



In League with the Divine: How Religion Influenced Nazi Perpetrators of the Holocaust

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In League with the Divine: How Religion Influenced Nazi Perpetrators of the Holocaust

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A Thesis in the Field of History
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Abstract

Scholars of the Holocaust have, in recent decades, started to examine the factors that motivated seemingly “normal” people to become willing participants in the Nazis’ pogroms of extermination. Although many social, political, economic, and psychological influences have been analyzed, religion has often been overlooked. This study remedies that gap in the existing literature by examining the ways in which religion impacted the mindsets of those responsible for the Holocaust. First, it explores how the Nazis created a new political faith that indoctrinated average Germans with an unethical value system that validated persecution, violence, and murder. Second, this research evaluates how Holocaust perpetrators used existing religious doctrines—namely those of Christianity and paganism—to supplement their power over human life, cope with their internal psychological and moral conflicts, and justify their crimes of genocide.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

In his 1971 interview with Gitta Sereny, Franz Stangl recounted his role in the Holocaust, beginning with the time he spent as Police Superintendent of the Euthanasia Institute at Hartheim.¹ Recalling a young boy he encountered on one of his personal visits to the institution, Stangl used the presence of a Catholic nun and a priest—and their advocacy for the “mercy-killing” of the child—to justify the Nazi’s euthanasia program.² As Stangl reasoned, “Here was a Catholic nun, a Mother Superior, and a priest. And they thought it was right. Who was I then, to doubt what was being done?”³

Friedrich M., a member of Police Battalion 101, similarly turned to religion when discussing his role in the execution of Jewish women and children.⁴ Explaining that he only shot children after their mothers had been killed by one of his comrades, Friedrich claimed that it was “soothing to my conscience to release children unable to live without their mothers.”⁵ This admission quickly takes on deeper meaning when its diction is considered. As Christopher Browning pointed out, “The full weight of this statement, and the significance of the word choice of the former policeman, cannot be fully appreciated

¹ Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness: An Examination of Conscience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 16.

² For a more detailed account of this story, see Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 58. Although the term “mercy-killing” is not used specifically in connection with Stangl’s recollection of the child or this particular incident, it is a term that Sereny uses earlier in this section of the text to refer to euthanasia. For Sereny’s utilization of the term “mercy-killing” in connection with euthanasia, see Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 49.

³ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 58.

⁴ Friedrich M., Investigation and trial of Hoffmann, Wohlauf, and others, Office of the State Prosecutor, Hamburg, 141 Js 1957/62, 1708 as cited in Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 73. The only name provided for this member of Police Battalion 101 was Friedrich M. As such, in all future references to this particular individual, I will refer to the policeman as Friedrich.

⁵ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 73.

unless one knows that the German word for ‘release’ (*erlösen*) also means to ‘redeem’ or ‘save’ when used in a religious sense. The one who ‘releases’ is the *Erlöser*—the Savior or Redeemer!”⁶

In the cases of both Stangl and Friedrich, religion was a prevalent characteristic in their attempts to rationalize their participation in the Holocaust. For Stangl, the approval of religious figures provided a degree of morality to the state-sponsored killings of those considered “life unworthy of life.”⁷ For Friedrich, viewing his own acts of genocide through a religious lens allowed him to justify murder as an act of mercy. Examples such as these reveal that religion played an active role in the lives of Holocaust perpetrators.

Yet most of the existing scholarship regarding religion in Nazi Germany has neglected an analysis of this relationship. It is true that some studies have attempted to evaluate the personal religious beliefs of individual Nazis. However, scholars have largely overlooked the influence that religion had on the mindsets and decisions of those who were directly responsible for organizing and implementing the Holocaust.

This research rectifies that gap in the current literature. Using a variety of primary sources from the architects and perpetrators of the Holocaust, I explore how religion shaped the ways in which these men and women justified their crimes against humanity.⁸ In particular, my research highlights how these individuals used religious dogmas and

⁶ Friedrich M., HW 1708 as cited in Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 73.

⁷ David M. Crowe, *The Holocaust: Roots, History, and Aftermath* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008), 150.

⁸ Throughout this research, the primary focus will be on those Nazis who planned and organized the Holocaust, as well as those who were responsible for carrying out the pogroms of mass murder. However, there will also be some discussion of individuals who were indirectly involved in the perpetuation of the Holocaust as a result of their silence or inaction. Due to time and length constraints, this study will not extend beyond committed Nazis—including, but not limited to party members, government officials, and those employed in military or paramilitary capacities by the regime—or their immediate families. As such, some groups such as Polish and Hungarian collaborators will, by necessity, not be discussed.

imagery to reconcile the emotional and psychological conflicts that resulted from contradictions between their crimes and their internalized morals.

Countless primary sources were utilized throughout this research. They included diaries, journals, autobiographies, memoirs, and speeches written by Nazis; photographs from the era of the Third Reich; interviews conducted with former Nazis in the latter half of the twentieth century; and court transcriptions from various Nazi war crimes trials held in the post-World War II era. By supplementing these materials with existing scholarship from the field, I used a structuralist approach to evaluate the relationship between individual participation in the Holocaust, personal religious doctrines, and the pseudo-religion established by the Nazi regime. Through an analysis of how these three factors interacted in the minds of the people responsible for the Holocaust, I established that both traditional and paganist religious ideas and iconology were appropriated by those individuals as a means of creating new physical and psychological identities. These new identities served both as a means of coping with internal moral conflicts and promoting the continuation of Nazi extermination policies.

Historical Background

Religion in the Third Reich was complex. At their core, the Nazis strove to be a predominantly secular party.⁹ In fact, many of the individuals who joined the Nazi Party

⁹ Although in the early years, the Nazis were non-sectarian rather than secular, growing animosity between the NSDAP and the German churches led to increasing resentment towards organized religion among Nazi leaders. It also sparked the *Kirchenaustritt*, in which Nazis began leaving their respective churches. It is important to note that there was no legal mandate requiring Nazis to abandon Christianity. However, the heightening of anti-clericalism and the rising support from leaders such as Martin Bormann for a total separation of Nazism and Christianity, implied that the Nazis gradually developed a preference for secularism. Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 218-9.

left their respective churches during the *Kirchenaustritt* and became *Gottgläubige*, or believers in God.¹⁰ A state-created denomination, the designation of *gottgläubig* allowed the Nazis to renounce organized religion—especially the Catholic Church—while still retaining a pious image.¹¹ By combining anti-clericalism with adherence to Christian conceptions of God, the *gottgläubig* identifier appeased not only the Nazi regime, but also the German churches and their followers.

Yet even through attempts to increase Germany's secularism with this new *gottgläubig* designation, the Nazis could not completely eradicate formal religion from their domain. Indeed, many Nazis conformed to either Protestantism or Catholicism, and actively participated in church services and functions. These associations with Germany's established religious institutions were not ideal for the regime's goals of secularism. Nor was the lack of religious homogeneity among its members a benefit to the Nazi Party's aspirations for a unified Germany.

The Nazi objectives of secularism and unification stemmed, at least in part, from existing religious tensions throughout Germany. Since the Reformation, Germany had been deeply divided along Protestant and Catholic lines. Recognizing that this discord had created a rift in German society, the Nazis strove to amalgamate religion in the hopes of achieving a stronger, unified nation.¹² Yet it was never decided which religion—Protestantism or Catholicism—should become the sole creed of the state. Most likely, this indecisiveness was due to the opposing wants and needs of the Nazi Party—namely, the goals of its ideologies versus the necessities for its political survival.

¹⁰ Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 219. For more detailed explanations of the *Kirchenaustritt* and *Gottgläubige*, see Appendix 1.

¹¹ Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 219.

¹² Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 11.

On the one hand, the Nazis' ideological platform was inherently associated with Protestantism. This was most notable with respect to anti-Semitism. Historically, Protestantism was connected with anti-Semitic sentiments due to Martin Luther's vicious condemnations of Jews in publications such as *Letter Against the Sabbathers* and *On the Jews and Their Lies*.¹³ Luther's tirades not only demonized Jews but advocated for violence to be used against them.¹⁴ Since virulent anti-Semitism was central to the Nazis, the regime's preference for Protestantism was a natural development.

However, it was not only anti-Semitism that attracted the Nazis to Protestantism. The innately anti-Catholic stance of Luther's religion was also appealing. Although the Nazis did not appreciate the influence of clericalism—Protestant or Catholic—in Germany, they held particular distaste for the Catholic Church. This was most apparent in Nazi-occupied territories, such as Poland, where the Nazis presumably felt a greater need to assert their authority. In blatant attacks against the Catholicism in these regions, the Nazis restricted Catholic services, closed Catholic churches, and either deported or murdered Catholic clergy.¹⁵

Such harsh treatment of Catholicism was even more glaring as a result of the Nazis' tolerance for Protestant institutions that resisted their regime. In particular, the Nazis allowed the Confessing Church—a division of Protestantism that arose to combat the Nazis' attempt to unify Protestantism in Germany—to operate with relative

¹³ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 33. It can be implied that there was a direct connection between Luther's anti-Semitism and Nazi anti-Semitism due to the Nazis' reverence for Luther as the founder of Protestantism—their preferred denomination of Christianity. For examples of how Luther's ideas were praised by Nazis, see Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 53.

¹⁴ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 33.

¹⁵ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 160.

freedom.¹⁶ This stood in stark contrast to the restrictions placed on the Catholic Church, an entity that generally avoided confrontation with the Nazis and was often complicit in its activities.¹⁷ Therefore, by accepting the presence of rebellious Protestant sects in Germany and its occupied territories, while simultaneously more cooperative Catholic institutions, the Nazis demonstrated their bias towards Protestantism.

Nevertheless, Catholicism had a profound following among the Nazis. Although there were certainly members of the Party who were dedicated Catholics, the regime as a whole primarily tolerated that particular branch of Christianity out of political necessity. To completely dissociate with the Catholic Church, especially during the Nazis' rise to power and the early years of the Third Reich, would have been crippling. As such, the Nazis maintained a tenuous relationship with Catholicism through policies of appeasement. For instance, in order to gain the support of the Catholic *Zentrum* Party in the Reichstag, Hitler assured the Catholic Church that it would not be destroyed by the Nazis. Through concessions such as these, the Nazis sought to retain the support of Germany's Catholic populace while also limiting potential interference from the pope.¹⁸ Thus, Catholicism remained a powerful force in Nazi Germany, much to the chagrin of some Nazi officials.

¹⁶ For more information on the Confessing Church, see Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 112. For more information on Nazi attitudes towards the Confessing Church, see Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 11.

¹⁷ There has been extensive research into the complicity of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust. Although the body of literature is too broad to list here, some notable works include Randolph L. Braham, ed., *The Vatican and the Holocaust: The Catholic Church and the Jews during the Nazi Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Peter Godman, *Hitler and the Vatican: Inside the Secret Archives That Reveal the Complete Story of the Nazis and the Church* (New York: Free Press, 2004); Kevin Madigan, "How the Catholic Church Sheltered Nazi War Criminals," *Commentary* 132, no. 5 (December 2011): 20-4, ProQuest; Gerald Steinacher, *Nazis on the Run: How Hitler's Henchmen Fled Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 110.

Just as the Nazis were unable to eliminate the influence of organized religion in their regime, they were similarly powerless against the increasing popularity of paganism. This was primarily due to the many facets of Nordic paganism that were appealing to the Nazis—such as its ancient Germanic roots, inherently anti-Christian nature, Aryan racial theories, and emphasis on *blut und boden*.¹⁹ As a result, paganism acquired a growing number of followers throughout the Third Reich. In fact, several prominent party leaders such as Erich Ludendorff, Alfred Rosenberg, and Heinrich Himmler were professed pagans.²⁰

Yet despite paganism's allure as a "pure" Germanic religion aligned with Nazi conceptions of race and national pride, it was often too divergent from mainstream religion for the comfort of most Nazi leaders. High-ranking officials such as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels even openly condemned pagans like Ludendorff and Rosenberg for their seemingly primitive and heretical paganist religious views.²¹ At the same time, individuals such as Himmler embraced paganism and incorporated it into central features of the Nazi regime.²² The difference in how paganism was received by the Nazis—from skepticism to acceptance—thus created additional religious tension in an already divided Third Reich.

¹⁹ For information about paganism's Germanic roots and its focus on *blut und boden*, see Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 85. For information on paganism's anti-Christian nature, see Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 94. For information on paganism's connection to the notion of an Aryan race and the Nazis' application of Aryanism to religious figures from the doctrines of organized religion, see Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 96. For a detailed explanation of *blut und boden*, see Chapter 1.

²⁰ For information about Ludendorff's relationship to paganism, see Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 87. For information about Rosenberg's relationship to paganism, see Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 91. For information about Himmler's relationship to paganism, see Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 106.

²¹ For more information about Hitler's criticisms of Ludendorff, see Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 88. For more information on Hitler's and Goebbels' criticisms of Rosenberg, see Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 93.

²² This refers to Himmler's use of paganist ideologies and symbols in the SS. For more information, see Chapter 2.

Historiography

Since the 1960s, a significant amount of scholarship has addressed religion in Nazi Germany. Much of the literature throughout the decades has been dedicated to the relationship that the Nazis had with the Catholic Church, with particular attention being given to the Vatican's complicity in the Holocaust.²³ In terms of works encompassing a broader spectrum of religion in the Third Reich, John Conway's *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches* was among the first to thoroughly evaluate how Nazis perceived various sects of Christianity.²⁴ However, Conway's book has two main weaknesses. First, it takes an apologist tone toward Christian institutions in Nazi Germany, failing to account for their collusion in Nazi atrocities.²⁵ Second, it labels the Nazis as being completely opposed to Christianity, which ignores the fact that many Nazi leaders were openly Christian and held certain Christian ideas in high esteem.²⁶

In an attempt to fill the gaps left by Conway's research, Robert Ericksen and Susannah Herschel's *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust* addressed the role that Christian institutions played in the Holocaust.²⁷ The book, which is an edited collection of essays, effectively demonstrates the distinct levels of complicity and support

²³ There are too many works on this particular subject to mention them all in detail, but some notable ones include: Gordon Zahn, *Catholics and Hitler's Wars: A Study in Social Control* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962); Guenther Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1964); Madigan, "How the Catholic Church Sheltered Nazi War Criminals," 20-4; Michael Phayer, "The Silence of Pope Pius XII," in *The Holocaust*, ed. Donald L. Niewyk (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011), 240-52.

²⁴ John Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1968). For Steigmann-Gall's critiques of Conway's *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, see Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 5.

²⁵ Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 4.

²⁶ Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 5. This critique is particularly intriguing with respect to the Nazi pagans who wanted to retain Jesus as a central figure in their religion. For more information on this, see Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 96.

²⁷ Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel, *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

of the Protestant and Catholic Churches and their leaders in the Holocaust. Particularly compelling is the claim that Ericksen and Heschel lay out in their introduction—namely, that Christian Churches, through either their silence or approval regarding Nazi policies, created “moral suasion” that convinced “ordinary Germans... that those policies did not violate the tenets of Christian faith and morality.” Ericksen and Heschel further attest that the Nazi government was fully aware of this “moral suasion,” and used it to legitimize their movement and its genocidal policies.²⁸ Through an analysis of topics such as anti-Semitism, theology, and the roles of various Christian organizations—including the Catholic and Protestant Churches, the Vatican, and the Confessing Church—*Betrayal* illuminates the fact that religious institutions and leaders were often not only complicit in Nazi crimes, but were frequently active participants either through their direct support of, or silence towards, Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda and practices.

In spite of the strengths of Ericksen and Heschel’s work, *Betrayal* is nevertheless limited by its focus on established religion. Although it is true that the Catholic and Protestant Churches did play a significant role in the creation and perpetuation of the Holocaust through their religious and moral legitimization of Nazi anti-Semitic pogroms, it is important to recognize that not all Germans—and especially not all Nazis—conformed to one of these major Christian denominations at the time. *Betrayal* does not account for the impact—or lack thereof—that the churches may have had on Germans who either did not belong to a formal religion or instead followed a less traditional faith, such as paganism. This omission detracts from the effectiveness of *Betrayal*’s otherwise

²⁸ Ericksen and Heschel, *Betrayal*, 4.

solid thesis by oversimplifying the religious climate in Germany during the era of the Third Reich.

