The Cult of the Swastika:  
Political Theater at Nuremberg, 1933-1938  

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“The day of individual happiness has passed. Instead, we shall feel a collective happiness. Can there be any greater happiness than a National Socialist meeting in which speakers and audience feel as one? It is the happiness of sharing. Only the early Christian communities could have felt it with equal intensity. They, too, sacrificed their personal lives for the higher happiness of the community.”  

-Adolf Hitler
Abstract

The annual *Reichsparteitage* (Reich Party Days), held in Nuremberg between 1933 and 1938, were the largest displays of political theater in National Socialist Germany. This article explores two primary elements of the *Reichsparteitage*: the aesthetic design of the Rally Grounds and the creation of rituals occurring within these environments. Both aspects were designed according to the National Socialist *Weltanschauung* (world view) and succeeded in persuading audiences to their validity. This included the eradication of the individual in favor of the *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community) and the ritualization of political life to act as a salve for social trauma. The author argues that the aesthetic and ritual aspects of the *Reichsparteitage* combined to create a political religion wherein the Party's symbols and ideals became sources of spiritual fulfillment for the gathered faithful.
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The Reichsparteitage at Nuremberg represented the fullest measure of political theater within National Socialist Germany. Annually, between 1933 – 1938, droves of people flocked from around the nation to bear witness to this affirmation of the regime's presence and success in building a new society. Many observers, witnessing the regime's propaganda machine for the first time, left deeply impressed by the pageantry of it all. This awe was dwarfed only by those moments when Adolf Hitler, the Führer, addressed the gathered political faithful, extolling on the virtues of his Party, a dialog between the leader of the nation and his people.

Within the environment of the Reichsparteitage an atmosphere of religiosity was created. Form, rhetoric and ritual combined to create deep impressions upon those who came to believe in the National Socialist dream. Within the world created at Nuremberg, the individual found himself eradicated, subjugated to a greater collective which was then cleverly manipulated in order to further propagate this sense. The spectacle at Nuremberg exists as the primary proof of the creation of a National Socialist cult, a political religion seeking to establish a spiritual order over life and mind.

This study is about the Reichsparteitage and the role these events played within the world of National Socialist Germany. The first section explores the content of this ideology in order to establish the core motivations behind the creation of political displays. A discussion of the creation of spectacle will follow, with a mind to explaining the establishment of new aesthetic and ritual traditions. Finally, these topics will be subjugated to the larger idea of how National Socialism functioned as a political religion in its capacity to serve as a source of spiritual inspiration for many Germans.
The Content of National Socialism

The particular form of fascism being discussed within this study, National Socialism, has within it several aspects which work to differentiate it from similar ideologies which appeared within Europe during the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it is possible to apply the study of fascist governments in general to National Socialism in order to better understand its content. A brief discussion about the content of National Socialism is valuable in that it permits a more thorough understanding of the basic foundations of the movement which created such spectacular demonstrations of political theater.

An exceedingly appropriate definition of National Socialism is provided by Roger Griffin, who equates fascism to a specific binomial term: palingenetic ultra-nationalism. *Palingenetic* is derived from the Greek *palingenesis*, a myth of rebirth signifying “the triumph of a new life over decadence.” The latter term, *ultra-nationalism*, signifies the utilization of the rebirth mythos within the context of radical anti-liberal politics which seek to promote populist nationalism.¹ Griffin suggests that fascism is both anti-liberal and anti-conservative in that, while appealing to a mythic past, it is more concerned with overcoming the decadence of the modern age in favor of a glorious future.²

Fascist ideology holds within it a clear timeline of events through which a national community must progress in order to achieve their privileged place in the world. Reinvention of the past is often a feature of this, such as National Socialism's assertions that the defeat of 1917 and failed Beer Hall Putsch were required steps on the path to final victory.³ Leo Schneiderman, who discusses the psychology of myth and folklore, explains in his work that the modern man “is more religious than he consciously knows himself to be” due to a belief that the present he is
living in is a special, sacred time.\(^4\) It is a fair assessment to make that National Socialism, coming to power in a time of great turbulence and change within Germany, was able to access the hearts and minds of many Germans through the creation of a national myth justifying past sacrifices due to an imminent victory.

Just as it seeks to create a crisis in the minds of a national community, fascism also tends to appear amidst turmoil which expedites its consolidation of power. For many Germans, the tenets of National Socialism were secondary to the national security and stability promised by the new regime. In this way, the systematic approach to viewing the world preached by the ideology allows it to be uneasily classified as a religion. Sociologist Peter Berger describes religion, and specifically social applications of faith systems, as a “shield against terror” and frame of reference for everyday life.\(^5\) The National Socialist regime was the most successful fascist government in terms of politicizing society, a process which required the subjugation of private life to Party control.\(^6\) This success, as Aryeh Unger observes, was primarily intended to “set the nation in motion” towards fulfilling the desires of the regime.\(^7\) To this end, the presence of truth within the National Socialist Weltanschauung (world-view) was of secondary importance, permitting the regime to create a multitude of holiday and rituals meant to mobilize the masses.

