

Symbol and ritual under National Socialism

ABSTRACT

The relationship of symbol and ritual to the 'world-view' of National Socialism has rarely been discussed. In this article however, it is argued that for Nazism, symbol and ritual were essential forms of ideological presentation and reinforcement. The NSDAP reduced political relationships to the workings of an eschatology, constructed upon symbols relating either to the German *Volks-gemeinschaft* or to *Judentum*. Thereby it was possible to promote a sense of 'internal' consensus, in opposition to 'class politics', whilst simultaneously warning of imminent national catastrophe because of the 'Jewish conspiracy'. It was the very character of Nazi ideology, supported upon nebulous concepts such as 'feeling and belief' which determined its means of presentation through ritualized political celebration, where the mechanisms of 'mass suggestion' were consciously brought into operation. And the failure of other 'intellectual' forms of ideological presentation, such as the *Thingspiel*, supports the hypothesis that symbol and political ritual performed the function of mystifying the real social, economic, and political contradictions between the social strata which constituted German fascism's mass basis.

There have been surprisingly few attempts by social scientists to explore the cult and ritual aspects of National Socialism. Indeed H. T. Burden's book on the Nuremberg Rallies, published in 1967, remains the most substantive work available in English on the general theme of Nazism's political celebrations.¹ However, Burden confines himself to outlining the development of the annual Reichsparty-day, and one has to look to the work of two German authors, Klaus Vondung and Hans-Jochen Gamm, to find any sort of systematic analysis of the ritual forms of National Socialist celebrations, and their possible relationship to the various tenets of the Nazi *Weltanschauung*.²

The purpose of this paper is thus two-fold. First, by outlining the wider spectrum of Nazi political celebrations, we hope to demonstrate that Nazi political ritual cannot just be understood as, for instance, the expression of the 'irrational adulation and deification of Hitler',³ but rather should be seen as a central component of an ideological system (*weltanschauung*) which consciously sought expression in the 'mysteries' of myth and symbol. Second, an examination of the structure of National Socialist mythos and its symbol-world, suggests that the very nature of the Nazi *weltanschauung* led the NSDAP towards an increasing reliance upon political ritual as a means of ideological presentation.

One of the main limitations of Burden's analysis of the Nuremberg Rallies is precisely his failure to consider the Reichsparty-day within the context of the National Socialist *Jahreslauf*, for although the Reichsparty-day has exercised a particular fascination upon the popular imagination, it was merely one event within a carefully planned calendar of political celebrations. More importantly, much of the inner 'sense' of the Reichsparty-day can only be uncovered and analysed by reference to the so-called National Socialist Holy-History (*Heiligengeschichte*). This in turn was expressed in the various events which constituted the *Jahreslauf*, and in particular through the celebrations of 9 November. But before turning to a closer examination of this Holy-History, let us first sketch out the various forms of political ritual developed by the NSDAP between 1919 and 1945.

It is possible to identify three types of National Socialist celebrations:

- 1 The celebrations of the National Socialist Year (*Jahreslauf*).
- 2 The Morning celebrations (*Morgenfeiern*).
- 3 The Life celebrations (*Lebensfeiern*).

Finally there are the early forms of the *Thingspiel*, a type of theatrical celebration which does not fit into any of the above categories. Of these the *Jahreslauf* and the *Thingspiel* provide us with the most useful examples for the purpose of analysis, mainly because they developed prior to 1939 and thus relate more obviously to the political development of the NSDAP during the *Kampfzeit* and the early years of the Third Reich. The Morning celebrations and the Life celebrations found prominence mainly under wartime conditions, and especially after Stalingrad.

THE CELEBRATIONS OF THE JAHRESLAUF

The various political celebrations which made up the National Socialist *Jahreslauf* can be divided into two distinct categories. On the one hand those festivals already celebrated by the NSDAP prior to the take-over of power in January 1933, such as the 'Founding of