In response to this gap in Ericksen and Heschel's research, as well as to further rectify the limitations of Conway's study, Richard Steigmann-Gall wrote *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945*. This work addresses Nazi attitudes towards Christianity through an analysis of the religious views—both traditional and non-traditional—of Nazi officials. Steigmann-Gall's research focused not only on Hitler's inner circle, but also the leaders of organizations and local and regional governments in the Third Reich.²⁹ Furthermore, *The Holy Reich* is comprehensive in its evaluation of the relationship between Nazism and Christianity because of Steigmann-Gall's inclusion of multiple religious lenses. By incorporating the perspectives of Nazi leaders who identified as Catholic, Protestant, or paganist, Steigmann-Gall provides a detailed account of the wide range of religions that were present in Nazi Germany. He also highlights the ways in which those different faiths either affected, or were themselves impacted by, Nazi views of Christianity.

However, regardless of *The Holy Reich*'s comprehensive nature, Steigmann-Gall's research is limited by his emphasis on Nazi leadership. Although he does expand his analysis to include officials outside of Hitler's inner circle, he fails to account for those Nazis who were not organizational or governmental leaders. As a result, *The Holy Reich* lacks important content regarding the religious views held by lower-level Nazis.³⁰

²⁹ Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 10.

³⁰ By "lower-level Nazis," I am referring to those party members who did not hold leadership positions in the regime's government. In other words, "lower-level Nazis" consist of anyone who was tasked with carrying out, rather than creating, the Third Reich's policies. Some examples include military and paramilitary officers, rank-and-file soldiers or paramilitary personnel, and civilians.

In particular, Steigmann-Gall does not consider the effects that religion had on Holocaust perpetrators. This shortcoming prevents a complete understanding of the relationship between religion and Nazism from being attained, as it excludes most of the Nazis who were personally responsible for conducting the atrocities of the Holocaust and the “Final Solution.” As such, Steigmann-Gall misses this opportunity to assess the interconnectedness of religion, obedience to authority, and internalized doctrines of morality as they appeared in the minds and actions of rank-and-file Nazis.

Other scholars recognized that these conflicting elements created unique psychological conditions for Holocaust perpetrators. They subsequently studied the mentalities of those involved in the Holocaust, focusing much of their attention on the factors that convinced “average” Germans to willingly participate in the Nazis’ extermination pogroms through either complicity or direct involvement. Raul Hilberg was the first to do so in his book *The Destruction of the European Jews*.³¹ One of Hilberg’s initial observations is that the perpetrators “cannot be differentiated from the rest of the population. The German perpetrator was not a different kind of German. What may be said about his morality applies to Germany as a whole....”³² In other words, those responsible for implementing the Holocaust were not rare, psychopathic individuals, but rather ordinary people who were representative of broader German society at the time. To that extent, Hilberg also attributes the actions of the perpetrators to the overall structure of German society. In particular, he asserts that the methodological execution of the Holocaust reflected the hierarchical configuration of Germany’s social structure—

³¹ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Although I utilized a third edition copy of *The Destruction of the European Jews* for this research, it should be noted that the original date of publication for the first edition of Hilberg’s book was 1961.

³² Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 1084.

especially with respect to the characteristics of bureaucracy and unquestioning adherence to authority.³³

However, obedience to superiors cannot be held accountable for the Holocaust. For as historians such as Christopher Browning have since pointed out, no records exist to indicate that the refusal to kill civilians—even as part of the “Final Solution”—ever resulted in severe punishment.³⁴ As such, attributing the Holocaust solely to compliance is historically inaccurate. It is also overly simplistic. By grouping the influences of Nazi perpetrators into a single, collective category, Hilberg eliminates any elements of individuality. In other words, he fails to examine how unique interplays of socio-cultural, political, economic, and psychological factors led otherwise “normal” Germans to become voluntary killers.

Such a structuralist approach to evaluating the motivations of Holocaust perpetrators emerged in the 1980s. Initially, it appeared in historical research highlighting civilian participants, such as Nazi doctors and Jewish collaborators.³⁵ As scholars in the early 1990s returned once more to a focus on military and paramilitary personnel, they continued the structuralist tradition. Christopher R. Browning’s 1992 book *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* was a prime example of this. In contrast to Hilberg’s broad analysis of the German military, Browning’s research is a micro-study of a single Nazi police battalion unit. In it, Browning evaluates the professional backgrounds of the members of Police Battalion

³³ Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 994 as cited in Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 192.

³⁴ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 192.

³⁵ For one of the leading works of scholarship on Nazi doctors, see Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1986). For a prominent work of scholarship on Jewish collaborators, see Primo Levi, “The Gray Zone,” in *The Holocaust*, ed. Donald L. Niewyk (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011).

101, the crimes that they committed during the Holocaust, and the effects that those acts of genocide had on them. Browning concludes, similarly to Hilberg, that Holocaust perpetrators were reflective of average Germans.³⁶ Also reminiscent of Hilberg, Browning links Nazi war crimes with the influence of authority.³⁷

Yet Browning differs from Hilberg in one key area—namely, that he views obedience to authority as only a single facet in a much broader web of influences. For Browning, Nazis who participated in the Holocaust were motivated to kill by a combination of factors that were largely social and psychological by nature. These influences included group conformity, indoctrination to Nazi ideologies, and habituation to murder.³⁸

In 1996, Daniel Goldhagen countered Browning's socio-psychological assertions in *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*.³⁹ Goldhagen retains the arguments presented by Hilberg and Browning that the perpetrators of the Holocaust were reflective of ordinary Germans. However, Goldhagen takes a drastically different stance than Browning by attributing Nazis' individual acts of genocide to a distinctly German form of anti-Semitism. According to Goldhagen, "Because Hitler and the Germans were 'of one mind' about the Jews, he had merely to 'unshackle' or 'unleash' their 'pre-existing, pent-up' anti-Semitism to perpetrate the Holocaust."⁴⁰ In other words, Goldhagen perceives the pre-World War II Germans as people who were

³⁶ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 192.

³⁷ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 171-2.

³⁸ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 184-6; Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 184 and Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 186; Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 161.

³⁹ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

⁴⁰ Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 106 as cited in Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 192-3; Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 399 as cited in Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 192-3; and Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, 443 as cited in Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 192-3.

naturally predisposed to anti-Semitism and were finally permitted to act upon those sentiments when Hitler and the Nazis rose to power.

Although anti-Semitism was a major factor in the perpetration of the Holocaust, Goldhagen's thesis provides a far too generalized conclusion regarding the motivations of the killers. On the one hand, it does not account for the complex social, political, and psychological factors that Hilberg and Browning examined. Moreover, it classifies all Germans as being equally anti-Semitic. This is problematic for several reasons. First, it does not take into consideration the spectrum of anti-Semitism that existed in Germany at the time.⁴¹ Second, Goldhagen's thesis does not consider the existence of anti-Semitism in other locations throughout the world, and the reasons that the Holocaust emerged in Germany rather than somewhere else. Lastly, the emphasis on anti-Semitism in *Hitler's Willing Executioners* fails to reconcile Goldhagen's theory of a singular, universal anti-Semitism in Germany with factors such as the existence of individuals and groups who resisted the Nazi regime and often provided aid to Jews, the participation of non-Germans in the Holocaust, or the targeting of non-Jews in the Third Reich's acts of genocide.⁴²

Following the publication of Goldhagen's study, Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer produced a new book in 2011 that examined Nazi soldiers who participated in the Holocaust. Entitled *Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing, and Dying*, their scholarship returned to a psychological approach reminiscent of Browning's *Ordinary Men*.⁴³ Similar to

⁴¹ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 198.

⁴² For information on resistance to the Nazi regime, see Fulbrook, *A History of Germany 1918-2008: The Divided Nation* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008), 188-90, ProQuest Ebook Central. For information on the participation of non-Germans in the Holocaust, see Yisrael Gutman and Shmuel Krakowski, "The Poles Helped Persecute the Jews," in *The Holocaust*, ed. Donald L. Niewyk (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2011), 189 and Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 220. For information on the targeting of non-Jews in the Holocaust, see Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 145.

⁴³ Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing, and Dying*, trans. Jefferson Chase (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 336.

Browning, Neitzel and Welzer attribute the crimes of Nazi soldiers, in part, to group dynamics. According to Neitzel and Welzer, “Every member of a group sees himself as he believes others see him.... In war, for an indeterminate length of time and under the most extreme conditions, the soldier is part of a group he can neither leave nor seek out according to his own personal preference....”⁴⁴ This statement implies that the actions of soldiers—in this case Nazi soldiers—are influenced by, and linked to, the behavior and perceptions of their comrades.

In addition to this notion of conformity, Neitzel and Welzer also maintain Browning’s argument of habituation.⁴⁵ As they explain, “Stories about shooting, raping, and robbing are commonplace within the war stories. Rarely do they occasion analysis, moral objections, or disagreements. As brutal as they may be, the conversations proceed harmoniously.”⁴⁶ This observation by Neitzel and Welzer indicates that a gradual numbing of morality and emotion generally accompanies soldiers’ constant exposure to acts of violence. In turn, this numbing allows for continued participation in acts of violence.

Returning to the contrasting theses of Browning and Goldhagen, Bryce Sait in 2019 wrote *The Indoctrination of the Wehrmacht: Nazi Ideology and the War Crimes of the German Military*.⁴⁷ This book creates “what he calls ‘a third position between [Christopher] Browning’s circumstantial interpretation of war crimes and [Daniel]

⁴⁴ Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, 5.

⁴⁵ The concept of habituation, or psychological “numbing,” is also addressed by Lifton in *The Nazi Doctors*. For more information, see Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 442-7.

⁴⁶ Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, 5.

⁴⁷ Bryce Sait, *The Indoctrination of the Wehrmacht: Nazi Ideology and the War Crimes of the German Military* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019).

Goldhagen's view of a natural German antisemitism.”⁴⁸ Although Sait insists that the perpetrators' motivations were a result of anti-Semitism, he does not attribute those sentiments to a natural predisposition held by all Germans, as Goldhagen does. Instead, he blames the anti-Semitism of Nazi soldiers on military indoctrination—a claim similar to Browning's theories about socialization.⁴⁹ In Sait's opinion, it was the German military's racial brainwashing that created the virulent anti-Semitism that inspired Nazi soldiers to become murderers in the Holocaust. Although such racial indoctrination was formally implemented by the Nazis, Sait points out that its core beliefs were founded on pre-existing notions about Slavs and Jews that had been developed on the Eastern front during the First World War.⁵⁰ It is through this combined analysis of internalized anti-Semitism and external indoctrination that Sait's study becomes a blend of the opposing views presented by Browning and Goldhagen in the 1990s.

In short, scholarship about Holocaust perpetrators and the factors that motivated them to participate in the genocide has drastically varied since the 1960s. The first studies began with discussions of government policy and hierarchical norms. Later works transitioned into debates about socio-psychological and racial elements. Most recently though, scholars have sought a “middle ground” between the two approaches by combining analyses of individual and collective influences. Still, despite these varied attempts to create a more complete image of Nazi war criminals, one topic has been left largely undiscussed—religion.

⁴⁸ Brian E. Crim, review of *The Indoctrination of the Wehrmacht: Nazi Ideology and the War Crimes of the German Military*, by Bryce Sait, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 34 (1), June 22, 2020, 111. DOI: 10.1093/hgs/dca a008.

⁴⁹ Crim, review of *The Indoctrination of the Wehrmacht*, 111.

⁵⁰ Robert L. Nelson, review of *The Indoctrination of the Wehrmacht: Nazi Ideology and the War Crimes of the German Military*, by Bryce Sait, *Central European History* 53 (4), December 2020, 884. DOI: 10.1017/S000893 8920000965.

While reading the existing literature on the subject, it is evident that religion played a role in how Nazis experienced and justified their genocidal deeds. In fact, as seen in the examples of Stangl and Friedrich that were mentioned earlier in this chapter, many Nazi war criminals internally struggled with the morality of the acts they committed and subsequently turned to religion as a means of rationalizing their deeds—even if they were not overtly religious prior to joining the Nazi ranks.⁵¹ This juxtaposition of criminality and religion in the minds of Nazis is a unique area that can provide deeper insight into the mindsets of those who planned and executed the Holocaust. Therefore, the fact that no scholars have yet acknowledged it has left a significant gap in the research that will begin to be filled by this study.

Research Methods

Much like Lifton, Browning, Neitzel and Welzer, and Sait, I utilized a structuralist approach throughout the completion of this research in order to draw the most comprehensive conclusions about how religion impacted Nazis involved in the Holocaust. Structuralism, in a historical context, argues that individual components of human existence can be better understood by analyzing how they relate to each other and how they function within a broader social and cultural system.⁵² Therefore, using a structuralist approach helped me to evaluate the impact of religion more thoroughly on Holocaust perpetrators in two ways. First, it allowed me to examine the ways in which

⁵¹ In his interviews with Gitta Sereny, Stangl admitted that he was not overtly religious. Although he was not fond of doing so, it was not excessively difficult for him to renounce the Catholic Church and become a *Gottgläubiger*. For evidence of this, see Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 37.

⁵² David Pace, “Structuralism in History and the Social Sciences,” *American Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1978): 284-5, <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.2307/2712503>.

personal faith related to broader religious structures in Nazi Germany. Second, it aided me in exploring how religion interacted with social, political, and military elements to affect individual thoughts and behaviors.

Through this structuralist lens, I analyzed a wide array of primary sources World War II and post-war eras in order to draw conclusions about the impact of religion on Nazis who committed crimes against humanity. In particular, I focused on how specific individuals perceived and rationalized their amoral actions through religion. Among some of the sources that I referenced were diaries, memoirs, and autobiographies written by German soldiers and SS personnel, speeches and reports created by Nazi officers and officials, the testimonies of Nazis during the war crimes trials following the Second World War, and interviews conducted with former Nazis who had been involved in the Holocaust.

Using such a diverse range of sources yielded crucial insights for my research question. For example, analyzing a combination of private and public sources revealed disparities between what Holocaust perpetrators did or did not feel comfortable sharing in terms of their personal religious views and their acts of genocide. It also uncovered the intentional and subconscious ways in which they utilized religion to fulfill both personal and collective needs. Although all Nazis did not rely on faith in the same ways, the structuralist approach allowed me to determine how each individual's use of religion depended on their specific roles in the Holocaust, their psychological state, and their unique socio-political and professional backgrounds.

Research Limitations

This research could not have been completed without the abundance of digitized and published resources that were accessible through online databases, public libraries, and bookstores. Still, this study was limited by logistical obstacles. In particular, I was unable to travel to either Harvard's campus or distant archives for research due to financial and time constraints, as well as restrictions related to the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic. As such, I was unable to access certain primary source materials that may have otherwise been beneficial to my research.

In addition to these logistical constraints, another limitation that I faced with this study pertained to linguistic nuance. Although I have reading proficiency in German, there were, at times, certain parts of texts that were difficult to translate due to subtleties in language usage. These nuances included word choice, syntax, metaphors, colloquialisms, regional and vernacular dialects, and even "slang" terminology that were unique to the time period or specific individuals. However, with the use of hardcopy and virtual dictionaries, as well as the assistance of colleagues who possess greater fluency and familiarity with the German language than I, the utmost effort was put into acquiring accurate translations for the purposes of this research.

Chapter II.

Nazism as a Pseudo-Religion

The path from the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 to the systemic murder of millions of people was constructed of a series of steps that, almost wholly, deconstructed existing political and socio-cultural norms in Germany.⁵³ As those standards were, by intent, gradually dismantled, they were simultaneously replaced or restructured according to Nazi ideologies. In order to justify these transformations and increase support for the regime, the Nazis turned, among other things, to religion.⁵⁴

As an established force of authority, meaning, and morality, religion—its institutions, traditions, and symbols--had the ability either to hurt or help the Nazis. On the one hand, the teachings of organized religion—namely, the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches—frequently stood in opposition to Nazi aims, ideals and ideology, especially racial dogma. The Catholic Church, in particular, with its laws and traditions, based on biblical authority, that condemned murder and emphasized brotherly love among neighbors, was viewed by the Nazi regime to be a threat to their ambitions of genocide.⁵⁵ On the other hand, many Nazis recognized that a skilled appropriation of

⁵³ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 106; Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 447-9. Estimates about the total number of victims in the Holocaust vary, but figures for Jewish deaths alone range from 4,707,056-7,442,390. Roma deaths are calculated to be between 246,010 and 263,310. This does not include others who were killed in the Holocaust, such as political opponents, homosexuals, and the disabled. Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 447, Appendix A; Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 449, Appendix B.

⁵⁴ I understand that the findings presented in this study cannot be applied to all Nazis. Therefore, for this, and all future references to “the Nazis,” please note that such phraseology is not meant to generalize all Nazis within a single framework. Rather, when this term is used, let it be implied that there are individual and group gradations and variations among the Nazis as a whole.

