

Dangerous Undercurrent: Death, Sacrifice and Ruin in Third Reich Germany

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During the reign of the Third Reich, Adolf Hitler, along with his devoted followers, made plans for Germany founded on principles of superiority, a master race and the belief in "A Thousand-Year Reich." German *Kultur*, art and monumental architecture represented the tools with which Hitler could raise Germany up from a nation suffocating from depression and despair, to one thriving with confidence and pride. Yet beneath this façade of cultural glory and German supermen was the paradoxical obsession with death, ruin, and martyrdom. Inspired by Wagner, neo-Romanticism, monumentality, and *volkish* ideology, Hitler crafted a Germany built on sacrifice, hero worship, and fascist aesthetic politics. The culmination of which contributed to the creation of a Nazi *Totenkult*; a powerful civil religion that ultimately ended in an ideological national suicide and widespread immolation at the end of World War II.

During the reign of the Third Reich, Adolf Hitler made plans for a German future founded on the principles of victory, superiority, and a master race. He aimed to transform Germany into a state in which culture was the only "end to which power should aspire" and where the construction of Nazi cultural monuments, and art would change the face of Germany from one of despair and isolation, to one of pride and confidence.¹ Yet beneath this Nazi façade of racial supermen and cultural glory, another ideology developed, one obsessed with death, ruin and martyrdom which helped bring Hitler's Germany to its apex, and then to its ultimate climactic end. Inspired by Wagner, neo-Romanticism, monumentality and *volkish* ideology, Hitler crafted a hunger for sacrifice, and a hero worship whose exploitation within his fascist aesthetic politics brought about the creation of a Nazi *Totenkult*.² The manipulation of this *Totenkult* within Hitler's civil religion ultimately culminated in an ideological "national suicide" and an "orgy of self-immolation" inside Hitler's bunker at the end of World War II.³

Understanding the roots of this *Totenkult* makes it necessary to discuss the "*Volkish* thought" as it developed out of the nineteenth century, which as historian George Mosse argues, "showed a distinct tendency toward the irrational and emotional."⁴ This *volkish* thought, which was essentially a populist ideology, promoted the idea of "authentic German culture" and the superiority of the German race, language and history.⁵ This ideology had existed primarily within the margins of German society for most of the century, but began shifting to the mainstream of the German Right following the end of World War I and the establishment of the Weimar Republic.⁶ These German conservatives fought against "the entire social and ideological" course of the Weimar Republic's policy of "industrialization, urbanization, and Jewish assimilation."⁷ And through the *Volk* movement and eventually its unique form of neo-Romanticism, conservatives developed dichotomies of tradition versus modernity and art versus science, as the greatest issues involved in the "contest for the soul of Germany."⁸ The *volkish* movement also became more attractive to many in the educated middle-class, who increasingly doubted whether the "cultural and intellectual paradigms which had dominated the second half of the nineteenth century were capable of dealing with the social and existential effects of modernity."⁹

¹ Frederic Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2003), pg. xii.

² *Totenkult* when translated means "Death Cult."

³ Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pg. 1.

⁴ George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964), pg. 13.

⁵ Richard S. Levy, ed., *Anti-Semitism: A Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2005), pg. 743.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Frederic Spotts, *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pg. 131.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Margarete Kohlenbach, "Transformations of German Romanticism 1830-2000," Ed. Nicholas Saul, *The Cambridge Companion to German Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009), pg. 258.

Professor Margarete Kohlenbach argues that this skepticism in regards to “traditional religion, bourgeois morality, philosophical materialism, scientific world views and the beliefs of progress and evolution” contributed to the “cultural reorientation” of many in German society to the *Volk* movement and its neo-Romanticism after the rise of Hitler and National Socialism.¹⁰