the Party Programme' on 24 February, the Führer's birthday on 20 April, the celebration of the 9 November in Munich and the annual Reichsparty-day, were raised to the status of 'holy days' under the Third Reich, and constitute the most important events in the *Jahreslauf*. Conversely, important events which already had a strong cultural tradition in Germany, whether as expressions of the Christian churches' influence or that of the Labour movement, were taken over by the propaganda machine of the party, emptied of their original content, and transformed into public expressions of the new National Socialist *weltanschauung*. Remembrance Day on the 16 March, for instance, traditionally a day of mourning for the dead of the First World War, was transformed under Hitler's personal orders into an opportunity to reflect upon the heroic nature of the German soldiers' sacrifice. Henceforth the swastika flag was no longer to be lowered to half-mast, but flown proudly 'at the top of the standard' as a symbol of Germany's 're-awakened faith and pride'.⁴ The May-day celebrations of the workers' movement was also *gleichgeschaltet*: all signs of a genuinely socialist tradition were obliterated, and instead massive military parades were held in Berlin to celebrate the new mood of 'national unity and class harmony'. Goebbels wrote that this day should show: 'a grandiose picture of the National Socialist "creative will" . . . The whole people (*Volk*) thus unifies itself through that same "will".'⁵ Other traditional celebration days, such as Easter, Whitsun, Mothers' Day, the Harvest Thanksgiving and Christmas suffered a similar fate, with NSDAP worthies announcing that 'authentic' ceremonies and ancient Teutonic folk-customs must be revived in view of the onslaught against 'traditional' culture by the spirit of Jewish-Marxist materialism.

However, it is not our intention to examine in detail the structure of the various political celebrations which make up the *Jahreslauf*. Indeed, to do so would be unnecessarily repetitive, since we shall argue that the political interpretation which the NSDAP inserted into the events, and the system of mythos and symbolism through which this interpretation was expressed, was common to all. Rather we wish to demonstrate that political celebrations possessed a specific significance for National Socialism, by presenting and reinforcing certain symbolic entities - flag, Führer, *Volk*, etc. - through the 'revelation' of the mystery of the Holy-History. In order to do this we must first of all look at the celebration of 9 November.

THE 9 NOVEMBER CELEBRATION

The event which Hitler and the party leadership celebrated each year on 9 November was the notorious Munich Beer-hall Putsch of 1923. Throughout the *Kampfzeit* Hitler met with his old guard to remember

and honour the sixteen party members who had lost their lives as a result of this abortive *coup*. With the accession to power of the NSDAP in 1933 however, a radical reinterpretation of the *coup* was inevitable, since according to the party ideologues, National Socialism could not countenance the notion of even temporary defeat. Nor could it be admitted that any event connected with the name of the Führer or the party could have been a costly blunder. Thus the defeat of 1923 was turned into the 'pre-requisite for the victory of 1933'.

Naturally the mystification of events surrounding 9 November did not take place overnight. Even during the *Kampfzeit* many aspects of the 'victorious' interpretation found their way into the annual ceremony which Hitler and the party leadership performed in Munich's Königsplatz. But on 9 November 1935 a ceremony took place which illustrates the extent to which the NSDAP had woven a mystical web around the *coup*, and which also serves to illustrate the inter-relationship of mythos, symbol and ritual which was the hallmark of National Socialism's ideological style. It was the ceremony of the Resurrection of the Dead.⁶

Late in the morning of 9 November 1935, Hitler and his entourage left the Bürgerbräukeller to march to the Feldherrnhalle, along the route used by the putschists some twelve years previously. At the head of the procession was carried the Bloodflag (*Blutfahne*) which had been carried by the original conspirators, and was 'stained with the blood of the sixteen martyrs'. Hitler ordered a 'Blood-order' to be created, to whom the surviving putschists belonged, and it was their privilege to march with Hitler and the Bloodflag at the head of the procession. The route to the Feldherrnhalle was marked by 240 pylons, each bearing the name of one of the movement's 'fallen heroes'. The name was read out as the head of the column marched past the pylon in question. Throughout military bands played the Horst Wessel march. When the Feldherrnhalle was reached, the service of the resurrection of the sixteen 'Blood-witnesses', present in their recently exhumed state, began. The *Völkischer Beobachter* describes the scene:

The dead of the 9th of November (do not lie) in dark graves with sad salutes, but in a beautiful building, in a well-lit hall, under God's free heaven, in brass sarcophagen, in which beat the heart of our revolution . . .

We believe that these dead have found new life in us, and that they will live for ever. The belief that our flag is holy: the belief that the Creator has given us and them the strength for work and for victory, and the belief in our sacred mission to which these everlasting hours are dedicated, shows Germany her way forward. We know that out of the inner experience of our movement . . .

we have gained eternal life because of the struggle and the sacrifice of the fallen for Germany . . .