⁵⁵ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 157.

religion beliefs and symbols could provide legitimacy and a veneer of virtue to the ideas, policies, and practices of their party, which seemed flagrantly unethical and antithetical to ecclesiastical moral teaching.

Fully aware of religion's status as a weapon that could both harm their movement and a tool that could aid it, the Nazis launched a dual-pronged revolution of faith focused on attacking established religious institutions while simultaneously creating a new "Nazi" religion. It was to be this religion—a decidedly Christian but nevertheless "new 'Deutsche Kirche (German Church)'"—that, in the hopes of some Nazi sympathizers, would supplant existing forms of Christianity in Nazi Germany.⁵⁶

At its core, this Nazi religion was both a secular and pseudo-religion. In other words, it was "a combination of political ideology and religious outlook on life" as well as a "exclusively a phenomenon that resembles religion."⁵⁷ Through an intentional merging of various Christian and pagan beliefs, the Nazis sought to use this new religion to eradicate existing notions of morality and instead integrate into German society an "amoral value system that promoted some of European society's worst prejudices."⁵⁸ This ideological transition weakened the influence of organized religion on daily life in Germany, replacing traditional ethical standards with the Nazis' unscrupulous tenets in the hopes that the latter would eventually become normalized throughout the nation over time.

In order to achieve these ends, the Nazis used a variety of methods rooted in religion as a means of shrouding their attack on German society's value system. Through

⁵⁶ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 102.

⁵⁷ Carl Müller Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology: The Genesis and Impact of a Political Faith*, trans. John Irons (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2020), 183.

⁵⁸ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 106.

the deification and martyrdom of their leaders, the appropriation of symbols from Christianity and paganism, and the exploitation of Christian and pagan beliefs espousing Nazi notions of race and sacrifice, the Nazis attempted to associate the beliefs and actions of their regime with those of existing faiths. Through these powerful means, the Nazis sought to portray their movement as a righteous one. At the same time, they strove to establish their own political faith—one that manipulated and abused the ideas and symbols of Christianity and paganism for the purposes of power and genocide.⁵⁹

Divine Leaders

One of the key characteristics of many successful right-wing leaders is charisma. In a political sense, charisma refers not only to the individual personality of a political leader, but also to related social constructs. This latter component has been discussed helpfully by Ruth Wodak, among others. In a particularly important assertion, Wodak stated that political charism “has to be linked to the audience’s recognition of the ‘right’ set of social and cultural capital (habits) within the ‘right’ context.”⁶⁰ In other words the citizens of a nation must identify the leader’s opinions, goals, and viewpoints as being both socially and culturally correct within the sphere of the nation’s current socio-cultural and political environment.

When considered in this political context, charisma can be considered the result of a combination of internal personality traits and external factors.⁶¹ Of these elements, it is

⁵⁹ The term “political faith,” as used throughout this study, refers to the political ideologies of a government entity—in this case, the Nazi Party—that are developed and instituted in such a manner that they instill among the government’s citizens a new value system that both aligns with and promotes the governing body’s political agenda.

⁶⁰ Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: Sage, 2015), 133.

⁶¹ Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*, 133-4.

most crucial to note two. First, in terms of internalized qualities, right-wing leaders tend to possess a belief that they are a “savior of the people.” Second, regarding external influences, there exists around right-wing leaders a “process of charismatization, that is, ‘*cultic charisma*’... the deliberate attempt to create something like a religious aura surrounding the leader.”⁶²

When analyzing Nazism, it becomes clear that Nazi leaders possessed both of these characteristics. Regardless of their place in the hierarchy of the Third Reich, Nazi leaders considered themselves, to varying degrees, to be intermediaries of the divine. The regime’s creation of a “cultic charisma” only served to strengthen that perception in the minds of Nazi leaders and those they governed. The most obvious example of this was, of course, Adolf Hitler. However, similar cases can also be seen with lower-ranking Nazi officials as well as officers in military and paramilitary organizations.

Hitler as God’s Messenger

Leni Riefenstahl’s “Triumph of the Will,” detailing the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, opened with the arrival of Hitler.⁶³ However, it was no ordinary political entrance. Instead, Hitler, in a plane, descended from the sky, emerging from among the thick cloud cover. Below, the people of Nuremberg eagerly awaited Hitler’s arrival, shouting and waving in excitement as his plane neared the earth. The crowd offered a unanimous “Hitler salute” as the plane pulled to a stop, the word “heil” (hail) ringing out three times in a mass greeting as the Führer finally stepped out of the plane. Hitler smiled at those

⁶² Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*, 133-4.

⁶³ *Triumph of the Will*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl (Germany: Leni Riefenstahl-Produktion and Reichspropagandaleitung der NSDAP, 1935), 00:01:31 to 00:07:55. <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6uajey>.

assembled. Their pointing and waving continued, now illuminated by bright sunlight. Evidently, Germany was no longer under a dense layer of clouds as it had been prior to the Führer's arrival.⁶⁴

This opening scene, encompassing the first few minutes of the film, clearly illustrated the “charismatization” of Hitler by Riefenstahl. Although it did indeed portray the literal arrival of Hitler in Nuremberg, there was also an important symbolic dimension to the scene. The imagery of Hitler's descent to earth—notably from an undisclosed location in the sky that was presumably not visible to those on the ground due to the cloud cover—made it appear as though Hitler was a man, if not a divine figure himself, who was sent from the heavens to save Germany from the overcast gloom of its post-World War I years.

For countless people, this scene was more than mere cinematic imagery—it was reality. In fact, many Germans openly confessed that they were certain Hitler was a “savior.” For instance, one Nazi professed his belief that “our Leader, Adolf Hitler, was given by fate to the German nation as our savior, bringing light into darkness.”⁶⁵ In a more collective display of political worship, the Hitler Youth, through their song “*Das Lied der Getreuen*,” articulated to Hitler the message that “There are so many people who bless you, / Even if their blessing is a silent one – / There are so many who have never met you, / And yet you are their Savior.”⁶⁶ Even Robert Ley, a prominent government

⁶⁴ *Triumph of the Will*, 00:01:31 to 00:00:04:45.

⁶⁵ Theodore Abel, *Why Hitler Came into Power: An Answer Based on the Original Life Stories of Six Hundred of His Followers* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1938), 244.

⁶⁶ Baldur von Schirach, ed., *Das Lied der Getreuen: Verse ungenannter österreichischer Hitler-Jugend aus den Jahren der Verfolgung 1933-37* (Leipzig: Philipp Reclam jun. Verlag, 1938) cited in “The Song of the Faithful: Verses by Unknown Members of the Hitler Youth in Austria, Written During the Years of Persecution: 1933-37,” German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, accessed January 29, 2022, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/hitpoet.htm>.

official, alluded to Hitler's status as a national savior when he declared that "we found our faith in Adolf Hitler, and through him found God once again."⁶⁷ These examples, among countless others, illustrated the permeation of Hitler's sacred "charismatization" at both the individual and group levels, as well as in the private and public sectors of Nazi Germany.

Others similarly attributed Hitler's ascension to power in 1933 to divine intervention. For example, Protestant theologian Paul Althaus, "[a]fter the seizure of power... proclaimed: 'Our Protestant churches have greeted the turning point of 1933 as a gift and miracle of God.'"⁶⁸ Rüdiger Sünner's "Black Sun," which explored the mythological and occult history of the Nazism, also framed Hitler's rise to Führer within the context of ancient Nordic legends. According to the film, "Long before 1933, spiritual preparations had been made for the coming of a Messianic leader who would defend the 'Aryan light' against the 'Jewish-Bolshevist darkness.'" As evidenced by the Nazis' use of light and song at their pseudo-religious 1937 Reich Party Convention, Hitler was perceived and treated as that "Messianic leader."⁶⁹ Yet as Sünner's film indicated, Hitler was not—at least in the eyes of paganists—a self-proclaimed savior, but rather one who had presumably been sent by the deities to rescue Germany from alleged evil forces.⁷⁰

These beliefs in Hitler's sacred origins and character connections were only further deepened for many who personally heard the Führer speak. Struck by his power

⁶⁷ Robert Ley, "Schicksal — ich glaube!" in *Wir alle helfen dem Führer* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1937), 103-114 cited in "Fate — I believe!" German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/ley2.htm>.

⁶⁸ Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 48-9.

⁶⁹ *Black Sun*, directed by Rüdiger Sünner (Icarus Films, 2009), 00:36:45 to 00:37:10, <https://video-alexanderstreet-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/watch/black-sun/cite?context=channel:the-icarus-films-collection>.

⁷⁰ It is interesting to note that this bears certain similarities to the Christian idea of a second coming of Christ.

as a public speaker, audience members at Hitler's speeches were convinced that some sort of divine power possessed him, dictating his words and actions. For example, according to Charles Lindholm, Hitler seemed to be a "possessed servant" whenever he addressed large crowds.⁷¹ Indeed, in video recordings of Hitler's speeches, such as the one presented in "Triumph of the Will," Hitler's zealous expression of words and ideas inspired in his audience a frenzied reaction that resembled religious fanaticism.⁷² Such verbal, seemingly spiritual charisma appealed to many. Even Albert Speer confessed that he considered Hitler to be "deeply exciting" as a result of the "intermingling of frenzy and rationality" with which he spoke.⁷³ Whether the fervor that enveloped Hitler during his speeches was caused by a "possession" by some unearthly being—either the Holy Spirit or a different unearthly entity—was left to individual interpretation.⁷⁴ Regardless, the effect was enough to cause some even of the most reluctant individuals—such as Albert Speer—to become dedicated National Socialists.⁷⁵

Hitler was aware of the sacred power surrounding his identity and his words. Although he did not consider himself to be a deity, Hitler did publicly refer to himself as a "prophet," believing that he had been "called by a higher power—'providence' or 'heaven'—to save the German nation."⁷⁶ Although Hitler never explicitly identified who that "higher power" was, his assertion that his "struggle" against the Jews was a

⁷¹ Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 181-2.

⁷² Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will*. This is also mentioned in Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 182.

⁷³ Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 98.

⁷⁴ Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 180-1.

⁷⁵ People like Albert Speer confessed that, despite not initially supporting the Nazi movement, listening to Hitler's speeches convinced them to commit themselves to the Party. For Speer's admission to this, see Sereny, *Albert Speer*, 79-81.

⁷⁶ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 93; Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 182.

fulfillment of the Lord's work indicates that it was most likely Jesus Christ.⁷⁷ However, if it was not Christ, then Hitler most certainly was referencing God, as demonstrated by his adjoining statement that he was "acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator."⁷⁸ Yet regardless of whether it was Jesus or God—or both—for whom Hitler believed he was a "prophet," the holy "work" with which he believed he had been entrusted was clear. In short, his objective was the legal confinement and eventual removal of Jews from Nazi Germany for the purposes of both racial purification and economic freedom.⁷⁹ This allegedly divine mission, as well as Hitler's greater plans for Germany, were outlined in great detail in his manifesto *Mein Kampf*.⁸⁰

Widely purchased and distributed, *Mein Kampf* became the equivalent of the Nazi Bible.⁸¹ In fact, it was considered by the Nazis to be so holy a text that it was even given as a gift to newly-wedded Aryan couples.⁸² This suggested that Nazis viewed *Mein Kampf*—and by extension, Hitler's words and ideals—as the basis for living an honorable and decent life. This bore striking resemblance to the way in which sacred texts such as the Bible, the Qur'an, and the Tanakh were viewed by their respective religious communities. By treating *Mein Kampf* like holy scripture, the Nazis further enhanced the numinous atmosphere surrounding Hitler, namely by contributing to his image as a

⁷⁷ Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 27; Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 36; Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), 4 as cited in Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 94; "Extracts from Mein Kampf by Adolf Hitler," Yad Vashem: The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, last modified 2022, <https://www.yadvashem.org/docs/extracts-from-mein-kampf.html>.

⁷⁸ Yad Vashem, "Extracts from Mein Kampf by Adolf Hitler."

⁷⁹ Yad Vashem, "Extracts from Mein Kampf by Adolf Hitler;" "Adolf Hitler Issues Comment on the 'Jewish Question,'" Timeline of Events: September 16, 1919, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://www.ushmm.org/learn/timeline-of-events/before-1933/adolf-hitler-issues-comment-on-the-jewish-question>.

⁸⁰ Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 26.

⁸¹ Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 26.

⁸² History.com Editors, "Hitler's 'Mein Kampf' Is Published," A&E Television Networks, last updated March 10, 2021, accessed July 8, 2022, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/mein-kampf-is-published>.

divinely-sent savior. However, the Nazis also enlisted the use of propaganda to supplement Hitler's "cultic charisma." For example, magazines such as *Der Hoheitsträger* included articles describing the ideal Nazi home, in which writers specified that the walls should be filled with Hitler's words rather than "Jewish-Talmudic sayings."⁸³ The suggestion that any religious quotations in Nazi homes should be replaced with expressions from Hitler reflected not only the imbuing of the latter with religious significance, but also the substitution of traditional religion and God with Nazism and Hitler. This, in turn, reinforced religious imagery of the Führer, which was further enhanced by the pictures of a deified Hitler that were printed on various objects, such as matchbooks, being sold throughout Germany.⁸⁴

Despite the Nazis' use of *Mein Kampf* and party-created propaganda in the creation of Hitler's "cultic charisma," one of the principal elements in establishing this "religious aura" was the development of the Führer cult. Based on the concepts of total obedience and self-sacrifice, the Führer cult resulted in a loss of individuality combined with an obsessive, unquestioning submission to Hitler's will.⁸⁵

At its core, the Führer cult had a single principle—"common interest before self-interest."⁸⁶ In short, this promoted the idea that sacrificing oneself—whether through

⁸³ Wolfgang Schultz, "Auch an seinem Heim erkennt man den Nationalsozialisten!" *Der Hoheitsträger* 3, August 1939, 16-8 cited in "One Recognizes a National Socialist by His Home!," German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, accessed January 29, 2022, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/interiordecoration.htm>.

⁸⁴ Robert W. Jones, Jr., "Creating a Demigod: Nazi Art, Adolf Hitler, and the Cult of Personality," Office of the Command Historian, accessed February 24, 2022, https://arsof-history.org/articles/v4n2_creating_a_demigod_page_1.html.

⁸⁵ Rudolf Hess, "Der Eid auf Adolf Hitler," in *Reden* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1938), 10-4 cited in "The Oath of Adolf Hitler: Speech by Rudolf Hess on 25 February 1934," German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/hess1.htm>.

⁸⁶ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 94.

joining a youth organization, bearing children, contributing to the workforce, or enlisting in the military—for Germany, and thus for Hitler, was necessary in order to create a better future for the nation.⁸⁷ Yet by its very nature, this emphasis on individual sacrifice for the sake of Hitler and the collective German nation had a religious meaning and connotation. As Carl Müller Frøland explained,

The individual Hitler worshipper gains strength to work in the people's community, on the basis of his own abilities and interests. In a paradoxical way, the 'deindividualization' of the Führer worshipper provides he impetus for individual enterprise and produces the polycratic energy that pervades the Nazi state. The one who abandons himself to the 'man of power' Hitler is charged with power himself. The cult of the Führer can therefore be an expression of *political mysticism of the will*. Via a mystical union of the will of the individual and the collective, the individual gains access to a higher, mightier, activating will—the will of the Führer.⁸⁸

This exchange of energy between Hitler and his followers had clear religious connotations—namely, that there was a union of spiritual “wills” that granted the individual access to a more formidable sacred power—presumably some kind of divine power—through Hitler. This is similar to the way in which devotees in many religious traditions, including Christianity, attempt to connect with the deities of religion through prayer, rituals, and sacraments, all of which are intended to create the sort of mystical and political solidarity Frøland suggests.

Nazi leaders were not only aware of but fostered this notion of a Führer cult. Propaganda posters created by the party, but designed to convey a message from Hitler's perspective, advocated for viewers of the poster to share with Hitler their energy and

⁸⁷ It is important to note that Germany and Hitler were seen as interchangeable. Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 187.

⁸⁸ Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 188.

willpower so that he could continue to accomplish Germany's resurrection.⁸⁹ The last words of dead Nazis, many of which conveyed the theme of joy through sacrificial death for Hitler and Germany, were published in magazines such as *Der Schulungsbrief*.⁹⁰ Even new Nazi Party members, beginning in 1943, received a book entitled *Ich Kämpfe—I Fight*.⁹¹ Its title—a direct allusion to *Mein Kampf*—implied that individual sacrifices for the beliefs outlined in Hitler's manifesto were responsible for the successes of the Nazis and their leader, and that such sacrifices must continue in order for Germany to continue to flourish.