This neo-Romantic component to *Volk* ideology became intrinsic to the cult of belief that surrounded Hitler and National Socialism. The philosophy’s connection to nature, folk traditions, and man’s rootedness to his ancestral homeland, were essential in creating an alternative to urbanism and industrialization.¹¹ And like Romanticism, its philosophical predecessor, neo-Romanticism rejected the “uninspired” world of rationalism to achieve its romantic and conservative goals of “respecting” tradition, combating moral decline, promoting spiritual renewal, and regenerating antique German concepts. But instead of turning away from modernity, as many early Romantics had done, this new form assimilated its philosophy with Nazism’s modern propaganda, modern technology, and modern war. The earlier Romantic ideas on dynamism and the human will became useful philosophies for the Nazis unceasing aggression. And, elements intrinsic to the earlier forms of Romanticism, including the allure of darkness, organic ruin, dramatic death, and the powerful importance of art to life, became co-opted and consumed by neo-Romanticism and the irrational and emotional *volkish* ideology.¹² The Nazis usurpation of the dramatic works of Richard Wagner is a clear example of this. Although Wagner was a product of nineteenth century Romanticism, his art deeply influenced Adolf Hitler, and essentially became the warped melody for Hitler’s romanticized German *Kultur* and *Totenkult*.

Wagner’s work and his Bayreuth Music Festival had long been embroiled in the ideological “battle for the soul of Germany” between the conservative advocates of the *Volk* and the established Weimar cultural structure. But with the rise of Hitler and his neo-Romantic *volkish* nationalism came “an ideological rampage that translated Wagnerian opera into a national cultural religion with Bayreuth as its supreme place of worship.”¹³ Even before the rise of Hitler, the attention lavished on Wagnerian opera and Bayreuth, the home of Wagner’s *Festspielhaus*, was enormous. In 1918, Walter Rathenau, the Foreign Minister for the Weimar Republic, discussing with some disdain how far Wagner had “eaten his way into the national consciousness” wrote, “It is scarcely possible to exaggerate how deeply the last generation was spellbound by the influence of Richard Wagner, not so decisively by his music as by the gestures of his characters, by his ideas....”¹⁴ Then once National Socialism came to the fore, the *Nationalsozialistische Monatshefte* under the direction of Alfred Rosenberg, an influential intellectual within the Nazi party, praised Richard Wagner for having “anticipated the reconciliation of art with politics and for his discovery of artist-man, which would bear fruit in the process of the healing of the German people.”¹⁵ And Adolf Hitler himself said, “Whoever wants to understand National Socialist Germany must know Wagner.”¹⁶

The obsession of Hitler and the true disciples of the *Volk* movement, with Wagner, elevated his work to an entirely irrational place of reverence within the new German *Kultur* of the Third Reich. His seminal operas of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, and *Tristan und Isolde*, apart from highlighting the superiority of the Teutonic race, also magnified the dark and violent love affair with death and glorified ruin, which was featured so often in Romantic art and became an essential thematic element to Hitler’s *Totenkult*. Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, or *The Ring of Nibelung* is actually a cycle of four operas, *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and the final opera *Die Götterdämmerung*. The latter translates as “Twilight of the Gods” and was said to be Hitler’s favorite opera of all time.¹⁷ The hero Siegfried and his lover Brunhilde die heroes’ deaths in an apocalyptic vision of the end of the world.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mosse, *Crisis of German Ideology*, pgs. 16-17.

¹² Ibid., pg. 259.

¹³ Ibid., pgs. 130- 131.

¹⁴ Ibid., pg. 130.

¹⁵ Eric Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), pg. 59. *Nationalsozialistische Monatshefte* translates as National Socialist Monthly, and was a political and cultural journal produced by the Nazi party.

¹⁶ Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics: From Wagner and the German Romantics to Hitler* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004), pg. 124.

¹⁷ Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*, pgs. 114-115.

Before she is consumed by flames, Brunhilde cries out, “Laughing let us be destroyed; laughing let us perish...let night descend, the night of annihilation...laughing death...laughing death.”¹⁸ In the second act of *Die Walküre*, Brunhilde’s father, the god Woton cries, “I want only one thing yet, the end, the end...”¹⁹ Yet the appeal to glorified death did not end with *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. In Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* the final aria is called “Liebestod,” which means “Death love.” In this aria, Isolde dies experiencing a death “as to drown, unconscious, the greatest bliss.” In death, her love for Tristan is finally consummated, expanding on earlier German Romantic notions of death as an erotic act of passion.²⁰