One of the primary objectives of National Socialism was the creation of a Volksgemeinschaft, or national community. Klaus Vondung defines this ideologically charged society as “classless...in total equality” due to the “common substance of [German] blood.”\(^8\) The idealism of a Volksgemeinschaft is described by German writer Hans Jobst, who in 1928 expressed his desire for a “community of equally minded, equally feeling, equally believing
people [who could experience] the dream of salvation as displayed and envisioned truth." This vision might have achieved realization in the mind of Jobst through the rallies held at Nuremberg every year between 1933 and 1938; this is even more apparent due to the fact that Jobst would establish himself as a renown author within the Third Reich and President of the Party's primary writer's guild. The Reichsparteitage at Nuremberg, an annual National Socialist bacchanalia marked by endless parades, memorials and other events, sought to bring into being an actual Volksgemeinschaft and demonstrate to the world the salvation Germany had achieved under the new regime.

**Aesthetics of the Rally Grounds**

In order to successfully render his vision of a Volksgemeinschaft made real, Hitler demanded that a suitable site be found. The location which would host an annual celebration of the National Socialist regime and its accomplishments had to simultaneously invoke the myth of an idealized path alongside that of a glorious thousand-year Reich. James Mayo notes in his article about staging political theater that “political ideology is by nature futuristic, and it accomplishes its objectives through the use of propaganda. In an audience environment, the stage set for propaganda can include architectural planning." In order to achieve the desired effect, Hitler's rallies needed to be a held within a space which would psychologically compel the audience to fully embrace the National Socialist ideology.

Architecture was a primary focus of the National Socialist plan to recreate Germany. It is quite known that Hitler himself would spend hours with his architect, Albert Speer, musing over models of cities which he believed would rise from the ground following victory. Old buildings representative of the degenerate Weimar period would be torn down and replaced with
splendid structures in the style of medieval Germany. Within municipal circles a whole new
discourse arouse surrounding this process, with “building sins” being marked for demolition in
favor of the town's traditional medieval structures. In this way, the mythos perpetrated by the
regime would be instilled within cities and towns quite literally street-by-street. Any city which
was to host the Reichsparteitage, the regime's largest political and cultural event, would have to
measure up to the new standards.

At first glance Nuremberg seems to have been an undesirable location given the criteria it
had to fulfill. Although it had deep roots as the site for annual imperial diets, during the Weimar
years it had developed a reputation as a stronghold for the Social Democrats, an active opponent
of the National Socialist movement. Previous rallies had taken place in Munich and Weimar, but
Nuremberg presented itself as a highly attractive third location due to its central location in
Germany as well as the willingness of the local government to grant swathes of land for the
development of rally grounds. There were two successful rallies held at the new site in 1927
and 1929, and by 1933 Party officials had come to an agreement with the city to allow the rally
to occur annually. In line with the futurist tone of his Party, Hitler announced at the opening of
the third Nuremberg rally that “our rally will take place in this town now and forever.”

Whereas the first two Nuremberg rallies were visual demonstrations of National Socialist
power, the success of all subsequent rallies far outstripped these early predecessors. Guaranteed
a permanent location, Hitler ordered the construction of structures which would reflect the glory
he planned to win for Germany. Starting in 1934, he commissioned Speer to design the future
rally grounds. Although not all of these plans would be realized, they are a clear indication of
the stage upon which National Socialism sought to make real its vision of the Volksgemeinschaft.
Hans-Ulrich Thamer states that the Nuremberg rallies were first and foremost designed to create a “cultic representation” of the regime and its ideology. Aesthetically they were designed to project a powerful image of a revitalized Germany and inspire rally participants into believing that they were a part of something much larger than themselves. Under National Socialism, art in general was approached as a reflection of the national community rather than the individual artist; any visual culture which did not seek to embody the Volksgemeinschaft was seen as “alien to the people” and denied legitimacy within public life. The design of the Nuremberg rally grounds was intended to be a Gesamtkunstwerk, or total work of art, which would encapsulate the “national spirit” of the new Germany.