The propagation of the Führer cult, along with the use of *Mein Kampf* and other propaganda designed to sanctify Hitler, contributed to the creation of the Nazi Führer's "cultic charisma." Combined with Hitler's preconceived perceptions of himself as a divinely-sent savior of the German people, this "cultic charisma" played a role in the overall "charismatization" of Hitler's persona. However, the Nazis did not limit their independently internalized or collectively externalized views of religious consecration to Hitler. They also bestowed upon subordinate leaders—especially those who died on behalf of National Socialism—a similar measure of divine status.

⁸⁹ "Nazi Posters: 1933-1939," German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, accessed February 16, 2022, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/posters2.htm>, fig. 62.

⁹⁰ "Ihr Vermächtnis: Letzte Worte unserer Toten," *Der Schulungsbrief* 3 (1936), 414-6 cited in "Their Memorial: The Last Words of our Dead," German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, accessed February 18, 2022, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/letzte.htm>.

⁹¹ Hauptkulturamt in der Reichspropagandaleitung der NSDAP, *Ich kämpfe* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1943) cited in "I Fight: A Book for Members of the Nazi Party," German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/ichkamp.htm>.

Making Martyrs of the Dead

For the Nazis, who viewed their “struggle” against Germany’s enemies as a modern version of the Crusades, death in the name of the Party was considered to be holy.⁹² As such, those who died for the Nazi movement were honored as secular martyrs. One of the most prominent examples of this was the Nazi response to the death of Ernst vom Rath. Herschel Grynszpan, a Jew whose parents were forcibly transported to Poland by the Germans, assassinated vom Rath while he was in Paris. Shortly thereafter, an image was printed on the front page of Julius Streicher’s anti-Semitic newspaper *Der Stürmer* showing Grynszpan smiling up at the corpse of vom Rath as it hung on a crucifix.⁹³ The visual of vom Rath’s body tied to a cross was nearly identical to the common image of Christ at the time of his crucifixion.

This connection between vom Rath and Christ becomes even more apparent when the fictionalized picture of vom Rath’s death is compared with a similar image from Streicher’s anti-Semitic children’s book *The Poisonous Mushroom*. The illustration, showing a mother with her three children as they stare up at a crucifix, bore the caption: “Wenn ihr ein Kreuz seht, dann denkt an den grauenhaften Mord der Juden auf Golgatha....”—“When you see a crucifix, then think about the gruesome murder by the Jews at Golgatha....”⁹⁴ By analyzing the religious imagery of the two pictures from *Der Stürmer* and *The Poisonous Mushroom*, it is evident that the Nazis used comparisons with Christ as a means of making martyrs out of subordinate government officials who were killed in the Nazis’ “struggle” against Jews. Military leaders, too, attained holy status in

⁹² Christopher Hale, *Himmler’s Crusade: The Nazi Expedition to Find the Origins of the Aryan Race* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003), 2.

⁹³ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 127-8.

⁹⁴ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 126.

the Third Reich if they died fighting the “enemies” of Nazi Germany. This was clearly seen in the case of Horst Wessel.

Wessel was “a young SA man who was killed by a communist in Berlin in 1930.” Immediately after his death, he was transformed into a national martyr.⁹⁵ Not only was his sacrifice in the Nazi “struggle” against communism immortalized in a song that became the equivalent of the Nazi national anthem, but Wessel also became the namesake of a new training ship.⁹⁶ In a speech at the launching of the vessel, Rudolf Hess invoked the spirit of Horst Wessel, asking it to imbue within young Nazi soldiers the same characteristics that Wessel himself had embodied with his death—the most important being voluntary sacrifice for Germany.⁹⁷

By speaking directly to Wessel’s spirit and requesting that it bestow courage and a self-sacrificial attitude on living soldiers in order to aid them in achieving the goals of the party, Hess mimicked the religious act of prayer.⁹⁸ The only difference was that, in this instance, Hess sought the help of a deceased Nazi instead of a deity or saint. Clearly, Wessel was no longer merely a dead SA member, but rather a martyred individual who now resided—at least in the minds of Nazis—among divine entities. It is also possible that Hess and other Nazis even ranked Wessel among the deities, since his individual sacrifice for the Third Reich bore similarities to the Christian teaching that Christ forfeited his life for the sake of humanity.

⁹⁵ Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 165-6.

⁹⁶ Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 166; Rudolf Hess, “An das Schulschiff ‘Horst Wessel,’” in Hess, *Reden* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1938), 191-4 cited in “The Launching of the Training Ship *Horst Wessel*: by Rudolf Hess,” German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, accessed January 31, 2022, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/hess3.htm>.

⁹⁷ Hess, “An das Schulschiff ‘Horst Wessel.’”

⁹⁸ Hess, “An das Schulschiff ‘Horst Wessel.’”

Just as the Nazis immortalized Wessel, they also made martyrs of the sixteen men who died in the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch in Munich.⁹⁹ Although the deceased were not leaders in the traditional sense of the word, they were nevertheless among the original Party members and were thus considered to have an honored status in the Third Reich.¹⁰⁰ They gained even greater prominence because they were viewed as having sacrificed their lives for the future of Nazism. As a result of their revered reputations, the bodies of those killed during the putsch were reinterred in the Ehrentempel—“two ‘Honor Temples’”—twelve years after the failed coup.¹⁰¹

Constructed in a manner similar to the Greek Parthenon, the Ehrentempel contained all sixteen corpses entombed in sarcophagi. The purpose of the Ehrentempel was twofold. First, the Nazis wanted to honor the sixteen dead putsch members in a manner equivalent with their esteemed status in the Party. Second, the regime intended for the temples to serve as a “national shrine”—presumably, a place in which German citizens could pay their respects to the interred Nazis, remember the sacrifice they made for the German nation, and be inspired by their example.¹⁰² In this way, the Ehrentempel resembled other burial sites, such as the Egyptian pyramids, that were designed to entomb and immortalize people with political or military importance.

⁹⁹ “Nazi Art for 9 November,” German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/9nov.htm>, *fig. 1*.

¹⁰⁰ This is evidenced by the revered status granted to individuals who became members of the Nazi Party prior to 1923. For more information about this, especially as it is evidenced through the distribution of special Party medals, see “The Golden Party Badge of the NSDAP,” Adolf Hitler’s Badges, Awards and Tinnies, Hitler Archive: A Biography in Pictures, accessed February 28, 2022, https://www.hitler-archive.com/articles.php?a=5#badges_2 and “Nazi Art for 9 November,” German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/9nov.htm>, *fig. 5*.

¹⁰¹ German Propaganda Archive, “Nazi Art for 9 November,” *fig. 1*.

¹⁰² David Heath, “Das Parteizentrum der NSDAP: Königsplatz,” *Traces of Evil: Remaining Nazi Sites in Germany*, accessed February 13, 2022, <https://www.tracesofevil.com/2008/01/munich-konigsplatz.html>.

The enshrining of the bodies in “temples”—structures that, by definition, are places of worship and considered to be the dwelling places of deities and other religious figures—already implied that the Nazis viewed the sixteen dead putsch members as martyrs worthy of worship.¹⁰³ Possibly, they even thought of their deceased comrades as gods or saint-like figures. The fact that the Ehrentempel resembled the Greek Parthenon only enhanced that connection. Since the Parthenon was built to house a shrine and statue dedicated to Athena, the patron goddess of Athens, it was consequently a notable religious structure in ancient Athens.¹⁰⁴ The likeness of the Ehrentempel to the Parthenon—with their overall architectural and functional similarities—therefore indicates that the Nazis attempted to make the dead putsch participants martyrs, and perhaps even divine figures, of the Third Reich.¹⁰⁵

As demonstrated by the examples of Ernst vom Rath, Horst Wessel, and the sixteen men who died in the Munich Beer Hall Putsch, establishing an aura of martyrdom around Nazi leaders who died in the “struggle” against Germany’s enemies was an important part of the Nazi regime and the new political religion they were creating. Typically, this martyrdom was developed through religious imagery in print and architecture, the invocation of the spirits of the dead, and symbolic comparisons with divine entities. Yet the use of religious imagery and symbolism was not used by the Nazi Party solely for honoring and deifying the deceased. In fact, leaders of the Party

¹⁰³ *Collins Dictionary*, “Temple (n.),” accessed February 27, 2022, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/temple>.

¹⁰⁴ History.com Editors, “Parthenon,” History, A&E Television Networks, last updated April 27, 2021, accessed February 27, 2022, <https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-greece/parthenon>.

¹⁰⁵ It is interesting to note that, just as Athena was the patron goddess of Athens, the sixteen dead Nazis who participated in the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch seemed to be similarly viewed by the Nazis as patrons of their party. This was a result of the circumstances surrounding the deaths of the putsch members—namely, that they gave their lives in the fight for Nazism.

incorporated religious iconology into many of the emblems and rituals associated with the Nazi regime.

Symbolism

The use of both abstract and physical symbols is a key component of religion. Therefore, it was only logical that efforts to create and appropriate symbols became central to the Nazis as they transformed their movement from a political one into a religious one. The Party's use of the swastika as its representative emblem, the pagan icons incorporated into the insignia and practices of the SS, and the missions organized by Heinrich Himmler to locate ancient religious locations and artifacts all illustrated the fundamental role that spiritual symbols played in the creation of the Nazi's new pseudo-religion.

Appropriating the Swastika

Perhaps the most infamous of all Nazi icons was the swastika. Chosen by Hitler to be the Party's emblem, the swastika had both historical and spiritual significance.¹⁰⁶ In particular, the Nazis identified the swastika as a symbol of their Germanic ancestors and the mythical Aryan race they wished to emulate.¹⁰⁷ The swastika had similarly been used as a sign of racial purity in the late 19th century by Helena Blavatsky's Theosophical Society and in the early 20th century by the Thule Society. Both organizations focused their attentions on racial theories. The Theosophical Society was dedicated to proving the

¹⁰⁶ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 95.

¹⁰⁷ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "The History of the Swastika," Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last modified August 7, 2017, accessed February 16, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/history-of-the-swastika>.

relationship between Aryans and the deities; the Thule Society was devoted to studying the racial purity of Aryans.¹⁰⁸ Since both organizations had used the swastika as their emblems, the swastika quickly lost the meaning it bore to ancient peoples. Instead, it became linked with racial thinking and the idea of a superior Aryan race.

The preoccupation with the swastika as a symbol of Aryanism—and, more specifically, the purported status of the Aryan race as descendants of the deities—was further enhanced by the swastika’s connections with the earth and its natural elements. Many paganists in the Nazi Party believed that the ancient runes of their ancestors were imbued with the mystical powers of nature. Since it was considered part of the runic family, many Nazis assumed that the swastika also contained those powers.¹⁰⁹ In this sense, the swastika had innately religious—in this case, paganist—denotations, which had developed long before the emergence of the Third Reich. Therefore, by appropriating the swastika as the emblem of their party, the Nazis linked their movement with pagan traditions.

Yet the Nazis also identified and promoted a symbolic relationship between the swastika and the Christian cross. This was not an arbitrary act, but rather one born of political expediency. For example, in a pamphlet designed to publicly unite Christianity and Nazism, Gerhard Hahn explained that the cross and the swastika functioned as partners to remind Germans that they “are German Christian people and should become ever more whole German Christian people, and remain so!”¹¹⁰ Hahn’s statement

¹⁰⁸ *Black Sun*, 00:09:55 to 00:13:20; *Black Sun*, 00:31:00 to 00:32:40; *Black Sun*, 00:36:11 to 00:36:35.

¹⁰⁹ *Black Sun*, 00:14:50 to 00:15:20 and *Black Sun*, 00:09:55 to 00:10:15.

¹¹⁰ Gerhard Hahn, *Christuskreuz und Hakenkreuz*, “Schriftenreihe der ‘Deutschen Christen,’” *Hannovers 1* (1934) cited in “The Cross of Christ and the Swastika,” German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/christuskreuz.htm>.

illustrated the idea that Christianity and Nazism were both reflective of the “ideal” human—a German Christian—and that neither could exist without the other.

This is additionally significant, though, because Hahn’s comment blended two spiritual concepts. On the one hand, he promoted the swastika as a symbol reflective of paganism and Nazism—in other words, as an icon of an ancient, non-traditional religion and a new political religion—both of which revolved around the alleged noble lineage of Germans. On the other hand, he emphasized the cross as an emblem of Christianity. Hahn’s decision to interconnect the two symbols to create the emblem of the German Christians in Hanover demonstrated yet again the Nazis’ attempts to create a new political faith centered on racial theories.¹¹¹

SS Insignia and Practices

Although symbols such as the swastika were important to the Nazi Party as a whole, they also played a crucial role within individual Nazi organizations, particularly the SS. The SS was designed by its commander, Heinrich Himmler, to be a “holy order” that would protect the Aryan race from other “heathen” races.¹¹² Due to this designation of the SS as a sacred battalion, as well as Himmler’s fascination with paganism, mystic symbolism became a key component of the organization. Runes were especially important. According to many pagans at the time, runes concealed the religious

¹¹¹ The emblem that Hahn created for the German Christians in Hanover contained an image of the swastika overlaid on a Christian cross. German Propaganda Archive, “The Cross of Christ and the Swastika.”

¹¹² *Black Sun*, 01:14:35 to 01:15:15.

doctrines of ancient Germans, who had secretly preserved their beliefs and teachings in the mysterious markings after the Christian domination of Europe.¹¹³

As a result of this perceived connection between ancient runes and Germanic pagan traditions, Himmler incorporated the former into the apparel and practices of his black-clad troops. The most blatant example of this was the set of thunderbolt runes that represented the SS.¹¹⁴ However, runes were also engraved into rings forged for the elite members of the SS. The ring included four runic symbols around its band, two on each side of a centered skull known as a *Totenkopf*.¹¹⁵ The runes focused on the concepts of spiritual freedom and triumph, as well as the mystical union between humans, deities, and the universe.¹¹⁶ The inclusion of these specific runic messages on rings intended solely for exemplary SS members reflected not only the value that Himmler placed on pagan spiritualism, but also his desire to transform the SS into a divinely-inspired military division similar to the Crusaders.

In addition to runes, the incorporation of the *Totenkopf* on both the ring and other parts of the uniforms of the SS “Death’s Head Units” was also religiously symbolic. According to Himmler, the skull and crossbones icon signified “the annihilation of the individual will for the cause of a higher mission.”¹¹⁷ The *Totenkopf* therefore contributed to the “political mysticism of the will” that the Nazis used in the deification and martyrdom of their leaders.¹¹⁸ It also reinforced notions of the Führer cult through its

¹¹³ *Black Sun*, 00:11:55 to 00:15:40.

¹¹⁴ “SS Bolts,” Hate Symbols Database, Anti-Defamation League, accessed February 27, 2022, <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/ss-bolts>.

¹¹⁵ *Black Sun*, 01:09:55 to 01:11:40. For more information about the *Totenkopf*, see Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 188 and “History of the SS Honor Ring,” Reproduction of SS Totenkopfrings, Totenkopfring der SS, accessed February 26, 2022, <https://totenkopfring.com/history-of-ss-honor-ring/>.

¹¹⁶ *Black Sun*, 01:10:08 to 01:11:40.

¹¹⁷ *Black Sun*, 01:10:50 to 01:10:58.

¹¹⁸ For more information about this “political mysticism of the will,” see Chapter 1.

connotations of self-sacrifice for the nation and for Hitler. At the same time though, the *Totenkopf* and the “a higher mission” it represented also implied that the members of the SS were modern Crusaders. Their objectives—especially the extermination of the Jews—were believed to be divinely-ordained by a superior power, presumably a deity. As such, the *Totenkopf* not only reflected Nazi spiritual tenets, but also identified SS personnel as religious warriors.

Therefore, by adorning his troops with runes and mystical symbols rooted in paganism, Himmler attempted to metamorphose the SS into a “holy order.”¹¹⁹ Indeed, the pagan runes and the *Totenkopf* indicated that the wearers of those insignia were imbued with mysticism and acting on behalf of the divine powers of the universe. However, the Nazis also believed that such icons cleansed and revitalized the soul.¹²⁰ In fact, pagan runes were incorporated into the insignia on SS attire and jewelry, in part, to promote spiritual renewal. This trend was rooted, once again, in the work of leading pagans both preceding and during the Third Reich. For instance, Guido von List, an occultist whose studies about the cultic traditions of Aryan giants were admired by Hitler and other Nazis, believed that runes were symbols of both nature and salvation.¹²¹ The Thule Society’s magazine *Runen* similarly proclaimed that runes were the medium through which the “Germanic spirit” was discovered and reborn.¹²² Consequently, the use of runes as part of the daily appearance of the SS was Himmler’s way of “baptizing” its members—offering them spiritual renewal in their new lives as Nazi converts and

¹¹⁹ *Black Sun*, 01:14:55 to 01:15:07.