How few marched off in the beginning? Today there are millions represented in the flags and standards who are witness to this celebration. How few had from the first a clear understanding of this German belief? Yet the way to victory was ever clear to our soldiers in those lonely quiet hours . . .

We old and young National Socialists thank Adolf Hitler for this unforgettable day. We praise him and this holy symbol of the resurrection of Germany, for which we have him and the flag of our struggle to thank. We go forward with open eyes and believing hearts under his direction.⁷

The centrepiece of the ceremony at the Feldherrnhalle was the admittance of the coffins into the sarcophagen, where the sixteen 'martyrs' were to lie as an 'Eternal Watch' for Germany. As the bodies were removed from the gun-carriages, Hitler called out their names one by one, to be answered each time by the thousands of assembled Hitler Youth and party members with the response 'Here!' The *Völkischer Beobachter* explained the significance of the ritual:

Again and again the thousands roar 'Here!' . . . the testament of these first Blood-witnesses is thus raised up to our entire Movement, whilst their spirit lives and works for Germany as its Eternal Watch. . . . Each of the dead thus greets the assembled thousands, who are themselves the reflection and the carriers of their will to victory.⁸

Then Hitler, flanked by his deputies and the comrades of the Blood-order, entered the temple and walked alone to 'greet his former true-followers'. Having placed wreaths on each of the coffins, Hitler spoke to the assembly of the significance of the ceremony:

These sixteen men, who twelve years ago gave their lives as a sacrifice for their people (*Volk*) and their Führer, are today raised from the grave. Who does not feel the truth of this resurrection? Who does not see the glint of their eyes in the newly-raised-up Wehrmacht? And the Reich, which is itself built around this consecrated ground, is it not their kingdom? The kingdom of their 'will' and victory?⁹

Thus out of the events of the 9 November 1923, the NSDAP fashioned an inter-related symbol-world founded upon the mythos of a Holy-History to which the 'martyrdom' of the sixteen was witness. However in order to be able to analyse the structure of this Holy-History, it is necessary first of all to examine the various symbols which 'revealed' its meaning.

The most powerful symbol of the 9 November 'revelation' was the

Bloodflag, transformed into a 'witness' of the 'sacrificial blood' of the movement's martyrs. After the takeover of power the Bloodflag was additionally portrayed as a manifestation of the 'historical inevitability' of National Socialism, for as we have seen, the spilling of the sacrificial blood was now the cultural pre-requisite for the movement's victory.

The Bloodflag is a transparent allegory of the Christian cross, especially in its representation of the process of historical salvation for a nation or people through the blood-sacrifice of another. Its power as a 'holy' symbol is emphasized by the fact that the Bloodflag was only exhibited on the 9 November and at Nuremberg on Reichsparty-day. At Nuremberg the Bloodflag performed a specific function in the political ritual developed by the NSDAP. It was carried in front of the Führer during the flag-dedication ceremony, in which the banners and flags of the party formations were 'sanctified' by Hitler's touch and that of the original Bloodflag:

The drums roll. The flags – how many of them are faded and tattered, soaked with the blood of fallen fighters and riddled with bullet holes. With his hand he presses the cloth of the Bloodflag 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.¹⁰

But the blood of the martyrs, like the blood of Christ, was also a means of transfiguration. Thus their blood, the symbol of their 'eternal life', was carried in the blood of the new National Socialist man, who will be recreated in the blood of his descendants, or in the earth as a material basis for the reproduction and recreation of the *Volk*.¹¹ The choral oath in Böhme's *Cantata for the Ninth of November* makes this clear:

He who has pledged, he who has taken the oath,
whether in death he passes away
he continues to live in the earth.

He who has recognised himself through struggle,
he who burns within himself, whether death touches him,
he continues to live in blood.¹²

So the Bloodflag, as the holiest relic of the National Socialist movement, projected its significance and power to all other flags through the medium of the sacrificial blood, in the same way as the Christian crucifix derives its thaumaturgical significance from the original Cross of Golgotha. 'Place your hand proudly on the shaft of this flag,' states Baumann, 'for from this one flag we derive all our strength.'¹³ Simultaneously, the interpretation given to the death of the sixteen conspirators by the party propaganda machine meant

that the 'virtues' of the individual's absolute loyalty, unquestioning obedience and his readiness to sacrifice his life for '*Führer* and *Volk*' were equally imprinted in the flag symbol. Therefore the Bloodflag, by symbolizing the 'metaphysical' transformation of Germany which had brought about the Third Reich, provided, as we shall see, an essential 'confirmation' for the entire structure of the Nazi mythos. It is not surprising therefore, to discover that the flag or swastika emblem was rapidly embellished with other 'significant' associations which related to the wider aspects of National Socialist doctrine.