It was this kind of romantic drama and tragic death that inspired even Friedrich Nietzsche in his youth to believe Wagnerian opera had a broader and more dramatic purpose. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche argued that art, not morality, was the “metaphysical activity of man.”²¹ This art relies on the constant struggle between the artistic powers of Apollo and his antithesis Dionysos. Apollo represents the “pictorial world of dreams” and individual moderation, and Dionysos represents drunken ecstasy, freedom from restriction, and the destruction of individuality.²² When a synthesis between Apollo and Dionysos is achieved, the product is Greek tragedy; art of dreams and art of ecstasy.²³ However, for tragedy to succeed in making the pessimistic life of man worth living, the Dionysiac element must be dominant to Apollo, because only then can the lure of artistic ecstasy seduce man to live despite the “frightful uncertainty of all conditions of life.”²⁴ And, since it is impossible to know the true nature of Greek tragedy as experienced by ancient Greeks, the closest comparison in the modern world for Nietzsche existed in the tragic operas of Richard Wagner, for he was a man like himself, who understood that artful tragedy was the highest task of life and culture.²⁵

Thus this Wagner mythology became the foundation from which Hitler claimed himself to be the artist-Führer, and without reluctance projected himself to the masses as Germany’s new Siegfried when he wrote in *Mein Kampf*, “A Fire was kindled from whose flame one day the sword must come which would regain freedom for the German Siegfried and life for the German Nation.”²⁶ This kind of Wagner mythology, like that of the neo-Romantics, linked death with glory, hope, and ultimately love, and became a fundamental element to understanding the appeal of both, under Hitler’s National Socialism. This is why George Orwell once said, “Whereas Socialism, and even capitalism in a more grudging way, have said to people, ‘I offer you a good time’, Hitler has said to them ‘I offer you struggle, danger and death’, and as a result a whole nation flings itself at his feet.”²⁷ In essence, death was a “central part of the ethos of the Third Reich.”²⁸ However, Hitler did not rely on Wagner and a legacy of neo-Romanticism alone to construct his *Totenkult*; another fundamental element was the cult of dead heroes.

Hero worship and “The Cult of the Fallen Soldier,” represent the clearest and most affecting examples of the paradoxical nature of Hitler’s dream for Germany. Following World War I, most Germans had a clear understanding of sacrifice as realized through the blood of their young soldiers. This is especially true for the “Myth of Langemark,” an important battle for the ethnohistory and death iconography of World War I.²⁹ At Langemark, Belgium on 26th of October 1914, hundreds of young German soldiers marched into no man’s land to their death. As the myth goes, the boys marched all the while singing “Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles, über Alles in der Welt,” the opening verse of *The Song of Germany* or *Das Deutschlandlied*.³⁰

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., pg. 115

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. William A. Haussmann (New York: Macmillan, 1923), pg. 8.

²² Ibid., pgs. 27-28

²³ Ibid., pg. 28.

²⁴ Ibid., pg. 145.

²⁵ Ibid., 21.

²⁶ Michaud, *Cult of Art*, pg. 58.

²⁷ Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*, pg. 115.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Jay W. Baird, *To Die For Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pg. 1.

³⁰ George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pg. 70-71. “Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles, über Alles in der Welt” translates as “Germany, Germany above everything, above all things in the world.”

Thousands of young men were slaughtered, but the myths surrounding their death became an essential part of death cult ideology. Emil Alefeld, a soldier present that night, had written a letter to his family beforehand in which he recounted:

We are Germans; we fight for our people and shed our blood and hope that the survivors are worthy of our sacrifice. For me this is a struggle for an idea, the *Fata Morgana* of a pure, loyal, honorable Germany. And if we go to our deaths with this hope in our hearts, perhaps it is better than to have the victory...³¹

The attitude expressed by this naïve German soldier speaks to the glorified ideal felt by many Germans that “Death in battle not only guaranteed eternal life for the martyr but also acted as a resurgent life force for the Fatherland.”³² The last line in his letter, “perhaps it is better than to have the victory” also shows the notion that sometimes the sacrifice is more important than the actual victory itself.

