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INTRODUCTION

As cultural and political conflicts raged in Weimar Germany, the editor-in-chief of the Nazi Party's official newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter* (*The Folkish Observer*), published a front-page editorial marking the 100th anniversary of Ludwig van Beethoven's death on 26 March 1927. In it, Alfred Rosenberg declared that during the present epoch of "spiritual battle," followers of Adolf Hitler could consider Beethoven's music a powerful source of inspiration. Whoever understood the spirit of the National Socialist movement especially, Rosenberg claimed, knew that "an impulse similar to that which Beethoven embodied in the highest degree lived in all its members": namely, the "desire to storm over the ruins of a crumbling world, the hope for the will to reshape the world, and the strong sense of joy that comes from overcoming passionate sorrow." When the Nazis achieved victory in Germany and across Europe, Rosenberg implied, they would enjoy "heart-warming consciousness" that "the German Beethoven towered over all the peoples of the West." They would then remember that Beethoven had passed on to National Socialists the "will of German creation." Living in the "*Eroica* of the German Volk," Nazis "wanted to make use of" this willpower.[1]

This inspirational evocation of a cultural-historical hero in the Nazi newspaper was entirely consistent with Hitler's proclamations that if the National Socialist revolution was going to have a "transformative effect," its spokesmen would have to "strive by all available means" to get the German people to "believe in its mission with conviction." Above

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all, the Nazi leader insisted, this required "demonstrating its cultural worthiness." At times of "weakened faith" in Germany's "highest merits," it was necessary to revive the Volk's confidence by "invoking works that remained untouched by political and economic troubles," that is, by invoking great works of Western culture in the name of his ideals.[2]

This book reveals how Hitler's party continually pursued these propaganda goals by means of its main instrument of mass media, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, which was the most widely circulating newspaper of Nazi Germany. This study analyzes how the paper's editors, staff writers, and contributors presented the history of European literature, philosophy, painting, sculpture, and music according to National Socialist beliefs. Nazi leaders regarded their movement as the culmination of Western culture, and this examination of their daily paper shows how they and their followers sought to substantiate this proposition with reference to intellectual and cultural history. Through investigation of every major cultural article published in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, it demonstrates how they wrote about German creators considered foremost (including Luther, Dürer, Goethe, Beethoven, Wagner, Nietzsche, and many others), about non-Germans sometimes deemed related in "Germanic" spirit (such as Socrates, Leonardo, Michelangelo, and Rembrandt), and about the party's anointed "enemies" (among them, Heine, Einstein, and Thomas Mann). As such, this book is the first comprehensive survey of the terms National Socialist propagandists used to appropriate the great names of European art and thought, exposing how the party linked them rhetorically to Nazi ideology and policies. Tracing precisely what *Völkischer Beobachter* writers asserted about their favorite masters and about those they despised makes clear how the party tried to convince readers that Nazism offered not just political renewal but cultural advancement, while at the same time advocating the destruction of Jews along with other perceived opponents.

Scholarship on nineteenth- and twentieth-century "German identity" consistently testifies that the fine arts played a pivotal role in the developing symbolism of the modern nation. Activists seeking to strengthen German political unity emphasized shared conceptions of beauty. Competing political movements sought to increase their respectability by demonstrating that cultural heroes – *Meister* or masters – could be aligned with their respective ideologies. Consequently, as George L. Mosse observed, German politics and high culture penetrated each

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other: philosophy, literature, painting, sculpture, architecture, and music all came to be perceived as symbolic of political attitudes.[3] In recent years, excellent work has been done to trace connections between the arts and politics in modern Germany. Particularly in the area of "Nazi culture," researchers have investigated how cultural leaders and organizations collaborated in the production of party and state propaganda. To great effect, scholars have concentrated on the biographies of German creators and the administrative histories of cultural institutions.[4] But scholarship on the biographical and institutional background of National Socialist cultural politics (*Kulturpolitik*) functions only as a first step toward answering the central question of this field: how were particular works of art, literature, and music interpreted and then employed as tools of Nazi politics? We must press our investigation beyond determining who was responsible for politicizing culture to learn precisely how the Nazi canon retroactively aligned specific creators with National Socialist principles.[5]