As discussed above, one of the criteria for the Party's selection of Nuremberg as its permanent rally site was the availability of land for development. Joshua Hagen notes that the construction of the rally grounds was only half of a grand project meant to juxtapose the medieval grandeur of the “old” Germany, embodied in Nuremberg, with that of the new Reich. For this to be successful, Hitler required that the annual festivities be held in a large area which included parade grounds, meeting halls and camp sites for the Party faithful to convene and celebrate the regime. The grounds would eventually expand to cover 16.5 square kilometers and became known as “the world's largest construction site.” In 1935 a special state corporation, the Zweckverband Reichsparteitag Nürnberg, coordinated the efforts of the Reich's government and the city authority to complete the layout of the site as designed by Speer. The rally grounds would include six main components in all, some of which would remain uncompleted despite priority status conferred upon them by Hitler.

The spaces contained within the rally grounds were meant to be spacious and capable of
hosting large events awash in propaganda. The Luitpold Grove, with its First World War memorial and meeting hall, was redesigned towards the purpose of accommodating masses of SS and SA men who would stand in silent reverence as Hitler paid the nation's respects to the dead of a previous generation. The Zeppelinfeld, completed between 1934 and 1936, known as the subject of Leni Riefenstahl’s landmark film Triumph of the Will, was built to even greater proportions. The tribune which lined the arena's western border was Speer's masterpiece, meant to provide the Führer with an impressive vantage point from which to observe and address his amassed following. These two locales were the only projects which achieved full realization by their designers; others, such as a giant sports stadium and even larger parade ground, were halted due to the outbreak of the war and never completed.

In line with his desire to utilize rallies to create a Volksgemeinschaft, Hitler also insisted that the structures employed within these events remind observers of the regime's predicted longevity. The Führer was an eager adherent to Speer's “theory of ruin value” and utilized this principle in most of the structures meant to demonstrate the new Reich's power. Ruin value was the easily understood idea that ancient ruins, despite millenia of decay, still remained impressive testaments to the greatness of their original builders. Believing entirely in the longevity of his own regime, Hitler remarked that “one day it will be understood with utmost clarity how very great the blessing is which shines forth throughout the centuries from the tremendous edifices of this history-making age.” Speer enthusiastically fulfilled this desire for eternally imposing structures, and his projects were frequently accompanied by illustrations which demonstrated the evolution of a building's exterior decay over the course of several hundred or thousand years. This feeling of the regime's eternal survival through its aesthetics was invoked by Otto Dietrich,
who at the 1935 rally stated that “this sacred site of the Party Rally grounds...will be the highest symbol of National Socialist life and culture, in it the unique style of German National Socialism will find its strongest expression.” In the same way that medieval cathedrals were designed as an eternal monument to God's glory, so was it that the rally grounds were meant to remind future generations of the earliest years of the National Socialist movement.

The Zeppelinfeld was dominated by Speer's tribune, a monolithic structure which spanned the entire length of the arena's western border. Set within the wall behind the podium was a swastika bedecked with laurel leaves, a clear symbolic reference to ancient Rome. The entire structure was in fact influenced by the Pergamon Altar, a monument built by the Greeks in the second century BCE. True to the principle of ruin value, the tribune was meant to remind National Socialists of a glorious antiquity they wished to embody within their present time.

The space before the speaker's podium was equally calculated to impart a lasting impression upon observers. The Zeppelinfeld was entirely encircled by flagpoles which, when fitted with swastika banners, created the feeling of a mystic barrier around the audience. As Mayo observes, the positioning of flags high above gathered crowds suggested the subordination of the individual to the ideals of the Party. Braziers were also utilized to this effect at night, but perhaps the best example of this was the “cathedral of light” which first appeared in 1934. During this spectacle, hundreds of anti-air searchlights, arranged around the Zeppelinfeld, would be lit up simultaneously to illuminate the skies surrounding the audience. Thamer claims that during this event “flags, fire and light [would be] united in the image of a church, cutting off the assembled community from the darkness of the hostile world outside.” The success of displays such as the cathedral of light, made possible through the architectural design of the rally grounds
themselves, is apparent enough from primary source accounts by Germans who attended the Reichsparteitage between 1934 and 1938. Even the British ambassador in attendance, Sir Nevile Henderson, called the spectacle “solemn and beautiful.”

As set-pieces for the rallies at Nuremberg, flags played an important part within the National Socialism political system. As Wilhelm Reich notes, the importance of the swastika as an iconic symbol of the regime cannot be understated. In the words of Hilmar Hoffman, the National Socialist flag “was meant to communicate all the virtues” of the movement, including “all amorphous ideas and second-rate virtues” such as loyalty to the nation and Führer. Rally events were almost always awash with banners bearing the swastika upon them, a feature which Mayo explains as instrumental in the sanctification of space beyond that of a neutral arena. Indeed, one of the most memorable scenes of Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will is the “sea of flags,” an impressive demonstration organized by Speer which involved hundreds of marching Party faithful carrying banners for review before the podium. The flag-bearers themselves would often become set-pieces to be manipulated, subordinate to the power of the flag; Speer was particular to select only men who appeared of good health and capable of projected the desired image of youthful vigor. The proliferation of swastika flags was also part of a program to create an omnipresence of Hitler throughout Germany, and in some cases the banner itself was equated with the Führer. Such was the case when, in 1934, the traditional pledge of loyalty undertaken by German officers changed its focus from the national banner to the person of Adolf Hitler. In these ways, the regime was able to effectively employ the use of flags to create impressive and highly politicized environments for its rallies.