A similar theme runs through the cult of Albert Schlageter, another integral piece of the death cult mythos. Aside from the young soldiers of World War I, Schlageter represents one of the most important martyrs in German death cult iconography. In 1923, after bombing a railway bridge, Schlageter was executed on the outer border of Dusseldorf by French forces. Throughout Germany many were outraged at the execution and saw it as nothing more than a disproportionate act of retaliation. Immediately his myth began to grow, and a monument was erected in his memory at the site of his execution.³³ This myth of Schlageter became a favorite hero worship story of the Third Reich. In 1934, at a Hitler Youth Rally at the Schlageter Memorial, Baldur von Shirach addressed Hitler’s young disciples and said:

As you look at this grand monument, remember that today the cross of Schlageter towers not only over us, but it casts its shadow over all of Germany and this symbol of strength, of spirit, of dedication and sacrifice received its heroic incarnation in Schlageter. He went to his death answering the call to duty. Here on this spot the dark earth drank his red blood and he was struck down with that cry on his lips which is our call to destiny today: ‘Oh, you my Germany!’³⁴

Jay W. Baird argues that Schlageter had become “an immortal” in the pantheon of death cult heroes.³⁵ And as is shown by Shirach’s speech, the cult of dead heroes endured well beyond the Weimar era and into the consciousness of many Germans under National Socialism. This cult of dead heroes, alongside the manipulation of Wagner and *volkish* neo-romanticism became integral to the vision of Germany’s Führer. However, vision is useless without a means of communicating it to the masses, and for Hitler the greatest source for communication came in the form of aesthetics and art. From architectural monumentality, Third Reich poetry, and Nazi rallies, the symbolism of death, blood, drama, and ruin found a new wave of energy never before seen in Germany.

Perhaps the most unusual of these aesthetic forays was the death cult’s influence on Albert Speer’s theory of “ruin value.” Speer, Hitler’s favorite architect, designed some of the Third Reich’s most colossal monuments, including the Reich Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg and the model for the Great Hall in Berlin.³⁶ His monumental architecture was specifically built according to his theory of “ruin value.” This theory argued that the architecture of the Third Reich should be constructed so the process of natural decay, even after hundreds or thousands of years later, would allow the monument to “communicate the heroic inspirations of the Third Reich” just as the ruins of antiquity do in Greece and Rome.³⁷ Speer discussed in his memoirs the creation of a “romantic drawing” of how the Zeppelin Field in Nuremberg would look “after generations of neglect, overgrown with ivy, its columns fallen...but the outlines still clearly recognizable.”³⁸

³¹ Baird, *To Die For Germany*, pg. 3. A “fata Morgana” is a mirage or illusion.

³² *Ibid.*, pg. 2.

³³ *Ibid.*, pg. 13-14, and 22.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 40.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Paul B. Jascot, *The Architecture of Oppression: The SS, Forced Labor and the Nazi Monumental Building Economy* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2000), pgs. 48-52. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, pg. 72.

³⁷ Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs*, Trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1970), pg. 56.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

The very idea of ruins and monumentality is essential to understanding Hitler's *Totenkult*. Speer's theory of "ruin value" may be directly connected to the imitation of the romantic ruins of Ancient Rome and Greece, but there is also a psychological element that goes beyond the desire to imitate antiquity. Andreas Huyssen, a professor of German at Columbia University has argued that ruins in general represent more than a process of architectural decay. Ruins are in fact an expression of modernity's "catastrophic imagination," and are really the articulation of a nation's "obsession with the passing of time."³⁹ According to Speer, Hitler "liked to say that the purpose of his building was to transmit his time and its spirit to posterity. Ultimately, all that remained to remind men of the great epochs of history was their monumental architecture."⁴⁰ And, as the Roman ruins did for Mussolini, so too should the ruins of the Third Reich "speak to the conscience of future generations of Germans."⁴¹ Like the Parthenon or the Coliseum, Germany's dominion over the world as visualized by Hitler, would be a testament to its enduring greatness long after his Third Reich had disappeared through the decayed monuments of his empire.

This is why monument building was such an obsession for Hitler. He truly believed that "no *Volk* lives longer than the evidence of its culture," and for National Socialism, that culture would be remembered through its romanticized and monumental architecture and art long after he was dead and gone.⁴² This was made especially clear when Hitler spoke at the cornerstone laying ceremony of his new Congress Hall in September of 1935, and declared:

A hall shall rise that is to serve the purpose of annually housing within its walls a gathering of the elite of the National Socialist Reich for centuries to come. Should the Movement ever be silent, even after millennia, this witness shall speak. In the midst of a hallowed grove of ancient oak trees will the people then marvel in reverent awe at this first colossus among the buildings of the German Reich.⁴³