¹²⁰ *Black Sun*, 00:10:08 to 00:10:16 and *Black Sun*, 01:20:20 to 01:22:25.

¹²¹ *Black Sun*, 00:15:01 to 00:15:20.

¹²² *Black Sun*, 00:31:00 to 00:32:40.

crusaders. Runes also portrayed the organization as the embodiment and defender of the true German, while creating an aura of divine protection and legitimacy around it.

Yet the importance of runes and other pagan symbols was not limited to the physical image of the SS. They also shaped the rituals of the organization. For example, Himmler restored Wewelsburg Castle in order to transform it into “a cult and training center for the SS.”¹²³ To achieve this end, the edifice was reimagined to suit Himmler’s religious perception of the SS. For instance, the studies of the SS generals were decorated with runes. The library was filled with thousands of books about topics such as mysticism, which served as instructional materials for SS members. Cult rooms were created and imbued with the “black sun” rune.¹²⁴ This latter alteration was particularly crucial to the practices of the SS.

The “black sun,” like the lightning bolt runes and the *Totenkopf*, was viewed as a symbol of spiritual revival. It became a centerpiece of cult rooms at Wewelsburg. Himmler hoped its presence would invoke “victory and spiritual awakening for the SS.”¹²⁵ This included, one can assume, both the individual religious spirit and the collective spirit of self-sacrifice. Beyond its human influence though, the “black sun” also had an impact on Wewelsburg Castle itself. Through its placement in the cult rooms there, the “black sun” fulfilled a role similar to that of religious icons in the décor of churches and temples—it created a sacred space. Since these cult rooms were intended for SS rituals, the “black sun” was the single emblem at the heart of the organization’s pseudo-religious and pagan practices. In that way, the “black sun” became the SS’s

¹²³ *Black Sun*, 01:18:45 to 01:19:05.

¹²⁴ *Black Sun*, 01:19:20 to 01:20:54.

¹²⁵ *Black Sun*, 01:20:20 to 01:20:54.

equivalent of the Christian cross. It was also another means by which Himmler tried to use visual appearances—this time architectural—to meld the SS into a sanctified branch of the Nazi regime.

The Hunt to Locate Religious Sites and Artifacts

In addition to the appropriation of religious—in most cases, pagan—symbols by the Nazis and their organizations, there was also a preoccupation in the Third Reich with locating religious sites and artifacts. Again, this was largely an obsession of Himmler and his SS. Spanning both Christianity and paganism, most of Himmler's efforts were dedicated to finding places and objects that could verify the origins of the Aryan race.

To accomplish this goal, Himmler founded the Ancestral Heritage Research Institute, which went on missions to prove the genetic and geographic roots of Aryans.¹²⁶ He likewise sent Karl Wiligut, a prominent SS occultist, on a journey to research ancient Germanic religions. Other SS expeditions were similarly dispersed to Tibet and Peru, while SS-sponsored excavations occurred at Externsteine—all in search of potential evidence of Atlantis and its Aryan origins.¹²⁷ These SS ventures were religiously significant because they were focused on studying the foundations—and therefore establishing the legitimacy—of the Aryan race, which was believed to be descended from the deities who once lived in Atlantis.¹²⁸ If evidence of Atlantis could be found, then it would have further substantiated and justified the Nazi Party's racial theories, policies, and pogroms.

¹²⁶ *Black Sun*, 00:45:51 to 00:46:08.

¹²⁷ *Black Sun*, 00:50:46 to 00:51:10 and *Black Sun*, 00:55:00 to 00:55:50.

¹²⁸ *Black Sun*, 00:49:01 to 00:49:55.

Locating Atlantis was not the only goal of the SS, though. Sacred artifacts were also pursued by the organization due to their rumored mystical connections. The Holy Grail, with its ties to paganism and Christianity, was the main object Himmler and his troops hoped to acquire.¹²⁹ According to pagan traditions, the Holy Grail was a sacred item that was purported to be a source of light. It could, by extension, repel the “darkness” of those considered to be unholy.¹³⁰ For the SS and the Nazis, this would have applied to all non-Aryans, especially the Jews. Possession of the Grail was therefore seen as a means by which the SS could further augment the racial pogroms of the Nazis.

Yet Himmler recognized that obtaining the Holy Grail could also benefit the Nazis as a result of its relationship with Christian doctrine. According to Christian teachings, the Holy Grail was the cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper, as well as the chalice in which his blood was collected following his crucifixion.¹³¹ Christians therefore considered it to be a holy object imbued with the essence of Christ. If the SS found the Holy Grail, it would have appeared as though God himself had guided the Nazis to its location, thus implying that the Nazis had the approval of Heaven. This, in turn, would have depicted the actions of the Nazis—including the genocide they initiated—as being morally correct and aligned with the desires of God. It also would have served to further validate both the SS as a “holy order” and the Nazis as a new political faith.

Although efforts to locate Atlantis and the Holy Grail never came to fruition, they nevertheless demonstrated the importance of sacred places and artifacts to the Nazis. On

¹²⁹ *Black Sun*, 01:12:00 to 01:12:10.

¹³⁰ *Black Sun*, 01:14:35 to 01:15:10.

¹³¹ Mariel Synan, “What is the holy grail?,” A&E Television Networks, last updated September 3, 2018, accessed February 25, 2022, <https://www.history.com/news/what-is-the-holy-grail>.

the one hand, locations and items with religious significance were seen as a source of justification for Nazi racial theories and practices. On the other hand, they presented an opportunity for Nazis to validate their regime's authority and promote their movement as an innovative religious denomination rooted in Christianity and paganism. However, with the SS's failure to find Atlantis and the Holy Grail, the Nazis became dependent on manipulating existing religious ideologies to shape their new political faith and its genocidal policies.

Religious Foundations of Nazi Racial Theories

The Nazi *Weltanschauung*, or world view, revolved around notions of racial purity. Many Nazis believed that German—specifically Aryan German—blood was a sign of divine right, an “inheritance given to us by Heaven.”¹³² This implied that there was a sacred connection that existed between Aryan Germans and the deities. The Nazis then used this, in turn, as a method of rationalizing their persecution and extermination of non-Aryans—Jews, Roma, homosexuals, and the handicapped, among others.¹³³ According to Nazi ideology, if Aryan Germans were innately connected with Heaven, then non-Aryans were associated with its anti-thesis—Hell. This imagined link between non-Aryans and the underworld was further illustrated by the common depiction of Jews and other “enemies” of the Third Reich as devils.¹³⁴ By identifying Aryans as divine and

¹³² Walter Groß, “Heilig ist das Blut: Eine Rundfunkrede von Dr. Groß,” (Berlin: Rassenpolitisches Amt der NSDAP, 1935) cited in “Blood is Holy: A Radio Speech by Dr. Groß,” German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, accessed February 17, 2022, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/gross3.htm>.

¹³³ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 226; Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 141-2.

¹³⁴ Elvira Bauer, *Trau keinem Fuchs auf grüner Heid und keinem Jud auf seinem Eid* (Nuremberg: Stürmer Verlag, 1936) cited in “Trust No Fox on his Green Heath and No Jew on his Oath: by Elvira Bauer,” German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, accessed February 16, 2022, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/fuchs.htm>.

non-Aryans as wicked, the Nazis created their own amoral racial doctrines, thereby providing a religious justification for their harassment, discrimination, imprisonment, and murder of “enemy” groups throughout the Holocaust.

This “Heaven vs. Hell” mentality was structured on three main themes: anti-Semitism, *Blut und Boden*, and *Volksgemeinschaft*.¹³⁵ Each of these concepts was developed and promoted by the Nazis through the use of religious ideology. In particular, the Nazis appropriated key figures and beliefs from both Christianity and paganism in order to establish, rationalize, and spread these three central tenets of their new political faith throughout Germany.

Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism was at the core of the Nazi platform and the Holocaust. In an attempt to justify their stringent anti-Semitism to those both within and outside of the Party—especially those who were not themselves openly antagonistic towards Jews—the Nazis appropriated the figure of Jesus. In particular, they promoted the belief that Jesus was an Aryan.¹³⁶ Leading Nazis such as Artur Dinter attested to Christ’s Aryan qualities.¹³⁷ This depiction of Jesus as an Aryan was essential to promoting the idea that Aryans were linked directly to Christ and God. It was also important in justifying the Nazis’ racial views in the context of Christianity.

¹³⁵ Werner May, *Deutscher National-Katechismus* 2nd edition (Breslau: Verlag von Heinrich Handel, 1934), 22-26 cited in “The German National Catechism,” German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, accessed February 12, 2022, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/catech.htm>.

¹³⁶ Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 31 and Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 96.

¹³⁷ Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 31.

However, Jesus' identity as an Aryan was not the only concept that the Nazis endorsed as a means of spreading and rationalizing their Party's anti-Semitism. They also put a great deal of effort into demonizing Jews by usurping the story of Christ's crucifixion. Streicher's illustration of the German family and the crucifix in *The Poisonous Mushroom* is one example of many.¹³⁸ The caption of the image was vengeful in tone, implying that Aryan Germans should hate Jews because of the role that the latter had in killing Christ.¹³⁹ Hence, this text portrayed the Jews as a source of evil and criminality in the world.

Other anti-Semitic propaganda took a more direct approach, focusing less on Christ and more on depicting Jews as literal demons. For instance, Streicher's children's book *Trust No Fox on his Green Heath and No Jew on his Oath* included a story entitled "The Father of the Jews is the Devil." One of the pictures accompanying the story was that of the Devil surrounded by people belonging to those races the Nazis considered to be his descendants—Jews, blacks, the Chinese, Native Americans.¹⁴⁰ Both the title of the tale and the images complementing it established a relationship between Jews and other "enemies" of Germany, and the Devil. This association was intended to spread anti-Semitic sentiments throughout Germany—especially among impressionable children. It was also meant to defend that anti-Semitism through religious means by depicting Jews as amoral children of Hell against which holy Aryan Germans were supposed to fight.

Yet the Nazis depended on not only their own creation of anti-Semitic propaganda to justify their hatred of Jews, but also historical anti-Semitism rooted in Christianity. As

¹³⁸ See Chapter 1.

¹³⁹ To review this referenced image caption, see Chapter 1.

¹⁴⁰ Calvin University, "Trust No Fox on his Green Heath and No Jew on his Oath."

with Nazi attempts to demonize Jews, a substantial portion of Christian anti-Semitism—especially in Catholicism—stemmed from tensions surrounding the supposed perpetrators of Christ’s death by crucifixion. For instance, St. Gregory of Nyssa referred to Jews as “slayers of the Lord.”¹⁴¹ Pope Stephen III similarly promoted the spread of hatred toward Jews by advocating for Catholics to avenge the execution of Christ.¹⁴² Such examples of Catholic anti-Semitism grew even more severe with the beginning of the Crusades.¹⁴³

Protestant anti-Semitism, however, as mentioned earlier in this study, was linked to Martin Luther’s attacks on Jews.¹⁴⁴ For the Nazis, who aligned their party more closely with Protestantism than Catholicism, Luther’s tirades provided ample fodder for their own anti-Semitic agenda.¹⁴⁵ For example, in his *Letter Against the Sabbathers*, Luther linked Jews with the Devil and claimed that they were destined to be “punished by God.” As demonstrated earlier in this section, such demonization of Jews was a popular tactic of prominent Nazi anti-Semites such as Julius Streicher. Beyond mere ideology, the Nazis also based their pogroms against Jews on ideas expressed in Luther’s literary works. For instance, in *Table Talk* and *On the Jews and Their Lies*, Luther suggested that physical acts of violence should be taken against Jews. His recommendations included the destruction of Jewish homes and the burning of synagogues. The inspiration that the Nazis took from this was clear, as these were some of the very actions that the regime took against Jews during *Kristallnacht*.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 16.

¹⁴² Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 19.

¹⁴³ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 21-5.

¹⁴⁴ See Chapter 1.

¹⁴⁵ The Nazis were less harsh in their persecution of the Protestant Church in Germany than they were of the Catholic Church. This indicated that they were more sympathetic to Protestantism. See Chapter 1 for more details on Nazi attitudes towards Protestantism. See also Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 187.

¹⁴⁶ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 33.

Therefore, by depicting Jesus as an Aryan who was unjustly murdered by the Jews, while simultaneously demonizing the Jews through visual and literary propaganda, the Nazis used religion as the basis of their anti-Semitic beliefs. The appropriation of Christ and the Devil were at the core of Nazi attempts to expand and justify their anti-Semitism, especially as it escalated into the organized pogroms of the Holocaust. Turning to existing anti-Semitism in the Catholic and Protestant Churches, the Nazis further strengthened and rationalized the Jewish hatred espoused by their own political faith. Thus, through a combination of religious figures and tenets appropriated from Christianity, the leaders of this new Nazi religion made their party's unethical anti-Semitic values seem like pious doctrine.

Blut und Boden

In addition to anti-Semitism, the Nazis also used religion to promote the concept of *Blut und Boden*—Blood and Soil. However, unlike anti-Semitism, the Nazis turned to paganism rather than Christianity to develop and popularize it. At its core, *Blut und Boden* was founded on the idea of “a blood community anchored in the soil of the homeland, in harmony with the natural order.” In other words, the *Blut und Boden* philosophy relied on race, agriculture, and territorial expansion.¹⁴⁷

As with most other components of the Nazi regime, the belief in an Aryan race was at the center of *Blut und Boden*. The Nazis believed that true Aryans were “a Nordic ‘nobility of the blood,’ consisting of pure-blooded farmers.”¹⁴⁸ This notion demonstrated the interconnectedness of race and nature in Nazi ideology. There was also a spiritual

¹⁴⁷ Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 141.

¹⁴⁸ Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 142.

element to this relationship as well, since the Nazis asserted that there was a link between the souls of Aryans and soul of the earth.¹⁴⁹ In that way, the Nazis viewed Germany, as well as their territorial acquisitions, as being mystically linked with Aryan blood and, by extension, with the deities that commanded the universe.¹⁵⁰ As such, territorial expansion and agrarianism became intertwined with racial thinking and pagan conceptions of nature. A new kind of “mysticism of the will” also developed—though instead of revolving around Hitler, this one centered on the union between humans and nature.¹⁵¹ Therefore, *Blut und Boden* grew out of Nazi racial thinking, pagan views of nature, and the Nazis’ belief in the spiritual and divine ties between the two.

Volksgemeinschaft

The notions of the Führer cult, Aryanism, anti-Semitism, and *Blut und Boden* all blended together to create a third major tenet of Nazism—the *Volksgemeinschaft*, or people’s community.¹⁵² Based on racial qualifications and stressing the idea of self-sacrifice for the greater collective, the *Volksgemeinschaft* became an essential part of Nazi ideology.¹⁵³

As a central component of Nazism, many of the Third Reich’s leaders went to great lengths to ensure that people believed and participated in the *Volksgemeinschaft*. For example, as previously discussed, the distribution of *Ich Kämpfe* emphasized the importance of individual sacrifice for the Fatherland and Führer.¹⁵⁴ This was

¹⁴⁹ Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 144.

¹⁵⁰ This refers to the Nazis’ belief that Aryans were descended from the deities. For more information, see the previous section entitled “Symbolism,” subsection “The Hunt to Locate Religious Sites and Artifacts.”

¹⁵¹ Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 145; Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 188.

¹⁵² Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 165.

¹⁵³ Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 286.

¹⁵⁴ See previous section entitled “Divine Leaders,” subsection “Hitler as God’s Messenger.”

accomplished through its content and title. The former highlighted the achievements of the regime in order to accentuate the positive effects of self-sacrifice for the collective good.¹⁵⁵ The latter alluded to *Mein Kampf* and the individual's responsibility to participate in Hitler's "struggle."

It was through the perceived holiness of Hitler's manifesto, and the self-sacrifice being demanded from all Germans to fulfill the goals outlined within it, that Nazi leaders promoted the *Volksgemeinschaft*. For instance, Hitler explicitly declared that those who did not believe in or contribute to the German *Volksgemeinschaft* were committing a sin "against the very meaning of life."¹⁵⁶ By using the word "sin" in this case, Hitler appealed to the consciences of all Germans—especially Christian Germans who would be most affected by a fear of sin due to its central role in their religious doctrines. His message to them was clear: those who were against the *Volksgemeinschaft* through either open opposition or indifference were sinners, and thus acting in opposition to God's will. The subsequent implication was that the *Volksgemeinschaft* was the epitome of holiness, morality, and heavenly "goodness." Anyone not part of it must, by extension, be associated with evil, immorality, and Hell.