Scholars such as Mayo and Reich believe that the rally grounds at Nuremberg were a
stage upon which National Socialist leaders presented a drama bolstering the legitimacy of their regime. The rallies are best understood as grand productions put on by the state wherein symbols would confirm the National Socialist ideal within the minds of an audience. To this end, the buildings designed by Albert Speer and others were very successful in suggesting a glorious, eternal Germany which existed upon a historical watershed. The overall layout of the Zeppelinfeld was designed not only to accommodate masses of political faithful, but furthermore to inspire within them a collective sense of being completely insignificant in the face of greater political ideas. The next section will review the rituals associated with the Reichsparteitage and how they capitalized upon these advantages to the fullest measure.

**Functionality of Rites and Rituals**

The rallies which would take place at Speer's monumental Zeppelinfeld were but one of several events which made up the entirety of the Reichsparteitage at Nuremberg. Agendas for the rallies lasted several days, consisting of countless parades, speeches and gatherings which were meant to reinforce the National Socialist ideology within the minds of participants. Rituals became a part of the Nuremberg rallies due to their importance in legitimizing the state ideology nearly to the point of being a political religion. These rituals, designed and perfected by Party leaders, were to become a new chapter in the canon of National Socialist ideology.

Before discussing the specific types of rituals which made up the Reichsparteitage, it is necessary to briefly touch upon the utility political theater enjoys within fascist systems. As has already been discussed, the creation of a fascist ideology depends upon the propagation of myths which establish national consciousness as critically important. This in turn demands a problem to be solved through the transformation of the national community into the image of the ruling
Typically this is presented as a sort of crisis, which in National Socialism took many forms: the disastrous defeat in the First World War, the political chaos of Weimar-era Germany and, last but not least, the invisible threat of international Jewry which actively conspired against all nations and peoples. A core element of ritual theater, as Berghaus notes, is its capacity to offer “a healing power, or katharsis, in a moment of crisis – and to communicate a binding belief system to the participants.” Thus it is possible to understand the utility of the National Socialist rally as performing a vital role in confirming “threats” to the welfare of its nation and granting a medium to participants through which they might act against these perceived dangers within the limits of the regime's Weltanschauung.

In a general sense, the ritualization of activity serves to condition human beings to produce certain modes of behavior. In the case of politics, rituals might be established as a reaction to change within society and related fears. Roger Grainger explains that at their core rituals are concerned with “mankind's fear of novelty, of unstructured situations and states of flux, in which the old way is over and done away and the new one has not yet really begun.” Furthermore, ritual acts as a social bonding mechanism, removing the individual from their alienation from social others, a byproduct of modernity, and placing them within a greater community to which they belong only by virtue of their recognition of the ritual's significance.

The rituals within National Socialist rallies served the critical purpose of transforming tens of thousands of individuals bodies into a single emotional mass, instrumental in crediting the myth of a Volksgemeinschaft made real.

The Reichsparteitage would typically begin with an official arrival ceremony for Hitler himself. Fond of celebratory entries before adoring masses, the Führer was also well aware of
modern marvels which permitted his person to travel through the crowd-laden streets with maximum visibility. A festival-like atmosphere, centered upon the vehicle carrying Hitler, would wind throughout the city of Nuremberg and conclude upon the steps of the Rathaus, where the municipal authority ceremoniously welcomed the Führer and his followers to the city.\textsuperscript{35} This grand entrance was usually preceded by a fly-over of the city by Hitler's airplane, an event involving less ritual but nevertheless impressing itself upon the minds and imaginations of the gathered National Socialist faithful. Nevermore than in Riefenstahl's \textit{Triumph of the Will} is this symbolic act recorded to such an effect, with the Führer's transportation descending from the clouds above the city, a modern-day savior coming to earth to relieve a suffering nation.\textsuperscript{36}