Hitler also declared in a speech later in July of 1937, that art in general "constitutes an immortal monument, itself abiding and permanent, and thus there is no such criterion as yesterday and today...there is but the single criterion of 'worthless' or 'valuable,' and hence 'immortal' or 'transient.'"⁴⁴ And for Hitler, immortality was "anchored in the life of the people as long as they themselves are immortal."⁴⁵

These immortal monuments or temples of the German Reich were not just a means of "bequeathing to posterity the genius" of Hitler's age. A far more obvious *Totenkult* aesthetic was also evident in Hitler's monumental architectural plans. Specifically the construction of miles upon miles of mausoleums along the borders of Germany's newly expanded empire. Following the Nazis supposed victory against the Allied powers, colossal citadels for the dead, or *Totenburgen*, envisaged by Hitler "were to glorify war, honour its dead heroes" and at the same time, "symbolize the impregnable power of the German race" as the massive stone structures would stretch "from the Atlantic to the Urals...."⁴⁶

Hitler also reconstructed the Königsplatz tombs for martyrs of the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923 as a *Totenkult* monument.⁴⁷ What had once been a neo-classical memorial in Munich constructed at the behest of King Ludwig in the mid nineteenth century became a mecca where Germans could celebrate their dead martyrs.⁴⁸ Ultimately however, the *Totenkult* under Hitler advanced beyond architectural schemes, and a literary tradition also developed in the Third Reich which fostered the worship of dead heroes, along with a glorification of self-sacrifice for the Fatherland. This can best be seen in the poetry of Gerhard Schumann.

³⁹ Andreas Huyssen, "Nostalgia for Ruins," *Grey Room*, no. 25 (2006): pg. 11.

⁴⁰ Alex Scobie, *Hitler's State Architecture: The Impact of Classical Antiquity* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), pg. 93.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Adolf Hitler, "September 11, 1935 Speech for Congress Hall Ceremony," in *The Essential Hitler: Speeches and Commentary*, ed. Max Domarus and Patrick Romane (Wauconda: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc., 2007), pgs. 485-486.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pg. 486.

⁴⁴ Adolf Hitler, "July 19, 1937 Speech," in *The Essential Hitler: Speeches and Commentary*, ed. Max Domarus and Patrick Romane (Wauconda: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc., 2007),, pg. 490.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*, pg. 117.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 116.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Schumann, a fêted poet during the Third Reich, wrote poems which juxtaposed blood and sacrifice with Christian symbolism. In 1934, Schumann wrote a sonnet entitled *The Purity of the Reich* in which he appealed to the memory of fallen heroes for a rebirth of German values:

Now there arises a band of the determined,...
By night they dream of the blood that was shed,...
And of the Führer, who carries the burden of fate,
And of the fields, which cry out for our men,
And of the river, flowing by on our borders,
And of the brother, who forgives us our guilt.

Nothing is kept secret from them.
Their stern words are heavy as forged steel.
Their steps echo the call for ultimate judgment.
In their souls they bear the Grail.
Vassals of the Führer, keepers and avengers alike.
Within them burns and with them grows the Reich.⁴⁹

In 1936 Schumann wrote:

Poetry is the lifeblood of a Volk because the soul also hungers and thirsts and cannot be left barren. Poetry elevates the everyday into grand images transmitted to history and eternity. And beyond that today the creative arts have become important weapons in the ideological struggle for the peoples of the world. The Führer has shown us the path to take.⁵⁰

And indeed it was true; the creative arts and the use of aesthetics became a formidable weapon with which Hitler mesmerized much of the nation. His utilization of the *Totenkult* and its symbolism captivated his audiences and thrilled them with spectacle. Possibly his most effective tactic, his use of blood, both symbolically and literally, from flags, to costumes, to the prose of his impassioned and operatic speeches, became the fundamental element in the death cult imagery of the Third Reich.