Thus, through deceptively pious comments such as this, the Nazis used religion to promote support for the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Through its basis in blood, nature, and self-sacrifice, the *Volksgemeinschaft* was further constructed and justified through the Führer cult, Nazi racial thinking, and the concept of *Blut und Boden*—all of which contributed to

¹⁵⁵ German Propaganda Archive, "I Fight: A Book for Members of the Nazi Party."

¹⁵⁶ H. Mehringer, "Sieg des Glaubens Zum 30. Januar," *Der Schulungsbrief* (January 1930), 2-4 cited in "The Victory of Faith On 30 January," German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/schul01.htm>.

the development of a shared racial and territorial community headed by a single deified leader.

This conglomeration of ideas was also symbolic of the broader role of religion in Nazi ideology. By merging Christian and pagan teachings that they appropriated, and in many cases abused, the Nazis established a set of amoral tenets at the core of their new political faith. Those doctrines, and the pseudo-religion they comprised, created a social and political climate in which persecution flourished. In this environment, the Third Reich's discriminatory and genocidal policies received religious validation; and those responsible for planning and implementing the pogroms of the Holocaust fashioned new spiritually-based identities for themselves in order to assert their authority and rationalize their actions.

Chapter III.

Religion and Physical Appearance

In his novel *Michael: Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchblättern*, Joseph Goebbels confessed, “I converse with Christ. I believed I had overcome him, but I have only overcome his idolatrous priests and false servants. Christ is... relentless.”¹⁵⁷ This comment, coming from the pen of the Nazi’s chief propagandist, was jarring. For ardent Nazis such as Goebbels who were supposed to have renounced formal religion in favor of Nazism, making such a blatant declaration of faith in a work of literature intended for widespread publication was contradictory at best. Yet the presence of religion in Goebbels’s writing was not limited to this singular instance. Even in his personal musings, Goebbels’s word choice and ideas conveyed clear religious connotations.¹⁵⁸

Goebbels’s inclusion of Christian doctrine and pro-Christian language in his literary works revealed two important characteristics regarding religion in the Third Reich. First, it illustrated the fact that opposition to organized faiths was not as crucial to the Nazi Party as was anti-clericalism.¹⁵⁹ Second, it demonstrated that many Nazis, regardless of their status in the regime, were either not willing or not able to completely sever all ties with their personal religious denominations. In fact, even well after their party rose to power in 1933, many Nazis continued to be influenced to varying degrees—

¹⁵⁷ Joseph Goebbels, *Michael: Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchblättern* (Munich, 1929) as cited in Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 21.

¹⁵⁸ Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 20-2.

¹⁵⁹ Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 21-2.

both intentionally and unintentionally—by the dogmas of traditional religion or paganism to which they previously ascribed.¹⁶⁰

However, this persistent presence of religion, combined with the inundation of Nazi political ideologies, created psychological discord in the minds of Nazis at all levels of the regime. This was most prevalent among those who were directly involved in perpetrating the Holocaust. Placed in positions of supreme authority over human life, Nazis who played a role in the regime's systemic genocide augmented their authority and reconciled their newfound power—power usually reserved only for the deities of religion—by creating for themselves new personas. Through alterations to their physical appearances that were inspired by the teachings and symbols of Christianity and paganism, these war criminals sought to embody and enforce the divine status with which they felt imbued by their positions and, more importantly, their indisputable god-like control over the life and death of others.

White Clothing as a Symbol of Divine Power

Of all the Nazis who participated in the Holocaust, physicians and death camp kommandants were most likely to express their authority through self-fashioned, religiously-oriented appearances. White clothing, in particular, was worn by doctors and camp commanders alike to elevate and even deify themselves and, subsequently, personify and reiterate their power over their victims.

For doctors, this self-imposed deification was subtler than it was for camp kommandants. Since white coats were a commonplace symbol of the medical profession,

¹⁶⁰ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 106.

a physician wearing a white medical jacket did not immediately invoke religious imagery. However, according to Dr. Mark S. Hochberg, white medical coats did have historic ties to notions of moral purity.¹⁶¹ Since purity was a characteristic commonly associated with deities, saints, and martyrs in religion, it is feasible that the doctors' white medical coats created at least a subconscious relationship between Nazi physicians and divine religious figures. Yet when considered within the context of the duties fulfilled by doctors on behalf of the Third Reich, as well as the psychological views that many Nazi physicians held of themselves, the white coats assumed even greater significance in transforming doctors into gods.

For instance, throughout the Holocaust, doctors stationed in euthanasia centers and death camps held primary responsibility for the selection process—in other words, determining which victims would live and which would die.¹⁶² They also possessed the ability to exact forms of inhuman treatment on their victims, as best exemplified by Hermann Pfannmüller's starvation of children and Josef Mengele's infamous medical experiments.¹⁶³ Both selections and medical torture were largely based on the particular dispositions and daily attitudes of the individual doctors. As a result of this complete, often arbitrary control that they had over the fates of their victims, in addition to the lack of restrictions imposed on them by the Nazi state, many physicians developed feelings of omnipotence.¹⁶⁴ In particular, many Nazi doctors involved in the Holocaust functioned

¹⁶¹ Mark S. Hochberg, "The Doctor's White Coat: An Historical Perspective," *Virtual Mentor: AMA Journal of Ethics* 9 (April 2007): 311, 10.1001/virtualmentor.2007.9.4.mhst1-0704.

¹⁶² Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 4.

¹⁶³ For details about Pfannmüller's use of starvation in the children's euthanasia program, see Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 153 and Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 61-2. For details about Mengele's medical experiments at Auschwitz, see Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 259-61 and Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 347-56.

¹⁶⁴ Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 448.

under the belief that they had been personally sanctioned to commit murder on behalf of God as part of a broader divine plan to heal the German *Volk*.¹⁶⁵

In order to promote this conceptualization of physicians as healers of the nation rather than of individuals, the Nazi regime reinvented the profession. For example, the state attached new meanings to various components of the profession, such as the Hippocratic Oath, to ensure that doctors were seen—both by themselves as well as the nation at large—as national healers.¹⁶⁶ In short, each physician became a “medical *Führer*” in the Third Reich.¹⁶⁷ Just as Nazi ideology perceived Hitler as a god-sent savior of the German people, so too were physicians viewed as divine redeemers who were supposed to do away with those considered to be a blight upon the nation’s health.¹⁶⁸ In order to restore the vitality of the German *Volk*, doctors had to eliminate the perceived “diseases” in German society—namely, those who were believed to be unworthy of life, especially Jews.¹⁶⁹ Yet just as God was believed to make sinners recompense for their wrongdoings, Nazi doctors also had to make those at fault for the malignity of the nation “atone for... [their] guilt.”¹⁷⁰ Extermination, especially through gassing, thus came to be viewed by physicians as part of their divine role on earth. It was their way of simultaneously exacting what they perceived to be a more humane form of retribution and curing the German *Volk* of those groups that were allegedly causing its downfall.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 449; Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 32.

¹⁶⁶ Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 32.

¹⁶⁷ Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 452.

¹⁶⁸ Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 119-20.

¹⁶⁹ Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 16.

¹⁷⁰ Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 10; Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1967 [1961]), 635 as cited in Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 453.

¹⁷¹ For more information on the use of gas as a form of “humane” extermination, see Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 453.

Therefore, as a symbol of both the doctors and the medical profession as a whole, the white lab coat subsequently became associated with these notions of omnipotence and divine purpose. It is clear that some Nazi doctors were aware of this symbolic relationship between their white coats and the divine status they hoped to bring to mind. Those who were cognizant of the connection used it to create an aura of god-like superiority around themselves. For instance, Imfried Eberl was a Nazi physician who was placed in command of the Treblinka death camp at its inception. According to many witnesses, Eberl made it a habit to wear his white medical coat whenever he could be seen around the camp. Considering the fact that Eberl allowed conditions at Treblinka to deteriorate to the point that corpses were left unburied throughout the camp, his decision to be visible amidst the carnage only while dressed in his white physician's jacket reflected his feelings of omnipotence and his attempts to physically portray his supreme authority over life and death.¹⁷²

Although Nazi doctors used their medical coats as a means of physically establishing their perceived divine identities, they were not the only Holocaust perpetrators who manipulated their appearances for this purpose. In fact, much like Eberl, death camp kommandants—even those without medical backgrounds—also chose white apparel as an expression of their supreme, god-like authority over their victims. Though it is true that, compared to physicians, camp administrators played a decidedly less direct role in the extermination processes of the Holocaust, they were nevertheless responsible for overseeing the killing operations on a daily basis. Indeed, by the very nature of their jobs, kommandants were imbued with “executive authority”—in other words, power over

¹⁷² Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 124.

all “executive, judicial and legislative” matters within their particular camps.¹⁷³ Many of these Nazi leaders recognized that, by possessing such broad powers over their prisoners, they transcended typical human codes of existence and instead became “Lord[s], over life and death....”¹⁷⁴

To portray their self-appointed divine statuses within their camps, many kommandants changed their physical appearances by dressing in white clothes. One of the most prominent examples of this was that of Franz Stangl. During his time as komandant of the Sobibor death camp, Stangl had a white riding outfit fashioned for him. As Stangl explained, the clothes were made of “very nice linen – off-white.... I had a jacket made right away and a little later jodhpurs and a coat.” Although Stangl claimed that the clothes were made for riding in the hot weather, many witnesses reported that he actually wore his white outfit while attending “the unloading of transports.”¹⁷⁵

Stangl’s decision to wear white clothes while overseeing the arrival of new prisoners to Sobibor spoke volumes to his perceptions of identity. As previously mentioned, the color white, in religious contexts, corresponded to purity and goodness.¹⁷⁶ For Stangl to dress himself entirely in white therefore meant that he was portraying himself as a pure, guiltless being. This was significant for Stangl, who struggled with the moral correctness of the Holocaust and his role in it.¹⁷⁷ His utilization of white clothing

¹⁷³ NMT 7: Hostage Case (U.S.A. v. Wilhelm List et al. 1947-8), Green Series 11 U.S. 9557, 9640 (A.M.T. February 03, 1948), <https://nuremberg.law.harvard.edu/transcripts/4-transcript-for-nmt-7hostagecase?seq=9649&q=lord>.

¹⁷⁴ *List et al.*, Green Series 11 U.S. at 9640.

¹⁷⁵ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 117-8.

¹⁷⁶ See Chapter 2.

¹⁷⁷ Throughout *Into That Darkness*, it was evident from many of Stangl’s responses to Sereny’s questions that he felt guilty for his role in the Holocaust. He finally confronted and admitted his guilt in his final discussion with Sereny. To read more about Stangl’s confession—which itself revealed his internal struggle regarding his culpability for the Holocaust—see Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 364-5.

seemed to serve as a means by which he absolved himself of guilt and justified his actions.

Since purity is often associated with sovereign religious figures such as gods, Stangl's choice in apparel also corresponded with the part of his personality that embraced his "executive authority" over the prisoners.¹⁷⁸ Stangl's supervision of the arrival of transports provides an example of this. The entrance of new prisoners into Sobibor and Treblinka, as in all death camps, was a time during which initial selections were made regarding which prisoners would live and which would die. It can be assumed that Stangl felt a certain connection with religious entities such as God who, according to the doctrines of traditional religion, controlled the fates of human beings. Coincidentally, elements of the divine—such as God or Heaven—were often depicted in religious imagery using the color white. Hence, by adorning himself with a white uniform during decisive moments regarding life and death, Stangl not only resembled divine figures, but used that façade to assert his god-like status within the camp.

Like Stangl, Fritz Gebauer, kommandant of Yanov death camp, also utilized white clothing as an expression of the divine identity that he psychologically assumed. Gebauer, like Stangl, had the supreme control over human life that came with the role of death camp commander. However, unlike Stangl, Gebauer was more intimately involved in the extermination processes of his camp. For instance, at times when he was visible in Yanov, Gebauer was often accompanied by his dog, which he had trained to attack and

¹⁷⁸ During her interviews with Stangl, Sereny observed that it seemed as though the former Nazi had two personalities—one was harsh and more agitated, only appearing when his position at Sobibor and Treblinka, or other difficult subjects that he wished to avoid, were breeched; the other was relatively mild, displaying itself during less emotionally and ethically charged discussions. This was reflected by a physical shift in his demeanor as well. Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 50 and Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 156-7.

kill prisoners at his command. He was also reported to have led at least one parade—complete with an orchestra—to the location in which prisoners were to be executed. According to witnesses, it was during this latter occasion that Gebauer wore his infamous white uniform.¹⁷⁹

Much like Stangl, Gebauer's decision to wear white clothing while overseeing and participating in the killing operations of Yanov created a physical image that connected him with divine figures of authority, such as God. It also associated him and his actions with symbolic notions of purity that stemmed from the color of his uniform. In this respect, Gebauer's choice of personal apparel reflected his self-deification. Yet the importance of his white clothing was further amplified by another key component of his physical appearance—the presence of his dog. The dog, which would attack and kill prisoners at Gebauer's command, reinforced its owner's "executive authority" over the prisoners of Yanov. It also buttressed Gebauer's self-created identity as a god-like figure—a man who, clothed in white, had the power to control not only which prisoners were to be killed, but also the very method of their extermination.

Belts and Insignia as a Symbol of Divine Service

Although white clothing was used by Nazi doctors and death camp kommandants in the creation of their sanctified personas, less noticeable characteristics in the daily dress of Holocaust perpetrators played a similar role in establishing divine identities. This

¹⁷⁹ International Military Tribunal, "Sixty-first Day, Monday, 18 February 1946," *Trial of the Major War Criminals before The International Military Tribunal* Volume VII (1947), 549, https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/NT_Vol-VII.pdf.

was particularly true of the belts and insignias worn by rank-and-file Nazis who participated in the genocidal pogroms.

Unlike physicians and camp commanders, subordinate SS men who were charged with personally performing many of the atrocities of the Holocaust did not—or more likely, could not—alter their physical appearance to mimic feelings of divinity.¹⁸⁰ This was most likely due to a combination of factors, including the need of the rank-and-file men to obey formal regulations regarding military dress, as well as the role of these men as the followers rather than the creators of orders. Yet lower-ranking SS men still perceived themselves within a religious context. Just as the doctors and camp kommandants—those who oversaw, organized, and managed most of the extermination processes of the Holocaust—saw themselves on a level equivalent with God, the average SS men subsequently viewed themselves as servants of God.¹⁸¹

This was most clearly demonstrated by a single part of the SS uniform—the belt. According to witnesses in Nazi death camps, many of the SS men responsible for guarding and operating the camps wore belts that held “the inscription ‘God is with us.’”¹⁸² This engraving, prominently displayed on a required element of SS uniforms, alluded to the popular Nazi belief that the regime’s acts of genocide were performed on behalf of—and with the approval of—God.¹⁸³ Some SS men took the words on their belts

¹⁸⁰ I am focusing mainly on the SS here, since they held primary responsibility for many of the regime’s genocidal activities, especially with respect to concentration and death camps. Herbert F. Ziegler, *Nazi Germany’s New Aristocracy: The SS Leadership, 1925-1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 6.

¹⁸¹ International Military Tribunal, “One Hundred and Thirty-eighth Day, Friday, 24 May 1946,” *Trial of the Major War Criminals before The International Military Tribunal* Volume XIV (1947) 481, https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/NT_Vol-XIV.pdf.

¹⁸² International Military Tribunal, “Sixty-ninth Day, Wednesday, 27 February 1946,” *Trial of the Major War Criminals before The International Military Tribunal* Volume XIV (1947) 316, https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/NT_Vol-VIII.pdf.

¹⁸³ See Chapter 2.

as a form of moral justification for their actions, while others used the inscription to redefine their personal identities.

For instance, according to Richard Rhodes, a member of *Einsatzgruppe D* commented that “[a] man is the lord over life and death when he gets an order to shoot three hundred children—and he kills at least one hundred fifty himself.”¹⁸⁴ This statement, uttered by one of the SS men who participated in the exterminations conducted by one of the Nazis’ mobile killing units, revealed the almost holy identity with which some rank-and-file Nazis viewed themselves. On the one hand, they saw themselves as “lords” with total control over their victims’ fates, much like Nazi doctors and camp kommandants did. On the other hand, they committed their killings on the orders of their commanders—men who, by the nature of their military and executive authority, had god-like control over both their subordinates and their victims. The nearly gleeful tone of this particular SS man illustrated that some men took pride in identifying themselves as obedient soldiers and enthusiastic executioners who—as indicated by their belt buckles—performed their actions of martial servitude in the name of God and the deified men who commanded them.