In his book about the Nuremberg rallies, Hamilton Burden argues that political ritual was primarily employed to engender an “irrational adulation and deification of Hitler.”\textsuperscript{37} This is, as Simon Taylor points out, too simple a conclusion due to the complex role played symbols and myth within rituals seeking to lend credence to the National Socialist \textit{Weltanschauung}.\textsuperscript{38} The extent to which Hitler participated within rally events is limited by the association of his person with symbols of the regime. The vital purpose he served was that of a medium between the regime and the political faithful, the latter of which invested him with the entirety of National Socialist ideology. Within the context of the \textit{Reichsparteitage}, the person of the Führer represented the \textit{Pontifex Maximus} of Germany's spiritual rejuvenation, a leviathan figure whose words conveyed the collective will and energy of an entire nation. Taylor's argument draws a connection between the symbols employed within rally sites and the role played by Hitler in utilizing these symbols in order to channel the energy of participants towards the legitimization of these symbols as items of political and spiritual significance. The cult of the Führer, with its
seemingly “irrational adulation” of a single monolithic figure, was in actuality the energetic affirmation of political symbol systems furthering the legitimization of the National Socialist regime, a phenomenon which depended upon but extended far beyond the person of Hitler.

This is perhaps best seen in the Party congresses which dominated the opening days of the Reichsparteitage. Architecture, ceremony and pageantry combined in this event to present rally participants with a compelling example of the National Socialist order and the role played by Hitler within it. Congresses were almost always opened by the Führer, who entered the hall accompanied by the Blood Flag, a swastika banner stained with the blood of Party martyrs who fell in the failed Beer Hall Putsch of 1923. While the propaganda value of flags within the National Socialist world has already been discussed, the Blood Flag warrants slight digression due to the special place it occupied within the pantheon of Hitler's Germany. This particular flag was used for several ceremonial purposes, such as the sanctification of new army standards, and accompanied Hitler throughout the course of the rally. As Hoffman argues, flags are in themselves neutral symbols which must be invested with meaning to become items of political significance; the Blood Flag is a perfect example of this due to its sacred value to the National Socialist mythos, which was extended to the person of Hitler as it stood behind him at all times.39 During the Party Congresses, the banners which followed Hitler into the hall would be borne by members of the Schutzstaffeln “Blood Order,” which stood behind the speaker's podium.40

Although the hall was built to accommodate sixteen thousand people, the Congress events were not intended to be forums for discussion. Rather, they were utilized by the regime to compound upon National Socialist ideals and the status of the movement. Thornton Sinclair notes the two dominating agendas of Party Congress as being the listing of the regime's
accomplishments and appealing directly to participant emotions. These worked to legitimize the regime, not only due to the favorable opinion it created in the eyes of observers but also in the sense that it conferred a sense of accountability upon the regime's leadership. Within this highly propagandized environment, Party leaders were required to testify before the Führer, nation and world regarding their work in advancing the victory of National Socialism.

Agency within the environment of the Party Congresses lay entirely within the hands of the speakers which addressed the gathered audience. Individuals who were lucky enough to get a ticket to attend one of these events were expected to sit for hours upon uncomfortable stone benches and listen in respectful silence as Hitler and his officers spoke in ambiguous terms about the national struggle against an array of enemies. It is possible, however, that the individual within the Congress, surrounded by so many of his fellows, felt within himself a false sense of power to either approve or disapprove of what was being told to him. Approval was of course the only permissible option, and the energy produced by the crowd, shouting its support for what was being told to them, gave credence to the ideals being espoused. It was in the meticulously designed arenas in the Zeppelinfeld and Luitpold Grove that these occasions reached their climax, with tens of thousands of audience members participating in some of the most memorable examples of political theater ever created.

As discussed above, Speer's designs for the Zeppelinfeld were made with a mind towards accommodating massive crowds whose attention would be drawn to the speaker addressing them as well as symbols covering the rally grounds. Ken Kelman describes these locations as similar to large-scale movie production sets built during the 1920s for elaborate films, meant to invoke awe within an audience. The key difference in the structures at Nuremberg was that the
audience became a part of the spectacle due to their proximity to and ability to interact with those who orchestrated it. Erving Goffman speaks of political rallies as events wherein the audience is merged with the speaker, forming a social relationship on a massive scale.\(^{43}\) Primary source accounts given by attendees at the rallies confirm that this was the case at Nuremberg, where Hitler and other National Socialist leaders manipulated stagecraft, symbolism and rhetoric to stir the gathered faithful into a quasi-religious frenzy.