The fact that the NSDAP had originally rejected the old nationalist colours so beloved of the other right-wing para-military formations in the immediate post-war era in favour of the swastika, was claimed as proof by the party ideologues that the movement represented a radical new social and political *weltanschauung*, in opposition to both 'Reaction and Red terror'. The swastika was therefore presented as the deepest historical expression of the German *Volk*; as a symbol of profound religious significance for the early Teutonic tribes who were the first to give historical expression to the 'longing for a German homeland'.¹⁴ The swastika or sun-wheel promoted the quality of sun and light; the red backcloth the association of blood and fire.¹⁵ Möller's epic poem 'The Pledge', which accompanied the flag-dedication ceremony, gave expression to this 'most sacred' quality:

We are sworn to our flag, for ever.
Whoever dishonours the flag will be cursed.

The flag is our creed, of God and *Volk* and land.
Whoever wants to steal it, must first take our life and strength.¹⁶

Just as the flag derived its 'sacred' character from its analogy to the Christian cross, so Hitler derived a significant part of his status by appropriating the messianic qualities of Christ. Two distinct levels of interpretation operated here. On the lower level Hitler was presented as a cultural hero, a political saviour of his people, and the leader of the *Volksgemeinschaft* (*Volk*-community). Robert Ley's creed, 'We believe only in Adolf Hitler on this earth' fits this notion perfectly.¹⁷ But simultaneously Hitler is apportioned messianic status, not only 'immortal' in his own right, but even capable of conferring immortality upon his followers:

You walk among the *Volk* as a Saviour
Because you are completely possessed by belief . . .
Now we need not fear, for you say to us:
'If you believe, then I have slain death,
even when the body decays'.¹⁸

Whilst at Nuremberg on Reichsparty-day, the call from the party

ranks: 'The Führer is Germany and Germany the Führer', was answered by Hitler with the words: 'I am never without you, and you are never without me.'¹⁹

Thus the takeover of power and the establishment of the Third Reich as the secular manifestation of National Socialism's 'will to power' provided the basis for the reinterpretation of the events of 9 November 1923. The Munich *coup* was revealed as a turning point which heralded the coming of a new, historically distinct era. Böhme wrote:

The earth came to an end with your death
But with your glory our life began.²⁰

The 9 November was the manifestation of this 'new beginning', interpreted by the party ideologues as a metamorphosis of the (German) human condition. The old world has come to an end, and with the coming of the Third Reich the true meaning of history can be revealed. The lives of those whose sacrifice was a precondition of victory, and those who now experience this victory are transfigured in the symbol of the flag:

Whoever follows the flag, lives,
And in him live those who died for the flag.²¹

We must now examine the question of the relationship of the ideological content of this mythos, as set out above, to its method of representation in the form of ritualized celebration. Here we cannot be comprehensive, but it is possible to demonstrate an internal consistency between the ideological representation of the Nazi *weltanschauung*, its symbol-world and mythos, and its style of presentation in mass parades and ritualized celebration.

THE COMMUNITY OF THE MASS RALLY

The most obvious characteristic of major National Socialist celebrations, and in particular the Reichsparty-day in Nuremberg, was their monumentality: both in terms of the huge numbers of participants and in terms of the grandiose style of the architectural environment. Hitler's obsession with creating monumental places of celebration for National Socialism was not, however, merely the product of a frustrated architectural vocation. The following extract from *Mein Kampf* shows his understanding of the emotional mechanisms of mass parades. Describing a socialist rally in front of the Royal Palace in Berlin just after the end of the First World War, he writes:

A sea of red flags, red scarves, and red flowers gave to this demonstration, in which an estimated 120,000 took part, an aspect that

was gigantic from the purely external point of view. I myself could feel and understand how easily the man of the people succumbs to the suggestive magic of a spectacle so grandiose in effect.²²