Similarly, the *Totenkopf* also created a divine aura around the rank-and-file members of the SS “Death’s Head Units.” As previously mentioned, the *Totenkopf* represented, according to the SS’s paganist traditions, each individual’s responsibility to sacrifice themselves for the “higher mission” ascribed to them by the deities.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, it served as a symbol of “the bearer’s willingness to give and take death

¹⁸⁴ Richard Rhodes, *Masters of Death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the Invention of the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 169.

¹⁸⁵ See Chapter 2.

readily in the holy cause of National Socialism.”¹⁸⁶ In this way, just as with the inscribed belts, the *Totenkopf* identified those wearing it as divine servants who were willing to grant life or exact death according to the will of the gods—regardless of whether those gods were their commanders, the *Führer*, or the deities of religion.

¹⁸⁶ Ziegler, *Nazi Germany's New Aristocracy*, 39.

Chapter IV.

Constructing a New Psychological Self-Image

For the past several decades, historians such as Christopher Browning, Daniel Goldhagen, and Robert Jay Lifton examined the Holocaust through a new lens—the psychology of the perpetrators. By doing so, they attempted to shed light on the motivations that allowed seemingly “average” Germans to commit the atrocities of the Holocaust. Yet these recent studies were not the first instances in which individuals expressed interest in the psychology of the perpetrators.

In fact, some Nazi leaders conveyed concern about the mentalities of their subordinates, especially with respect to the mental and emotional burdens they endured throughout the Holocaust. Having tasked them with assuming the dual identities of murderer and idol, Nazi officials like Heinrich Himmler worried that some men would struggle with the moral contradictions of these two roles—and subsequently questions or disregard the genocidal acts they were ordered to perform. Himmler therefore issued public assurances that, although the men should not enjoy the killings in which they participated, they should nevertheless refrain from feelings of guilt, since they were merely obeying the commands of their superiors.¹⁸⁷

Despite such reassurances however, many Nazis experienced internal moral and psychological dilemmas as a result of their participation in the Holocaust. In an attempt to come to terms with their inner turmoil, some turned to religion. Using religious imagery and symbolism, as well as the presence of spiritual leaders, many Holocaust

¹⁸⁷ Rhodes, *Masters of Death*, 153.

perpetrators sought to rationalize—at least in their minds—the crimes they were asked to commit on behalf of Germany, the *Führer*, and God.

The Holocaust as Religious Duty

For Nazis who participated in the Holocaust, many of whom grew up in Christian households, the genocidal pogroms they performed were contradictory to the ethics upon which they had been raised. However, the quasi-religious quality of National Socialism allowed them to justify their actions in their own minds in terms of religious duty.

According to Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer,

The National Socialist ethos of respectability focused on the idea that fighters were not to engage in cries like murder, rape, and plunder to benefit themselves, but for the sake of a higher cause. This ethos allowed Germans to justify actions that were absolutely evil in terms of Western, Christian morality and to integrate them as unavoidable necessities into their own moral self-image.¹⁸⁸

In other words, by portraying the inhumane acts of Holocaust perpetrators as a form of divine will, the Nazi Party created an inherent means by which those individuals could internally vindicate themselves of their criminal activities. Many Nazis did precisely that.

For example, Baldur von Schirach, who served for a time as the leader of the Hitler Youth, alluded to the Nazis' role as divine servants. According to Schirach, "[T]he service of Germany appears to us to be genuine and sincere service of God; the banner of the Third Reich appears to us to be His banner; and the Führer of the people is the savior whom He sent to rescue us..."¹⁸⁹ This statement reinforced the notion that the Nazis' actions during the Holocaust were morally acceptable because they were performed on

¹⁸⁸ Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, 149.

¹⁸⁹ International Military Tribunal, "One Hundred and Thirty-eighth Day," *Trial of the Major War Criminals before The International Military Tribunal* Volume XIV, 481.

behalf of God. Thus, it was implied that the Nazis held no guilt for deeds that might otherwise be classified as illegal. In fact, even in the face of personal moral repulsion toward the Third Reich's genocidal policies and pogroms, many Nazi leaders and superior officers went to great lengths to assure their subordinates that they had indeed "acted right and... are justified in the eyes of God."¹⁹⁰

This belief in religiously-defensible, divinely-supported genocide correlated with Nazi perceptions that their struggle was not only political, but also religious by nature. As previously mentioned, the Nazis often depicted their attacks against Jews and other undesirable groups as part of a new Christian crusade. This was frequently bolstered by the regime's insistence that the Holocaust was not a means of unjustified racial and ethnic extermination, but rather a warranted form of vengeance wrought by Christians against Jews as a result of the latter's role in the crucifixion of Christ.¹⁹¹ Yet this concept of renegade justice was not limited to Christ's execution on the cross. In fact, it was also a remnant of the Nazis' belief that they were fighting a holy war on behalf of not only the traditional Christian deities, but also a new god—Germany.

Throughout the years of the Third Reich, the German nation became the sole deity that many Nazis worshipped.¹⁹² In the Nazi worldview, Germans were, by nature of both religion and nationality, "children of the gods' who had the right to kill."¹⁹³ This belief in German divinity, as well as the sacred right to murder others—namely Jews, who Martin Luther defined as the antithesis of true Germans by labelling them "children of

¹⁹⁰ NMT 1: Medical Case (U.S.A. v. Karl Brandt et al.), U.S. 5896, 5958 (A.M.T. April 15, 1947), <https://nuremberg.law.harvard.edu/transcripts/1-transcript-for-nmt-1-medicalcase?seq=6100&q=god>.

¹⁹¹ See Chapter 2.

¹⁹² Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 471.

¹⁹³ Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 475.

the Devil’”—on behalf of Germany was closely linked to racism, anti-Semitism, and notions of physical and spiritual purification.¹⁹⁴ Blending medical perspectives with religious doctrines, the Nazis asserted that Germany could only be saved by its Nazi crusaders by cleansing the nation’s blood through the sacrificing of victims.¹⁹⁵ Thus, by killing Jews—who were perceived as a racial malignity in Germany—the Nazis reinforced the notion that their criminal acts of genocide were in fact holy deeds performed for the Fatherland and God.¹⁹⁶

However, this conviction in a divinely-ordained plan for the racial purification of Germany was not universally held by all Nazis. Instead, some members of the Party perceived their genocidal tasks as a fulfillment of their Christian duty to extend mercy to the less fortunate. For example, during his time on the stand at the Nuremberg Trials, Nazi leader Viktor Brack defended his creation of the T-4 Euthanasia Program as a form of compassion. According to Brack, Nazi euthanasia was a demonstration of pity—the granting of a merciful end to those who, through physical or mental disabilities, God had destined to a life of suffering and sub-humanity.¹⁹⁷ Thus, euthanizing such people was seen as a way of saving them from continued pain and misery. It was also a method by which those considered to be “inhuman” could be more humanely eliminated. Through these lenses, Nazis involved in the euthanasia program justified their actions, much like Brack, through religious conceptions of God’s will and mercy.

¹⁹⁴ Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 479.

¹⁹⁵ Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 482-4.

¹⁹⁶ Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors*, 470-2.

¹⁹⁷ *Brandt et al.*, U.S. at 5958.

Rationalizing the Holocaust through the Presence of Religious Figures

Although sentiments of holy duty held great strength for some Nazis, that was not the case for all members of the regime. Many searched for other ways to rationalize the systematic killings in which they played a part. In some situations, these individuals turned to the support of the Christian churches and members of their religious communities—especially nuns and clergy—to justify the mass exterminations.

Such was the case for Franz Stangl. Prior to assuming command in Sobibor, Stangl served in an administrative capacity in the T-4 Euthanasia Program. It was during his tenure as part of the program that Stangl traveled to the euthanasia institute at Hartheim, where he encountered the nun and priest who advocated for the extermination of a disabled child.¹⁹⁸ As though trying to work through the questionable morality of not only the dilemma regarding the child, but also the euthanasia program as a whole, Stangl reasoned, “Here was a Catholic nun, a Mother Superior, and a priest. And they thought it was right. Who was I then, to doubt what was being done?”¹⁹⁹

Stangl’s statement showed that some Nazis, perhaps struggling internally with the moral conflicts aroused by their role in the Holocaust, looked to the Church and its personnel for absolution. So, too, did their wives. As indirect, and at times unwilling, participants in the state-sponsored genocide, the wives of Nazi perpetrators often turned to religion in order to resolve the ethical conundrums they experienced as a result of their husbands’ actions.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ See Chapter 1. For Stangl’s original account of the incident, see Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 58.

¹⁹⁹ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 58.

²⁰⁰ Although I mention that these moral dilemmas were faced by the wives of perpetrators on behalf of their husbands, this was often an extension of their feelings of personal guilt. For example, Frau Stangl frequently expressed concerns about her husband’s involvement in the Holocaust; but there were indications that some of those sentiments were connected to the recognition that her complicity made her partially culpable as well. Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 361-2.

In fact, Stangl's wife, Theresa, sought the guidance of a local priest after she learned about the events transpiring at Treblinka.²⁰¹ According to her recollections, the priest not only supported Stangl's actions as kommandant of the death camp, but "absolve[d] him from all guilt." This brought Frau Stangl a small measure of peace of mind and allowed her to vindicate her husband's—and by extension, her own—actions.²⁰² However, this example also highlighted the importance of religious personnel in the lives of Nazi wives. For some of these women, the approval of priests, nuns, and other church leaders was a crucial component in processing and rationalizing the acts of genocide that were committed by their husbands and propagated by their own inaction.²⁰³

In addition to members of the churches, many Nazis also looked for the presence of God to justify their crimes. For instance, while imprisoned in Spandau after World War II, the former chief Nazi architect and armaments minister Albert Speer wrote to his daughter, Hilde, about his thoughts on God's presence in the world. Throughout his letter, Speer equated God's manifestation on Earth with miracles that he encountered, such as the fern he mis-planted that still grew healthy. Among these "miracles" were the

²⁰¹ Treblinka was the new death camp to which Franz Stangl was transferred following his tenure at Sobibor. Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 157.

²⁰² Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 235-6.

²⁰³ As previously mentioned, Theresa Stangl clearly struggled with her own personal guilt in relation to the Holocaust. The conflict of conscience that she embodied stemmed from the fact that she never directly confronted her husband about his roles at Sobibor and Treblinka. She showed great distress when faced with questions about her decision not to present Franz with an ultimatum—namely, choosing either his family or his career. Her failure to demand such a choice from him, and thus to continue unquestioningly supporting him, was a form of indirect complicity in the Holocaust for two reasons. First, she was aware of the exterminations that were happening in both camps, yet remained silent about it. Second, she confessed that, had she presented her husband with the aforementioned ultimatum, she believed that he would have chosen his family. Although Stangl choosing his family over his job would not have ended the killing operations at Sobibor or Treblinka, it would have, at the very least, demonstrated that Theresa was opposed to the Nazis' genocidal pogroms and refused to tolerate her husband's role in them. Frau Stangl seemed to recognize that her failure to take such a firm stance against the Holocaust was in fact a form of silent approval. The moral struggles she consequently endured as she tried to come to terms with her own indirect collusion in the killings was evidenced in her discussions with Gitta Sereny. Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 361-2.

chaplains and priests with which Speer interacted while on trial and in prison. He interpreted the presence of these religious figures as evidence of God's existence in his life.²⁰⁴ The fact that Speer was so fixated on signs of God's presence around him implied that he was going through a form of mental processing and rationalization.

Throughout his interviews with Gitta Sereny, Speer frequently admitted to the crimes committed by the Nazi regime. Yet he also distanced himself from them just as often, refusing to accept any personal responsibility for the horrors of the Holocaust.²⁰⁵ Still, Speer had conflicts of conscience that he seemed unable to reconcile. As such, his belief that God was bestowing miracles and kindness upon him—something that Christian teachings suggest only happens for non-sinners—expressed Speer's subconscious attempt to absolve himself of guilt. As evidenced by his writings, Speer assumed that he would not have received God's miracles—in the form of the chaplains and priests who provided him with company and solace—if he had truly been guilty of any crimes.²⁰⁶ Sandwiched between discussions of Nuremberg, Hitler's evil, and the duty of confronting maliciousness in the world, Speer's use of God's presence as a means of coping with his guilt and rationalizing his role in the Holocaust became even clearer.²⁰⁷

Although Franz Stangl also looked for examples of God's physical manifestation in order to justify his involvement in the genocide created by the Nazis, he did not share

²⁰⁴ Sereny, *Albert Speer*, 632.

²⁰⁵ Speer's openness about the criminality of the Third Reich and his unwillingness to admit to any personal culpability for those wrongdoings is apparent in many instances throughout Sereny's *Albert Speer*. One such example is seen in excerpts from Speer's testimony at Nuremberg, during which he was questioned about conditions in a POW and labor camp. Speer "refused[d] to evade responsibility," yet denied any connection to, or awareness of, the conditions in the camp, since they were not under his direct control. Sereny, *Albert Speer*, 569-70.

²⁰⁶ This is implied by his assumption that the priests and chaplains who interacted with him were proof of God's presence. Sereny, *Albert Speer*, 632.

²⁰⁷ Sereny, *Albert Speer*, 632.

Speer's optimistic view of the supreme Christian deity; nor did he necessarily seek out God's presence in his own life as a means of personal absolution. Instead, he looked to shift guilt away from himself and place it directly with God. For instance, when questioned by Sereny regarding whether or not he believed God to have been present in Treblinka, Stangl responded in the affirmative. He explained that God was an unexplainable force of both the positive and negative in the world.²⁰⁸ Thus, even atrocities such as the gassing of Jews at Treblinka were able to proceed unhindered under his watch. In this way, Stangl blamed God for the Holocaust, since all events—both good and bad—were divinely ordained.

As the examples of Speer and Stangl show, God's physical existence was an important means by which Nazi perpetrators sought to rationalize their actions in the Holocaust. In their minds, if God—a being who was, by tradition, infinitely just and good—was present in the places where Jews and other *Lebensunwertes Lebens* were killed, then it subsequently implied that the unimpeded deaths of the victims were acceptable to God. By extension, the perpetrators' roles in the extermination processes were also assumed to be permissible to God. This preoccupation with signs of God's manifestation in the world represented yet another way in which those responsible for the Holocaust used religious figures as a means of validating the genocide and their involvement in it.

²⁰⁸ Sereny, *Into That Darkness*, 364.

Justification through Religious Concepts

Beyond religious duty and the approval of religious figures, Nazi perpetrators also tried to justify their crimes through the use of religious ideology. Julius von Jan offered a prime example of this. While on trial at Nuremberg, von Jan confessed that his actions during the Holocaust were based not on legal code, but rather religious doctrine.

According to von Jan, “[I]t was not for him to ask what he was permitted to do as a citizen... the only guiding principle was what he, according to the word of God (such as he interprets it), had to do.”²⁰⁹

This statement indicated that, for Nazis like von Jan, the Bible was used as a means of justification for the parts they played in the Holocaust. Although there were not necessarily overt messages in the Bible that commanded them to commit genocidal crimes, it was instead their interpretation of scripture—and thus the words and ideas passed down from God—that dictated their actions. In that way, some Nazis, including von Jan, rationalized their participation in the Holocaust through the use of religious ideas contained in the Bible.

Other perpetrators justified their crimes through sacred ideologies that were less tangible than the Word of God. One example of this was presented by Friedrich M., the *Einsatzgruppen* member mentioned in Browning’s *Ordinary Men*. Tasked with killing innocent women and children, Friedrich argued that he showed mercy by shooting children whose mothers had just been murdered by his comrades.²¹⁰ Yet Friedrich’s statement had a religious component to it, as well. In his description of the executions,

²⁰⁹ NMT 3: Justice Case (USA v. Josef Altstoetter et al. 1947), U.S. 8103, 8125 (A.M.T. September 03, 1947), <https://nuremberg.law.harvard.edu/transcripts/3-transcripts-for-nmt-3-justice-case?seq=8119&q=god>.

²¹⁰ See Chapter 1.

Friedrich said that it was “soothing to my conscience to release children unable to live without their mothers.”²¹¹ However, in German, the word for “release”—*erlösen*—can also mean “to ‘redeem’ or ‘save’ when used in a religious sense.” Therefore, as Browning pointed out, “The one who ‘releases’ is the Erlöser—the Savior or Redeemer!”²¹² As this demonstrates, Friedrich clearly identified himself as having sacred sanction in order to cope with the murders he committed.