Research in this direction fits into the historiography of cultural reception, which concentrates on meanings drawn from or attached to the arts once published, exhibited, and performed. The history of cultural reception in German political circles indicates how art forms are associated with sociopolitical development: not necessarily as a direct result of creators' intentions, but often as manifested in the responses of audiences.[6] National Socialist appropriation of intellectual history is a haunting example of this process. In my book on Beethoven in German politics, for instance, I traced the history of reception accorded to that composer by political activists from 1870 to 1989.[7] There I examined how Germans across the political spectrum interpreted Beethoven's music to justify their ideas and actions, thereby transforming composer and compositions into symbols for every major party. While I discussed affiliations made from the far right to the far left, significant sections of that book were devoted to describing the ways Nazis exploited this "master" as part of their propaganda. As the example above indicates, to describe the manner by which Beethoven was "Nazified," I paid particular attention to how the *Völkischer Beobachter* promoted him. However, surveying recent literature on Nazi music policy in particular and cultural policy in general, I notice few references to the *Völkischer Beobachter* or other Nazi publications intended for the wider public. Most scholarly work concentrates on periodicals, including art, music, and literary journals, that were targeted at specialized audiences.[8] A few

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studies of specific topics or individuals have referred to articles from the party daily. For example, Jeffrey Herf has carefully assessed the front-page articles and headlines of the *Völkischer Beobachter* in his work on anti-Semitic propaganda during the Second World War.[9] But the Nazis' most significant publicity instrument requires nothing less than a comprehensive analysis; without it, our histories of National Socialism are incomplete.

As surveyed in a handful of studies, the *Völkischer Beobachter* was a minor bi-weekly publication before being purchased by the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP) in 1920.[10] Hitler personally promoted this early undertaking, arguing that: "if a movement is to be successful in enlightening the broad masses of our people, then meetings, discussion evenings, and political instruction courses will not be adequate over time since these are only accessible to a small circle of listeners. Volkish propaganda must also totally avail itself of the use of the most potent weapon: the press."[11] Under the leadership of Max Amann and Dietrich Eckart, what Hitler later described as the party's "best weapon"[12] became a daily newspaper in February 1923. After the failed Beer Hall Putsch the paper was banned until March 1925. But once reinstated its distribution increased steadily – to 30,000 by 1929 – and a Berlin edition was launched in 1930. By the time of the war, the *Völkischer Beobachter* had become the first German newspaper with a circulation of more than 1 million. From 1923 until 1938, Alfred Rosenberg served as the editor-in-chief;[13] thereafter he was replaced by Wilhelm Weiss through 1945.[14] But whether under Rosenberg's or Weiss' leadership, the paper was always Hitler's primary publicity organ.[15] No other publication compares in significance in the history of Nazi propaganda. It was an official outlet of the party throughout its existence and ultimately had a dominant position over other newspapers.[16] As such, it was undoubtedly the most representative instrument of Nazi propaganda, including propaganda devoted to advancing Nazi cultural interpretations.[17]

In every portion of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, including its front pages (with their screaming red and black headlines), business and sports sections (the latter usually emphasizing *Kampfsport* [battle sports] such as boxing and ice hockey), even advertisements and crossword puzzles (swastika-shaped), one can learn how Nazi media presented events, policies, and ideology to the general public. But it is also possible to draw from the *Völkischer Beobachter* important details about the party's

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treatment of cultural matters. From its purchase by the NSDAP in 1920, the paper included a cultural section that appeared every day up to April 1945 (although under varying titles, including *Feuilleton*, *Kunst und Kultur*, and *Kultur*).[18] This section included concert, book, and exhibition reviews, articles about cultural topics of general interest, and especially pieces commemorating major anniversaries in the history of Western art and ideas – particularly the birth- and death-days (*Todestage*) of important creators and thinkers. All of these articles offer valuable information about how party ideologues presented Western intellectual and cultural history to its readers in an effort to appropriate "spiritual comrades."