**The Ritualization of Political Life**

After the official opening of the *Reichsparteitage* with the Party Congress, the rally grounds were dominated by an endless series of demonstrations, reviews of the party rank-and-file, and keynote speakers who addressed the convened Party membership. Two of the most important of these were reviews of the Labor Front and the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth). Whereas early rallies held grand reviews of all organizations at once, the rapid growth of the Party after 1933 demanded that these events be divided into separate occasions which often stretched across multiple days. Starting in 1934, the Labor Front, responsible for all public work project in the Third Reich, was assigned to parade upon the *Zeppelinfeld* and deliver a report to the Führer on their progress over the past year.\(^{44}\) In 1936 this included upwards of forty-five thousand men who, carrying their work-spades like rifles, exclaimed their devotion to their leader and his ideological project:

> The hour has come when once a year we lay aside our work and appear before the Führer. We stand in common work and uniform. No one is too good to work for the fatherland, and thus this service has become the duty of all. The Führer wants to give peace to the world and we are ready to follow him where he leads. We are troops of peace, making new land to protect our homes [....] We carry the fatherland in our hearts, we praise the Führer, and our whole lives will be one great labor service for the German people.\(^{45}\)
The event was designed to appear as a conversation between the arrayed Labor Front members and the person of Hitler, with forty-five thousand voices simultaneously welcoming the Führer to the review and delivering the proclamation quoted above. Hitler's reply would be delivered to the crowd *en masse*, creating a dialog between nation (embodied in the Labor Front) and leader. The creation of solidarity amongst rally participants was greatly assisted by the manipulation of symbols throughout the course of the review, such as flags borne by members of the audience.

For several members of the National Socialist movement, a chance to attend the *Reichsparteitage* and see Hitler in person was one to be coveted. Such was the case for Alfons Heck, who at the age of ten was invited to attend the festivities at Nuremberg. Heck notes that the leader of his local *Hitlerjugend* group had been ordered to enlist its two youngest members for participation in the rally events. This directive is unsurprising given the fact that several National Socialist leaders were concerned with associating their movement with the future and saw the inclusion of children within political life as a perfect way to construct that identity. As Heck notes, no major Party function after 1933 omitted the *Hitlerjugend* from the festivities, and an entire day was dedicated to the organization in the *Reichsparteitage* schedule. Hitler himself remarked about the need to mobilize an entire generation of young Germans:

> I want a violent, haughty, dauntless, cruel youth . . . . The free and glorious beast of prey must gleam again through their eyes. Strong and beautiful I want my youth. I shall have them trained in all bodily exercises. I want an athletic youth. This is the first and the most important. Thus I shall eradicate the thousands of years of human domestication. Thus I have the pure, noble material of nature at hand. Thus I can create the New.48

For the ideologues of National Socialism, Heck and his peers were the raw materials with which the German future would be built. Young members of the movement were thus given a
prominent and highly visual role within Party events such as the *Reichsparteitage*.

Heck provides an extraordinary primary source account of his first time hearing Hitler speak. Recalling the first half hour of the speech as “surprisingly intimate,” Heck explains that while he does not remember the content of what his leader was saying the “emotional impact” it had on his ten-year-old self was unforgettable.⁴⁹ In a similar story, Ludwell Denny, writing for *The Nation*, reported that Hitler “is an extraordinary person [and] received with enthusiasm. An artist turned popular prophet and savior is the way members of the audience described him to me....His speech was intense and brief; he constantly clenched and unclenched his hands.”⁵⁰ This account was written in 1923, years before the National Socialist propaganda machine was at full-force, demonstrating the power of the Party's leader as a speech-maker. Another article written in the same year states that Hitler was received “like a savior” at the first Party rally in Munich.⁵¹ The propaganda offices of the Third Reich certainly did much to strengthen the creation of a Hitler-myth, but these efforts built upon an image which had already established itself within the minds of many Germans by 1933.

Documented accounts of events featuring Hitler's speeches suggest that the Führer was at ease when speaking to a crowd. David Redles argues that this was greatly contrasted by how the dictator spoke to individuals, presenting himself almost as a “nonentity” once removed from politics and rallies, feeling most at home while addressing groups of people.⁵² Whatever nerves did exist for the man seemed to disappear just as quickly as he began to expound on topics of importance to the Party's ideological platform.⁵³ Otto Strasser, who saw Hitler speak on several occasions, stated that when “face-to-face with his public, he goes into a trance. That is his moment of real greatness, the moment when he is most genuinely himself.”⁵⁴ Louis Lochner,
who saw Hitler speak for the first time in 1930, reported that he was “spiritually intoxicated” by crowds, a point which is shared by Strasser who described the Führer’s speech at the 1924 Putsch trial as one in which Hitler became “drunk like his audience, [sheerly intoxicated] with his own ...words [and] with the emotional appeal of his own oratory.”