The Reichsparty-day was certainly the great show-piece of the National Socialist *Jahreslauf*, both during the *Kampfzeit* and during the peacetime years of the Third Reich. But its 'function' should not be reduced to what Burden for instance calls, 'a display (of) power with pomp and circumstance'.²³ Once again we need only turn to Hitler's explanation of the 'community of the mass rally' to understand what the NSDAP was attempting to achieve by this annual spectacular in Nuremberg:

The 'community' of the mass rally strengthens not only the individual, but binds together all, and helps create party spirit. . . . When a participant enters a mass gathering for the first time and suddenly has tens of thousands of men with the same views around him; when he, as one who is 'seeking' is swept along with the mighty effect of a suggestive ecstasy of three or four thousand others; when the visible success and agreement of thousands confirms the correctness of a teaching . . . then he himself lies under the magical influence of mass suggestion . . . The man who had entered such a gathering doubtful and hesitant, leaves it strengthened inside himself; he has become a member of the 'new community'.²⁴

Therefore the monumental celebration places of National Socialism did not only lend expression to a desire for bombastic representation. They performed, more importantly, a vital role in providing a carefully planned framework within which the feeling of 'community' could be created, and hence the mechanisms of mass suggestion could operate. The Zeppelinfeld in Nuremberg for instance could hold almost a quarter of a million people. At one end towered a massive construction of terraces some 400 metres long topped by a white stone column. This centrepiece was flanked by two further stone pillars on which 'eternal flames' burnt. On these three rampart platforms rose a forest of flags and swastika banners which served as a spectacular backdrop to the speaker on the *Haupttribüne*.²⁵

On the field below the masses were gathered in detachments or columns, themselves as much an architectural feature of the proceedings as the towering stone framework which enclosed them. Precisely because hundreds of thousands were gathered together on such occasions (and Hitler produced ever more fantastic plans for enlarging the 'community' of the rally) a framework of massive proportions was necessary to contain them. Thus on the one hand great masses of party members and spectators could be *isolated* from the outside world within a specifically National Socialist environment full of the sensory impressions of the Nazi *lebenswelt*. On the other

hand, the architectural surroundings were designed to concentrate the participants' attention upon the centrepiece of the Führer-stand. On this massive column, placed slightly in front of the main platform, Hitler stood alone, high above the masses like a high priest on a temple wall. His 'message', the word of the movement, was delivered to his followers from this vantage point and heard throughout the arena, thanks to a carefully prepared system of loudspeakers which were placed around the parade ground. Thus the masses were spatially subjected to Hitler's person, the symbolism of his absolute power, and to its ideological prerequisite, the Führer-principle.

It has often been noted that the visual and acoustic effects of the rallies were designed to call forth 'religious' emotions in the minds of both participants and spectators. Henderson, the British Ambassador, described Speer's so-called Cathedral of Light at Nuremberg as 'sacred and beautiful at the same time', whilst François-Poncet, the French Ambassador, spoke of a 'mystical ecstasy, a sort of holy illusion' which overcame the spectators.²⁶ Goebbels himself frequently talked of the need to emulate the mysticism of the Roman Catholic church at the party rallies. Indeed, if we separate the mechanics of the celebrations (the sensory effects which were designed to stimulate the participants' emotions) from the question of ideological presentation (the mythos of the Holy-History and its symbol-world) we can see that there is a common denominator, namely the plagiarization and exploitation of traditional Christian imagery and its means of ritual consecration. Even a brief look at the methods which the NSDAP used to 'consecrate' its symbols shows how the party ransacked the various religious traditions of the German churches, and reproduced their ritual forms in the political celebrations.

Just as the Bloodflag and much of Hitler's apparent 'charisma' were derived from analogy with the Christian concepts of the cross and the messiah, so the 'holy' symbols of the NSDAP were made significant by a technique which borrowed the means of consecration from existing ritual, and then projected this onto new objects and acts. In practice, this meant that the NSDAP uprooted the sanctifying mechanisms of the church and replaced its holy objects with those of National Socialism. In the speeches of the party leaders the suggestion that the flag is a 'sanctuary', the blood of the fallen is 'holy' and the Reich is 'eternal' are constantly repeated. Schumann spoke of the 'reich of the Holy Ghost' and said of Hitler that 'we need him like bread and wine'.²⁷ Even the relationship between the priest and his congregation, as well as the analogy of Hitler as Christ, is mirrored in the roles of the Caller and the Chorus in Herybert Menzel's eulogy for the Day of National Work. Thus:

Caller: One for all comrades. Who brought us this salvation?
Chorus: Adolf Hitler the Führer!