In the course of my research, I examined every page of the *Völkischer Beobachter* from January 1920 through April 1945 in search of each major article it published on literature, philosophy, painting, sculpture, architecture, and music.[19] In so doing, I gathered more than 1,600 articles. After carefully examining every item for National Socialist "spins" on important creators and works, I extracted and translated all passages in which the paper's writers and editors utilized creators and masterpieces of art, literature, and music as tools of Nazi ideology. In this book, I have woven these examples into a thematic and chronological tapestry of Nazi cultural interpretations, examining how they correlated the party's doctrines with the Western tradition of humanities or *Kultur*.[20] Very little of the material investigated in this research has been addressed in German scholarship before, and even less of it has been translated into English. Therefore, I hope it will be of interest to fellow scholars, teachers, students, and anyone intrigued about how high culture can be appropriated and manipulated by a political regime.

In Part I, "Foundations of Nazi Cultural History," I address the conceptual framework of Nazi ideology that these articles promoted: namely, establishing that major figures were of German racial origin, highlighting the volkish impulses behind even high culture, emphasizing the political and nationalist significance of such works, and, most intensively, insisting that anti-Semitism was a major current in the Western cultural tradition. These core themes of the Nazi outlook were reinforced via repeated references to the greatest figures of Western culture up through the romantic age. Major figures who were regularly invoked included Luther, Dürer, Rembrandt, Shakespeare, Bach, Mozart, Schiller, Goethe, and Beethoven. In many of these sections, the

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culminating example was Richard Wagner. Records of Wagner reception in the *Völkischer Beobachter* confirm the composer's enormous stature in National Socialist culture: few themes were addressed in the paper without some accompanying reference to Wagner's supposedly supportive views on the matter.

Having established these thematic foundations in Part I, I then provide a mainly chronological survey of the paper's coverage of examples, allowing readers to follow the line of the Western tradition according to the Nazi point of view. Thus, Part II, "Blind to the Light," relates how the *Völkischer Beobachter* addressed the Western rationalist tradition from the Ancients to the French Revolution and its consequences, closing with discussion of the paper's promotion of romantic culture as the superior alternative to Western "civilization." Throughout its treatment of Romanticism, the paper played down any "proto-modernist" aspects of the movement, while highlighting nationalist, militarist, and racist elements. Finally, the cultural legacy most cherished by Hitler and his movement, according to the *Völkischer Beobachter*, was the romantic musical tradition – particularly the actual music dramas of Wagner.

Part III, "Modern Dilemmas," addresses how *Völkischer Beobachter* references to cultural history from the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth century conveyed paradoxical attitudes toward modernist expression in the arts, correlating with debates that occurred within the party well into the Third Reich. On the one hand, it derided "socialist realism" and distanced itself from impressionist "superficiality." But, on the other hand, the paper identified "volkish" features in other depictions of nineteenth-century underclasses. Similarly, it identified with the "romantic" facets of some Symbolist and Expressionist creators, while rejecting others as navel-gazing nihilists. In search of "Nordic existentialism," the paper celebrated Søren Kierkegaard, but its reception of Friedrich Nietzsche wavered, ultimately implying that he just missed becoming "The Nazi Philosopher" because he did not quite grasp the seriousness of the Jewish threat. More consistently, the paper promoted volkish theorists as voices of the Nazi future. Coverage of late nineteenth-century music essentially involved determining where music could go after Wagner: committed late romantics were pitted against "French disease" and "psychopathia musikalis" manifested in modernist styles.