The blood imagery of the *Totenkult* was best symbolized in the rituals and aesthetics of the Nazi party rallies held in Nuremberg. In one example, an evening rally began with the *Nibelung March* from Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelung*. Wagner's music played while the blood-red standards and flags were presented to the Führer. Following the basic standards came what Frederick Spotts considers, "the party's most holy relic, the *Blutfahne*, or blood flag, the swastika banner that had been carried in the 1923 putsch. On this flag the blood of the 'martyrs' shot down on that occasion had allegedly been spilled, and almost every year in commemoration of the putsch, Hitler marched the *Blutfahne* through the streets."⁵¹ In 1936, he marched behind the flag dressed in his own putsch attire and to "heighten the effects of these annual dramas he decorated the streets with vivid splashes of blood red and Stygian black."⁵² This ritual evolved into a "cult of the 'martyrs of the movement' which had its own anthem...and its own relics, in particular the blood flag."⁵³

During these elaborate cult ceremonies, the language of Hitler's speeches also became immersed in the blood of sacrifice. The words, "'martyr', 'resurrection', 'sacrifice', 'holy place of pilgrimage', 'hero', 'death'...all added up to a simple message: sacrifice of oneself to the party and its Führer as a sacred duty, if necessary with the shedding of blood..."⁵⁴ In a speech given to the Nazi party congress in September of 1933, Hitler described the fanatical sacrifice that was needed to maintain the *Volk* movement of National Socialism. He declared: Power and the brutal use of force can accomplish much, but in the long run no state of affairs is secure unless it appears logical in and of itself and intellectually irrefutable.

⁴⁹ Baird, *To Die for Germany*, pg. 136.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 137.

⁵¹ Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*, pg. 64.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pg. 103.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pg. 105.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 106.

And above all: the National Socialist Movement must profess its faith in the heroism that prefers any degree of opposition and hardship to even once denying the principles it has recognized as right.⁵⁵ This kind of sacrificial ideology became increasingly more radicalized through the course of Hitler's reign. By the end of World War II, a mythology steeped in heroic death and the *volkish* neo-romantic dogma of National Socialism reached its zenith through the final acts of suicide by Hitler and his followers in the Berlin bunker.

On the 28th of April 1945, Josef Goebbels' wife Magda wrote a letter to her eldest son while inside Hitler's bunker. In the letter she wrote, "The world that will come after the Führer and National Socialism will not be worth living in, and therefore I have taken my children away...We have now only one aim: loyalty unto death to the Führer."⁵⁶ When Magda wrote that she had taken her six children "away," she actually referred to their murder by the forced ingestion of cyanide capsules. Not long after, Magda and her husband committed suicide following in the steps of Hitler and his wife Eva Braun. This kind of suicide and murder goes far beyond what French sociologist Emile Durkheim calls, "emotional or social problems," which is a possible explanation for the "epidemic" of other suicides that ravaged Germany at the end of the war.⁵⁷ The fact that Magda Goebbels proudly described the martyring of both her children and herself, speaks to the psychology of the Nazi death cult and the belief in "heroic sacrifice" for both the Führer and Germany. Joseph Goebbels also clung to the *Totenkult* rhetoric when he said "his death would set a heroic precedent for a new Germany which would 'survive this war, but only if it has precedents at hand on which it can lean itself.'"⁵⁸ Hitler himself called on the ideology of sacrificial death in his political testament written just before his suicide on the 30th of April 1945 when he wrote:

May it become, at some future time, part of the code of honour of the German officer...that the surrender of a district or of a town is impossible, and that the leaders here, above all, must march ahead as shining examples, faithfully fulfilling their duty unto death.⁵⁹

Whether this kind of rhetoric represented true belief or the mere ideological propaganda meant for posterity, will never fully be known. Committing suicide remains one of the "most private and impenetrable of human acts," making the analysis of such measures difficult to ascertain.⁶⁰ However, through the suicides of Eva Braun, and Joseph and Magda Goebbels, a connection can be drawn to the dangerous undercurrent of death, ruin and sacrifice which had been so masterfully constructed by their Führer. This undercurrent, developed and nurtured by Hitler and his multitudes of henchmen, managed to create possibly the greatest act of the *Totenkult*, the ideological "suicide of the nation."⁶¹ In *The Holocaust and the German Elite: Genocide and National Suicide in Germany, 1871-1945*, Rainer C. Baum argues that under the Third Reich, Hitler and his followers propelled Germany into a national suicide. With "institutionalized disorder" under the Führer, Hitler and his regime acted out what sociologist Robert Bellah argued was the distinctive mark of modernity, the realization that "the human condition itself has become a revisable entity" and that mankind can indeed define itself out of existence.⁶² Through this willful act, those with power in the Third Reich "rather than continuing to define the human species as one that strives for comprehensive meaning," decided instead to "redefine" the human condition into a state of irrational death as they moved their nation further into destruction.⁶³

There is also a psychological theory for the existence of Hitler's *Totenkult*, which is expressed in Sigmund Freud's theory on the death instinct. In both *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud develops a psychological explanation for mankind's ability to be drawn towards death, regardless of how irrational it might be.