Hitler's speeches would provide the backdrop for numerous ceremonies which served to expound the virtues of the Volksgemeinschaft and National Socialist cause. Whereas all of these events involved dictation from the tribune, it is important to understand how the relationship between the speaker and audience was built on these occasions. Hitler collectivized the audience, envisioning it as a single entity wherein audience members found strength by identifying with one another. Beyond the creation of new social forms based upon race and blood, the rally environment also served to transform the audience into “the immediate protagonist of the festivity.” Participation from observers was essential, not only as a sounding board for the speakers but also in the form of songs and parades. One part of the 1938 Reichsparteitage consisted of at least four songs: an oath melody, the national and Party anthems and finally another song before the event was concluded. In some cases these songs were merely reinterpretations of existing works, co-opted by the Party due to their public presence and known melodies, further helping to establish them in the collective mind of the audience.

Marching as well as singing dominated several parts of the Reichsparteitage. Haig Bosmajian argues that the der Kampf um die Strasse, literally “the struggle for the streets,” greatly informed the use of marching within Party rituals. The term describes the earliest days of National Socialism, when forces of the movement had to compete with other political parties, namely socialists and communists, for a public presence in Germany. In Mein Kampf, Hitler
explains that der Kampf um die Strasse was meant to “teach the Marxists that the future masters of the streets is National Socialism, just as it will someday be master of the state.”\textsuperscript{60} The Party's seizure of power did nothing to alleviate this atmosphere of an embattled nation, the crisis serving to validate fascism in any form, and marching remained a cornerstone of the movement. Bosmajian compares the goose-step to various forms of primitive dance in which “the participant lost whatever identity he may have had as an individual and yet at the same time he acquired a new 'identity' which brought attention to him” as a member of a larger group.\textsuperscript{61} A similar idea is espoused by Ernest Grosse, who explains the utility of hunting dances within early human communities which were beset with uncertainty.\textsuperscript{62} After the chaotic experience of the 1920s, many Germans likely found great comfort in seeing themselves strengthened and replicated manyfold through the collective practice of marching.

The rituals employed within the Reichsparteitage were all designed to become a part of National Socialist doctrine. Everything, from choreography to the types of set-pieces employed, was carefully calculated and replicated on several separate occasions. Speer noted Hitler's attentiveness in creating these rituals, remarking that the Führer approached the project as a “founder of a religion” would, establishing “unalterable rites” which would persist beyond his death.\textsuperscript{63} The architect also explained Hitler's wishes that even a “political goblin” would be able to recreate these practices “to bring a certain fascination to bear on the masses.”\textsuperscript{64} William Shirer, describing the 1934 Nuremberg rallies, stated that Hitler “was restoring pageantry and color and mysticism to the drab lives of twentieth-century Germans” and that Party events “had something of the mysticism and religious fervor of an Easter or Christmas Mass in a great Catholic cathedral.”\textsuperscript{65} These moments invited participants to imagine eternity before them,
playing out through rituals which would continue on for hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

The rituals of the *Reichsparteitage* were meant to display grandeur and inspire the audience's collective being, inviting that body to become the protagonist of the event itself. The sites built by Speer and others were cleverly utilized to “trap” the audience within the National Socialist world and subjugate them to the ideas being expounded upon by Party speakers. It is no surprise that many National Socialists described the Nuremberg rallies as the setting for their “conversion experiences,” further suggesting the role of the rallies in elevating the regime's ideology to pseudo-religious proportions.

**Conclusion: The Cult and Conversion**

For one hour on the fifth day of the *Reichsparteitage*, as the lone figure of Hitler made his way up the main parade boulevard of the *Zeppelinfeld* to the speaker's tribune, one hundred and fifty columns of light would shoot into the skies above the rally grounds. This “cathedral of light” served to create a barrier between the gathered masses and the darkness of the outside world. This was the high point of pseudo-religious fervor during the Nuremberg rallies, the embodiment of what Kelman called Hitler's “ministry on earth,” and perhaps the most impressive attempt on the part of National Socialism to present itself as a political religion.

Emilio Gentile argues that fascism appropriates pre-existing religious rituals in order to reproduce political religions wherein the State is overcome by the will of a single group, the Party, seeking to entirely integrate individuals into an imagined community. Unlike Italian Fascism, which found limits to its power in parts of life dominated by Catholicism, National Socialism was able to take advantage of the lack of religious unity within Germany. Whereas religion tends to establish a narrative of paradise after death, fascism propagated the creation of a
terrestrial happiness for an exclusive community. Berghaus notes that German National Socialism was once again more capable in this regard than Italian Fascism, which had to compete with the power of the Catholic Church. Without a unified religious resistance, National Socialist leaders were able to operate with near limitless freedom in their creation of rituals fully evoking religious rites of a similar nature. Among these was a ceremony involving the Blood Flag, with new standards for the Wehrmacht and SS receiving a “blessing” from both Hitler and the sacred banner. Taylor points out that this ceremony is very close to the Catholic practice of using the Holy Cross to signify a blessing unto another object, investing that item with power granted through the blood of a sacrifice. In the former case, the sacrificed martyrs were those Party members killed in the failed 1923 Putsch, elevated to the status of Christ within the National Socialist cult.