Part IV, "'Holy' War and Weimar 'Crisis,'" covers Nazi treatment of First World War literature and then surveys the paper's attacks

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against Weimar era culture and politics. Even before the *All Quiet on the Western Front* controversy broke out, the *Völkischer Beobachter* featured those it considered to be the true "Heralds of the front experience" as opposed to cowardly passivists. Part IV then surveys the *Völkischer Beobachter*'s ongoing attacks against Weimar era politics and culture. It initially demonstrates how the paper articulated its disdain for the Weimar Republic by complaining about the ways earlier cultural-historical figures (already covered in Parts I–III) were ignored or dishonored by "leftist" or "Jewish" controlled cultural authorities of the period, in commemorations, scholarship, and educational policies. The *Völkischer Beobachter* also insinuated that the great figures of the German and Western cultural past would have shared their critical attitude toward specific conditions in post-First World War Germany. Then, having claimed cultural-historical justification for their positions on contemporary issues, the paper also launched direct attacks on prominent "modernist" representatives of Weimar culture. According to the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Weimar "crisis" manifested itself culturally in the writings of "November criminals" and "asphalt literati," such as Berthold Brecht, Alfred Döblin, and the Mann brothers. The trial of George Grosz for blasphemous caricatures was likewise grist for the paper's antimodernist mill, but its main complaints were directed against music by the likes of Schoenberg and Weill.

Finally, Part V, "Nazi 'Solutions,'" covers *Völkischer Beobachter* claims that a great change in German cultural history occurred with the Nazi "seizure of power." Like the treatment of the Weimar era material, this part opens with discussion of how the paper associated earlier "masters" with events and policies undertaken by the regime, especially in commemorative articles that claimed that it was only under Nazi leadership that these creators were finally comprehended accurately (according to the main themes of Nazi ideology) and appropriately honored (in reformed festivals, performances, and educational programs). Thereafter, Part V covers a few of the "acceptable" alternatives to Weimar decadence that the paper posited from the so-called Era of Struggle (*Kampfzeit*) through the Third Reich. Though not exhaustive, this section indicates that much effort was expended to enhance the reputation of figures now largely forgotten. With the war, of course, the theme most emphasized in *Völkischer Beobachter* cultural coverage was militarism. Part V concludes with a retrospective of how revered cultural figures of the past were scrutinized for indications that they had engaged with or contemplated

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conflict and combat, demonstrating in their works and biographies that they had "fighting natures" that could serve as inspiration for the German Volk at war.

I intend in this structure to provide a synthesis of thematic analysis and chronological coverage that highlights concepts that transcended individual arts and artists in the ideological symbolism of the party, while approximating the flow that the newspaper's readers would have experienced through its cultural coverage. Reviewing the constant repetition of these themes via ongoing references to the major figures of Western culture can be trying. But it was precisely by way of incessant reiteration that these "principles" were intended to appear "unshakeable" (*unerschütterlich*) and "binding" (*bindend*) to the newspaper's readers. As Hitler put it in *Mein Kampf*: "effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these in slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand."[21]

In an immediate sense, this book is a contribution to the study of Nazi propaganda. The *Völkischer Beobachter* often referred to itself as a "combat paper" (*Kampfblatt*) since – at least until 1933 – its cultural coverage was part of a publicity competition with other German political parties to communicate the main points of its platform and demonstrate that each was consistent with high cultural values.[22] In *Beethoven and German Politics*, I covered the specific struggle over the legacy of Beethoven, showing how every major party from far left to far fight "fought tooth and nail" to claim him, retrospectively, as a fellow traveler. In this present book, we see the National Socialist side of this struggle over rights to other "masters" of music (along with Beethoven) and to leading figures in other creative genres.[23] As a committed Nazi who produced a doctoral dissertation (subsequently published by the NSDAP press) on the function of the newspaper's cultural section up to the "seizure of power" in 1933, reading Gerhard Köhler's assessment of this journalistic "war" is worthwhile: "The cultural-critical work of the editors and staff of the *Völkischer Beobachter* was in great part determined by an attitude of battle which saw the paper as taking part in a cultural-political fight between National Socialism, Liberalism, and Marxism."[24] Editors, staff members, and freelance contributors – the last of whom, as will be discussed in the Conclusion below, made up the majority of

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authors[25] – all knew their assignment was to convince others to accept National Socialist outlooks.