Others similarly viewed themselves—and their comrades, but extension—as merciful redeemers rather than executioners. Pery Broad, a non-commissioned officer at Auschwitz, was one man who compared his peers and superiors to saviors. One such instance of this occurred in Broad’s reminiscences of Auschwitz while he was discussing the camp’s senior *Lagerführer* Hans Aumeier. According to Broad, Aumeier used to place crosses next to the names on his list of prisoners, “putting small lines round the corners of the cross” for those who were condemned to death.²¹³ Thus, the act of marking or not marking a cross—and thereby either saving a person or condemning them to death—was a display of supreme authority over human life. In fact, such power was similar to the executive authority and omnipotence displayed by Nazi doctors and camp kommandants.²¹⁴ Yet it also provided Nazis like Aumeier, as Broad suggested, with the opportunity to become a savior to those prisoners they chose to keep alive.

As the examples of Friedrich and Aumeier demonstrate, some Nazis utilized religious conceptions of divine protection—and their perceived status as grantors of that

²¹¹ Friedrich M., HW 1708 as cited in Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 73.

²¹² Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 73.

²¹³ Rudolf Höss, Pery Broad, and Johann Paul Kremer, *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS*, compiled from *The Autobiography of Rudolf Höss* trans. Constantine FitzGibbon, and the *Reminiscences of Pery Broad* and the *Diary of Johann Paul Kremer* trans. Krystyna Michalik (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2003), 110.

²¹⁴ See Chapter 3.

protection—to rationalize the roles they played in the Holocaust. Those like Friedrich personally identified themselves as saviors for the supposed mercy they showed by killing their victims. However, Aumeier’s case revealed that even those who were less directly involved in the extermination operations began to view their comrades in a comparable way. For Broad, Aumeier was the epitome of a divine savior at Auschwitz—a man who, based on his own whims, selected those who would live and, subsequently, those who would die. In short, the cases of Friedrich and Aumeier illustrated how many Nazi perpetrators turned to Christian notions of a Christ-like redeemer to justify both their own roles, and those of their comrades, in the Holocaust.

Chapter V.

Conclusion

The Nazi Party's rise to power in 1933 was a political revolution that initiated a dual-pronged religious upheaval.²¹⁵ On the one hand, the Nazis wanted to restrict the power of existing religions throughout Germany. That included Christianity as well as non-traditional creeds, such as Germanic paganism. On the other hand, the Nazis strove to replace these established religions with a new political faith that was designed solely to promote the goals of the Third Reich.

The former objective was never achieved. Personal religious backgrounds and concerns about political expediency prevented it. However, the Nazis had much greater success with the creation of a pseudo-religion, which they founded on the concepts of anti-Semitism, *Blut und Boden*, and the *Volksgemeinschaft*. As such, the regime above all emphasized bigotry and sacrifice. To encourage Germans to embrace those qualities, the Nazis arrogated various Christian and pagan elements—divine imagery, prayers and rituals, teachings about deities and nature, symbols. The result was a new, amoral value system that garnered support for the Nazi regime and normalized its policies of genocide.

This covert form of indoctrination was effective for several reasons. Most importantly, it constantly exposed Germans to Nazi racial thinking. The belief in an Aryan race and German “blood community,” stringent anti-Semitism, and an emphasis on eugenics were all components of the racism that was endorsed by the members of the Third Reich through propaganda. This meant that Germans were subjected to Nazi racial

²¹⁵ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 106.

ideologies on a daily basis, which predisposed many of them to become supportive—or at the very least indifferent—to the policies and pogroms of the Holocaust.

In addition to racial indoctrination, the Nazis also increased support for their systematized genocide by deifying their leaders. Exploiting Christian teachings and German hopes for a resolution to their economic crisis, the Nazis depicted Hitler as a divine savior. Lower-ranking government and military officials, likewise, were represented as saint-like beings or martyrs sent by God to rescue the nation. By giving the regime an aura of sacred morality, this process of deification convinced many average Germans that the principles and actions of the Nazis—including racial violence and extermination—were both acceptable and just. It also inspired blind adherence to the Third Reich by equating Nazi officials with supreme, heavenly entities who had been sent to earth on the holy mission of saving Germany from those who had caused its misfortune.

Through an appropriation of Christian and pagan iconology, the Nazis conditioned the German populace to believe that they were part of this sacred undertaking. In the Nazis' opinion, it was the responsibility of all of the country's citizens to obey the regime as it avenged the losses that Germany incurred from the First World War, and to sacrifice themselves both personally and professionally for the sake of the nation and its *Führer*. By imbuing existing religious symbols such as the Christian cross and pagan runes with these notions of revenge and sacrifice, the government of the Third Reich established a connection between religion, morality, and Nazi ideology. More importantly, exposure to these symbols instilled in Germans the belief that true

observance of their personal faiths could only be achieved through obedience to the Nazi regime.

For members of the Party who participated in its genocidal activities, the effect was even more pronounced. For them, religious iconology was both a representation and reminder of their alleged status as modern Crusaders. Like the Christian Crusaders of the medieval era, Holocaust perpetrators were considered by many in the Third Reich—including, oftentimes, themselves—to be holy warriors responsible for avenging Christ, fulfilling God’s commands as outlined in scripture, and killing the religious “enemies” of Germany.²¹⁶ With this crusader mentality and a national government that advocated racial hatred, these individuals developed a worldview in which discrimination, violence, and extermination were normalized and, indeed, demanded. In other words, the Nazis’ pseudo-religion created the political, social, and psychological backdrop that permitted, encouraged, and even required members of the regime to voluntarily commit crimes of genocide.

Yet even under this Nazi faith, many of those responsible for the Holocaust still incorporated existing religion in their daily lives. This was particularly evident in their responses to the atrocities they perpetrated. For example, Nazi doctors, death camp kommandants, and SS personnel incorporated religious symbols into their physical appearances as a way of asserting their authority and justifying their crimes. White clothing, belt buckles inscribed with spiritual messages, and insignia imbued with mystic meanings all contributed to the divine personas that granted power and absolution to their wearers. For physicians and camp commanders, white clothing was a representation of

²¹⁶ It is important to remember here that Germany was viewed as being holy and, in some cases, a religious entity worthy of worship. For more detailed discussion of this, see Chapter 2.

their omnipotence and supreme god-like control over life and death. Belt buckles and insignia had a similar effect on members of the SS who served as guards and executioners. These uniform accessories reflected the belief that these individuals were modern Crusaders who had the support of the deities. In these ways, icons of Christianity and paganism were used by Holocaust perpetrators as a way of visually reinforcing their alleged roles as either gods or servants to the gods.

However, those who planned and committed crimes of genocide on behalf of the Nazi regime also used religion to generate new psychological identities. This seemed to occur most frequently with those individuals who internally struggled with their participation in the Holocaust. By mentally reimagining themselves in a religious context, these Nazis developed a way of coping with their moral dilemmas. For example, in order to attain forgiveness for their offenses, many Nazis turned to the presence of religious figures and personnel—including priests, nuns, and even God. Some used personal interpretations of Biblical passages to justify murder. Still others, like Friedrich M. and Pery Broad, constructed mental images of themselves and their comrades as divine saviors in order to eradicate feelings of guilt.

In short, despite the Nazis' attempts to keep their party strictly secular, religion, in familiar but profoundly and often radically transmuted forms, continued to influence the lives of nearly all members of the regime. It had a particular impact on those who played a part in the Holocaust. First, the Nazis' self-fashioned political faith established a culture in which prejudice and genocide were justified, encouraged, recommended, prescribed, promoted—and, finally, normalized and championed. Existing religions were then manipulated to supplement this pseudo-faith and the genocidal policies and practices it

endorsed. For Nazis who were more psychologically predisposed to their roles as executioners, the doctrines they had been exposed to throughout their lives served to augment their obsession with power. However, for many perpetrators, the standardization of hatred and murder could not eradicate the traditional morals and value systems with which they had been raised. Therefore, these individuals relied on traditional forms of Christianity and paganism to rationalize and cope with their conflicts of conscience.

By affirming the authority and purity of the perpetrators, this relationship between religion and bureaucracy fatefully became critical to the continuation of the violence and extermination that defined the Holocaust. Although the Third Reich fell in 1945, other governments around the globe still use and abuse religion in order to fulfill political agendas. For instance, religion was utilized as a means of justifying genocides throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, including those in Bosnia and Rwanda.²¹⁷ In more recent years, religious bias has led to persecution throughout the Middle East and Asia, especially in places like Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.²¹⁸ Even in the United States—a nation dedicated to the separation of church and state—administrative bodies persist in using religion as a mode of discrimination against marginalized groups, such as women and the LGBTQIA+ community.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ See Omer Bartov and Phyllis Mack, *In God's Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001).

²¹⁸ EAA Editorial Office, "Facts About Asia: Religious Freedom in Asia," *Education about Asia* 25 (Spring 2020): 2, <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/facts-about-asia-religious-freedom-in-asia/>.

²¹⁹ There are many recent examples of discrimination in the US that have, at least in part, been founded in religion. One such instance relating to women was the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022, which greatly limited women's rights over their bodies. Overturning *Roe v. Wade* and giving states the option to ban abortions was advocated for by many extreme conservatives, including radical Christians. Similarly, for the LGBTQIA+ community, denial of services—including life-saving services—has often been connected to notions of religious freedom, which is often backed by state governments. Belinda Luscombe, "Reactions to the End of *Roe* Reveal Divisions Between Religious Leaders," *Time*, June 24, 2022, <https://time.com/6191048/religious-abortion-roe-reaction/>; Arielle P. Schwartz, "Discrimination Masquerading as Religious Freedom Is A Slippery Slope That Hurts Everyone," National LGBTQ Task

In all of these examples, as well as others too numerous to be mentioned in this study, religion was misappropriated or exploited by political entities to promote hatred, restrict individual rights, or even implement genocide. Religion continues to be used as a weapon of oppression by state institutions. Although modern abuses of religion by government entities cannot be equated with those that occurred during the Third Reich, they nevertheless indicate that—in different ways and to varying degrees—instances still exist in which some political agendas are promoted and achieved through the appropriation of sacred ideas and value systems. It is therefore imperative that the role of religion in the Nazi regime not be ignored. For as notable historians like Raul Hilberg, Christopher Browning, and Daniel Goldhagen proved, the Holocaust was implemented by ordinary people at the urging of their government; and due—at least in part—to the creation of a new pseudo-faith and the appropriation of existing religions, those seemingly “normal” people became murderers.

Such drastic shifts from innocence to criminality in the name of politics is still possible. Therefore, analyzing the connection between religion and bureaucracy in the Third Reich—particularly with respect to the impact that different traditional, non-traditional, and political faiths had on Holocaust perpetrators—is essential to understanding similar relationships between secular powers and religious belief and authority in the world today. In particular, it can reveal patterns regarding the ways in which governments use religion to promote inequality, discrimination, violence, and mass exterminations. Identifying and comprehending the significance of such connections is necessary if instances of hatred and persecution are to be confronted and

Force, accessed June 30, 2022, <https://www.thetaskforce.org/discrimination-masquerading-as-religious-freedom-is-a-slippery-slope-that-hurts-everyone/>.

combated. Therefore, although all of the lessons of the Holocaust should be remembered and applied responsibly to the issues of today, careful evaluation and greater attention ought to be given to the role of that singular and often overlooked element for which people have consistently fought, died, and persecuted throughout human history—religion.

Appendix

Definition of Terms

Aryan	The term “Aryan,” according to Nazi philosophy, referred to “an idealized, racially pure German” who, like their version of Jesus Christ, had white skin, blond hair, and blue eyes. ²²⁰
Crimes against Humanity	According to David M. Crowe, the International Military Tribunal defined crimes against humanity as the “murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against any civilian population, before or during the war; or persecution on political, racial or religious grounds in execution of or in connection with any crime within the jurisdiction of the Tribunal, whether or not in violation of domestic law of the country where perpetrated.” ²²¹
<i>Einsatzgruppen</i>	The <i>Einsatzgruppen</i> were killing units that, according to historian David M. Crowe, consisted of members of “the SS, the SD, Krip, the Order Police, and the Waffen-SS, the armed wing of the SS.” ²²²

²²⁰ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 58.

²²¹ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 397.

²²² Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 198.

Final Solution	The Final Solution was the Nazi policy of exterminating people who were considered to be unworthy of life, such as Jews, the handicapped, and homosexuals. ²²³
<i>Gottgläubige</i>	Translated to “believers in God,” <i>Gottgläubige</i> were Nazis who left their respective churches. The Third Reich’s creation of this new <i>gottgläubig</i> status was a way for Nazis to separate themselves from clericalism and organized religious institutions without seeming to be against religion itself. ²²⁴
<i>Kirchenaustritt</i>	The <i>Kirchenaustritt</i> was the term given to the mass exodus of Nazis who left their respective churches beginning in 1936. ²²⁵
<i>Kristallnacht</i>	<i>Kristallnacht</i> , or “Night of the Broken Glass,” was a Nazi pogrom implemented in November 1938 against Jews. During <i>Kristallnacht</i> , “Nazi thugs destroyed or damaged more than 1,500 synagogues and thousands of Jewish businesses and homes. They also murdered scores of Jews and severely injured many more.” About 30,000 Jews were also arrested and sent to concentration camps. ²²⁶ <i>Kristallnacht</i> was significant because it was the first

²²³ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 226.

²²⁴ Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 219.

²²⁵ Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich*, 219.

²²⁶ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 126-7.

organized and prolonged display of violence directed against the Jewish community by the Nazi regime.

Lebensunwertes Lebens The term *Lebensunwertes Lebens* translates to “lives unworthy of life.”²²⁷ It was most frequently used by the Nazis in reference to those who became the victims of the Holocaust, such as Jews, Roma, homosexuals, and the disabled.

National Socialist German Workers Party (Nazi Party, NSDAP) The National Socialist German Workers Party—also known as the NSDAP or Nazi Party—was a radical right-wing political party that emerged in Germany after the First World War.²²⁸ Originally known as the German Workers Party, the Nazi Party platform was centered on nationalism and the creation of a *völkisch* state.²²⁹

SA The SA was the abbreviation for the *Sturmabteilung*. The SA was commanded by Ernst Röhm until 1934 and was a highly anti-Semitic paramilitary organization. It was the precursor to the SS.²³⁰

SS The SS was the abbreviation for the *Schutzstaffel*. It was the paramilitary group that replaced the SA.²³¹

²²⁷ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 134.

²²⁸ Fulbrook, *A History of Germany*, 87.

²²⁹ For general information on the NSDAP as the National Socialist German Workers Party, see Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 95 and Fulbrook, *A History of Germany 1918-2008*, 67. For more information on the political platform of the NSDAP, see Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 92, and Fulbrook, *A History of Germany 1918-2008*, 87.

²³⁰ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 95 and Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 116.

²³¹ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 97 and Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 116.

T-4 Euthanasia Program	The <i>Tiergarten Straße Vier</i> , or T-4, Program was the code name for the adult euthanasia program implemented by the Nazi regime. ²³²
War Crimes	In the words of historian David M. Crowe, war crimes are “violations of the laws or customs of war. Such violations shall include, but not be limited to, murder, ill-treatment or deportation to slave labor or for any other purpose of civilian population of or in occupied territory, murder of or ill-treat of prisoners of war or persons on the seas, killing of hostages, plunder of public or private property, wanton destruction of cities, towns or villages, or devastation not justified by military necessity.” ²³³
<i>Volksgemeinschaft</i>	The <i>Volksgemeinschaft</i> , or “people’s community” was a central part of Nazism. ²³⁴ At its core, the <i>Volksgemeinschaft</i> was “a harmonious, unified order.” ²³⁵ It was closely linked with the Nazi <i>Weltanschauung</i> , advocating for idealized racial homogeneity and individual sacrifice. It also stressed blind obedience to the regime and Hitler. As Carl Müller Frøland explained, in the <i>Volksgemeinschaft</i> , “Here there are no conflicts that weaken the national unity, no individual contrasts, no

²³² Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 154.

²³³ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 397.

²³⁴ Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 165.

²³⁵ Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 165.

deviations from the racial ideal. This unified community is to be led by one man—a *Führer*. The *Führer* is the incarnation of the people's community.”²³⁶

Wehrmacht

The *Wehrmacht* was the German army.²³⁷

Weltanschauung

The *Weltanschauung* was the term applied to the Nazis' “worldview.”²³⁸ This “worldview” was included features such as sacrifice, notions of a *Volksgemeinschaft*, and anti-Semitism.

²³⁶ Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 165.

²³⁷ Crowe, *The Holocaust*, 120.

²³⁸ Frøland, *Understanding Nazi Ideology*, 115.

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