⁵⁵ Adolf Hitler, "September 1, 1933 Nazi Party Congress Speech," in *The Essential Hitler: Speeches and Commentary*, ed. Max Domarus and Patrick Romane (Wauconda: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc., 2007), pg. 146.

⁵⁶ Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany*, pg. 163.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 152.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 155.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 1 Goeschel is quoting the historian Richard Cobb from his 1978 *Death in Paris: The Records of the Basse-Geôle de la Seine*.

⁶¹ Rainer C. Baum, *The Holocaust and the German Elite: Genocide and National Suicide in Germany, 1871-1945* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981), pg. 8.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 292.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

He begins by arguing that everything living eventually dies from “internal reasons” and becomes inorganic as it had been before its inanimate state had originally awoken to life.⁶⁴ This being true, Freud contends that the “goal of all life is death,” because life’s first instinct upon developing consciousness is “to return to the inanimate state.”⁶⁵ As civilization has progressed, organisms have also developed self-preservation instincts. These instincts, however, do not contradict the death drive, they only serve as “component instincts whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself.” Essentially, all humans have an instinct towards the eventuality of death. The instincts of preservation that guide us through life are merely part of our subconscious desire to control the means by which we become inanimate once more.

However, this argument becomes more complex when Freud discusses the death instinct when manifested outward. In his *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud argues that the death instinct lies quiet compared to instincts of life...the instincts of Eros. However, the death instinct can be visible when “diverted towards the external world,” instead of the internal self, and becomes an instinct of aggression and destruction.⁶⁶ This then becomes a fundamental tension throughout civilization, as man struggles with his own subconscious death drive, and the desire to turn that drive outwards through aggression and hostility. Hitler’s entire regime seems committed to this struggle between self-destruction and the destruction of others, and this Freudian death drive theory explains some of the possible reasoning behind the allure of Hitler’s *Totenkult*, especially when coupled with the irrational and emotional *volkish* movement which facilitated both the self-destructive and the aggressive characteristics of humankind’s death instinct.

However, a psychological theory only goes so far in illuminating the reasoning, behind what is really the madness of Hitler the artist-dictator and his *Totenkult*. The man who dreamed of creating a new German culture fostered by racial superiority and Teutonic pride, also promoted hero-worship, glorified struggle, operatic suicide and artful destruction, and was only achieved through his unique form of aesthetic politics. This is elucidated in Peter Cohen’s documentary *The Architecture of Doom*, in which he argues that “Hitler saw doom as art’s highest expression, the drama was a reality...its completion was his final and decisive scenographic mission.”⁶⁷

When looking back on historians’ treatment of Hitler, George Mosse argued it was his use of aesthetics to paradoxically promote both creation and destruction, which has been most over-looked when attempting to understand the appeal of such a dictator. George Mosse wrote “We failed to see...that the fascist aesthetic itself reflected the needs and hopes of contemporary society, that what we brushed aside as the so-called superstructure was in reality the means through which most people grasped the fascist message, transforming politics into a civil religion.”⁶⁸ This civil religion, with its mixture of *volkish* ideology, neo-Romanticism and art obsession, although not accepted by all, made it possible for a fanatical dilettante turned dictator, to fashion himself into Germany’s *Rienzi*. In Wagner’s great hero, Hitler “sought to create social order and restore the empire. But in the end he brought destruction upon his world and was consumed in the fiery ruins” of his own making.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1950), pg. 50.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), pg. 66.

⁶⁷ Peter Cohen, *The Architecture of Doom*, DVD (Sweden: First Run Features, 1991).

⁶⁸ George Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (New York: Howard Fertig Publisher, 1999), pg. 46.

⁶⁹ Spotts, *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics*, pg. 401.

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