Of course, within the imagined Nazi "community" (*Gemeinschaft*), there were diverse views about all these matters. The point is not that there was a single, monolithic formulation of Western cultural history or its various components, but that this sort of argumentation was used to justify the regime's positions and policies in this important forum.[26] In the *Völkischer Beobachter*, we study the party's publicity efforts as manifested in high-cultural discourse directed via their most prominent and widely distributed media outlet to the widest possible audience.[27] In his analysis of Nazi propaganda, David Welch insisted on the importance of studying such material: "I make no apologies for using these speeches [or in this case, articles]; they represent not simply 'official' thinking on the subject, and thus the rationalization for measures undertaken, but, equally importantly, the direct contact between the Führer and his propaganda minister and the German people." As such, "they serve as examples of propaganda in action, a living fusion of theory and practice that sheds important light on the Nazi mentality"[28] – or, more precisely, what Nazis wanted the German mentality to be.[29]

Beyond communicating the main tenets of Nazism, moreover, the cultural-historical discourse of the *Völkischer Beobachter* was also dedicated to establishing respectability for the party and especially its anti-Semitic ideology. To put it in German terms, the goal was to demonstrate that while revolutionary, the National Socialist movement and its postulates belonged within the broader tradition of *Bildung* or self-cultivation that was pivotal to national identity.[30] The paper's editors and writers clearly considered this "educational" undertaking to be crucial to the Nazi movement. As one contributor put it: "to win over to our movement spiritual leaders who think they see something distasteful in anti-Semitism, it is extremely important to present more and more evidence that great, recognized spirits shared our hatred of Jewry."[31] Within this framework, George Mosse recognized that interpretations of arts and literature were geared toward a political-educational function. As he put it, "myths and heroes were all-important in what Hitler called the 'magic influence' of mass suggestion," so "building myths and heroes was an integral part of the Nazi cultural drive."[32] This deeper goal was to make "Nazi intellectual prejudices intellectually respectable."[33]

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Thus, the Nazi "combat paper" was not just a utilitarian political instrument, it also worked to lend the movement a sense of respectability. But even more was involved in this high-cultural discourse disseminated via mass media. As Jeffrey Herf has pointed out, newspaper propaganda supplied a powerful "interpretive framework" that gave readers ways to make sense of ongoing events, offering "plausible explanations for what was going on in the world."[34] This point is consistent with Mosse's insight that the appeal of nationalism as it evolved over the nineteenth century, and then Nazism in particular, was that they provided "fully furnished rooms" – or structured and organized ways of perceiving what otherwise seemed to be disorienting facets of modernization.[35] In his early analysis of cultural coverage in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi dissertator Köhler articulated the contemporary attraction of this "quality": "the frequent use of clear standards and measures, bases for comparison and targets for achievement founded on broader ideological views of art and the world … gave National Socialist art criticism its particular stamp." Contributors to the cultural section, he continued:

> *almost always used these measures and standards in their assessments, which resulted in the development of a communal sense of evaluation among them … This community extended, of course, into the masses of readers of the* Völkischer Beobachter. *Because, for them the cultural-criticism of their paper constituted a public means of expressing their National Socialist art and world view, promoting their group opinion regarding the events of the art world. It was the art critics who stood by them with advice and support in the manipulative war over their opinion.*[36]

Providing masses of readers with group opinions by which they could measure and rank not just artistic achievement, but also matters pertaining to history, politics, and race was a fundamental aim of the cultural politics practiced in the *Völkischer Beobachter*.[37]

Therefore, the material presented below, while part of the propaganda efforts of the party, was not just propaganda. Taken as a whole, it represents an ongoing formulation of the essential concepts that comprised what National Socialists touted as their "world view" (*Weltanschauung*). In each of these articles, whether written by party leaders, paper editors,

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