It is apparent that the Party rallies at Nuremberg succeeded in persuading several Germans into giving their lives and minds to the National Socialist cause. Most of the Party's Old Guard reported that their “conversion” occurred at such events. Heck remembers his first time hearing Hitler speak at the 1938 Reichsparteitage as being so memorable that “from that moment on [he] belonged to Adolf Hitler body and soul.” A German farmer had a similar experience in 1932, saying that after hearing Hitler his “life and efforts were dedicated to the Führer,” words proven by his subsequent decision to join the SA. Accounts such as these are endless, proving that rally elements – spectacle, rhetoric and showcasing – served as an effective recruitment tool for the Party.

As an event, the Reichsparteitage was the full presentation of National Socialism as a spiritual entity. The dates themselves reminded Germans of holy days which were kept with
great celebration each year, with the creation of a political mythos to surround these occasions only strengthening this association. The sets upon which these dramas were orchestrated were as carefully constructed as the most impressive cathedrals in Europe; symbols, light and sound were combined in both to create atmospheres which simultaneously excited and intimidated the senses. Both had clergy to address the faithful, first of which among the National Socialists was Hitler, whose ideological tirades would fill the rally grounds just as a priest's sermon might resonate within a cathedral. Finally, the ritualization of political activity served to confirm the rallies as events of permanence which would continue to be attended by Party faithful for centuries ever after.

Why is it important that in the twenty-first century we undertake a study of the Nuremberg rallies and how they served to create a political cult centered upon National Socialist ideology? In the present time, political theater remains a force of relevance, albeit not as overt as in Germany during the 1930s. Much of the success of National Socialism was gained from its ability to tap into the human imagination and desire for spiritual fulfillment through public demonstrations, such as those seen in the Reichsparteitage. Through advancing an understanding of these displays and their essence, we may better comprehend the phenomenon of fascism and its appeals to aspects of human nature, judged not for their content as good or evil, but merely as something which lies within us all.
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9 Jobst, Hans. *Ich glaube! Bekenntnisse.* Munich, 1928
17 Hagen. 159
18 Zelnhefe. 84-85
23 Lane. 193
24 Mayo. 26
25 Thamer. 181
29 Mayo. 25
31 Reichgesetzbblatt (Berlin). pt. 1 (Berlin, 1934). 785
32 Berghaus. 5
34 Berghaus. 45
35 For an excellent description of this, in addition to other events which comprised the Party rallies, see Burden, Hamilton. *The Nuremberg Rallies: 1923-39.* (Frederick A. Praeger: New York, 1967).
37 Burden. 91
38 Taylor. 505
39 Hoffman. 30-31
41 *Ibid.* 573
In an interesting primary source account, an eyewitness to the 1933 Reichsparteitage reported that, while sitting directly behind Hitler, he noticed that the leader “began to sweat. [Hitler] stared at the crowd which he could see but which could not see him yet. Slowly the back of his shirt began to discolor, a gradually growing dark spot began to show until his whole back was completely soaking wet. His apprehension seemed under control when he finally got up [and] began to address the crowds.” cited in Burden. 69-70

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42 Kelman. 2
44 Sinclair. 7
45 Der Parteitag der Ehre. vom. 8., bis 14 September 1936 (Munich 1936), pp. 71-85.
47 Ibid. 21
49 Heck. 22
52 Ibid. 152
53 In an interesting primary source account, an eyewitness to the 1933 Reichsparteitage reported that, while sitting directly behind Hitler, he noticed that the leader “began to sweat. [Hitler] stared at the crowd which he could see but which could not see him yet. Slowly the back of his shirt began to discolor, a gradually growing dark spot began to show until his whole back was completely soaking wet. His apprehension seemed under control when he finally got up [and] began to address the crowds.” cited in Burden. 69-70
57 Berghaus. 57
58 Sinclair. 9
59 Hoffman. 27
64 Speer. Inside the Third Reich.
67 Thamer. 177
68 This ceremony is described in great detail by Brandt, who explains that “with his hand [Hitler] presses the cloth of the Blood Flag against the new standards,and thereby they are consecrated with the blood of the sixteen, who as the first martyrs of the movement, gave their life-blood, and thereafter became immortal.” in Brant, Alfred-Ingemar. Meilensteine des Dritten Reichs. (Zentralverlag: Munich, 1938). 119
69 Taylor. 509
70 Redles. 147
71 Heck. 24