Caller: One for all comrades. Who has brought us honour again?

Chorus: Adolf Hitler the Führer!

Caller: There is one who helps us. Who do we believe when he calls?

Chorus: Adolf Hitler the Führer!²⁸

We have seen then how the various objects which the NSDAP elevated to the status of 'holy' or 'sacred' symbols essentially derived their significance from the plagiarization of Christian myth. Second, that a substantial part of National Socialism's style of ideological presentation - its political celebrations - was unoriginal and heavily reliant upon analogy with pre-existing forms of ritual. And finally that the various political festivals, and in particular Reichsparty-day, were consciously planned and organized in order to project and reinforce, through the mechanisms of mass suggestion and association, the National Socialist mythos and its symbol-world. Yet the so-called Holy-History of the National Socialist movement can hardly be regarded as 'myth' in the sense that it constitutes an 'explanation' or 'revelation' of the world.²⁹ So are the various Nazi symbols merely relevant to the circuitous logic of the 'manifestation' of the 9 November, or do they relate to the wider aspects of the Nazi *weltanschauung*, and thereby to an 'explanation' of National Socialism's political task? And if so, why did the NSDAP place such reliance upon this particular form of ritual presentation?

In order to answer these questions it is worthwhile setting out diagrammatically the relationship between symbol, ritual and the Holy-History which has already been discussed. This can be represented schematically as follows:

Holy-History: mythos.

1923 The shedding of the sacrificial blood - the prerequisite for eventual victory.

1933 The founding of the Third Reich - the 'manifestation' of its historical inevitability.

Symbol-world:

(representation of
Volksgemeinschaft)

Method of ritual presentation.
imagery of:

Bloodflag/swastika

Sun and light/fire and blood.

Führer/Hitler

Messianic ethos of Christ.

The *Volk*

Blood and earth.

Martyrs of the Movement

Salvation through blood-sacrifice.
The foundation of 'eternal reich'.

In essence the diagram reveals the structural similarities of the Holy-History to the premises of the Christian apocalypse. The shedding of the blood of the sixteen martyrs in 1923 is analogous to

the sacrificial death of Christ. But quite clearly Hitler is represented as the Christ of the Second Coming – the all-powerful saviour and final arbitrator, surrounded in the imagery of glory and light. The *Volk* are the chosen ones who will experience the millennium of the Thousand Year Reich.³⁰ But as with any eschatological phantasy the world must be divided into binary oppositions – ‘good and evil’ – and we have not yet identified an antithesis of the German *Volksgemeinschaft* within the symbol world of the Holy-History.

It is not by chance that the word *Feind* (enemy or evil one) consistently found its way into the propaganda outpourings of the NSDAP. In fact one finds the notion of the *Feind* used as shorthand, even within the party administrative apparatus, for the concept of the Marxist-Jew. Here, set out in ‘scientific’ precision is the apocalyptic antithesis of the *Volk*-community:

Judentum (the Jew-world) – disseminator of liberalism and the heart-wood of Freemasonry, but nevertheless, or rather because of this, also the carrier of Marxism and Communism . . . (it) seeks connections with the Reactionaries, Jewish-liberalism, Jewish-Freemasonry, Jewish-capitalist and Jewish-Marxist groups throughout the world, in order to spin a net around every nation, woven out of propaganda, high-finance and terror, conspiracy, betrayal and criminality.³¹

In general though, the image of the Marxist-Jew was not presented through the medium of political ritual, but rather through the medium of printed propaganda and film. Indeed it is hard to imagine how negative symbols could be presented ritually within the context of political celebration. None the less it should be borne in mind that the speeches of the political leaders at the major rallies, and in particular those of Goebbels and Hitler, consistently included denunciations of the Jews and threats to take radical action against the ‘jewish conspiracy’.³² Equally, the various symbolic attributes which were projected onto this *Feind* – the notion of a universal satanic threat, the Jew as the soul-less sub-human, as a ‘wandering parasite’, or as the ‘carrier of materialism and artistic aridity’, can all be seen as counterparts of the symbol-world attributed to the German *Volksgemeinschaft*.

This absolute division of the world into antagonistic and mutually exclusive elements – the *Volksgemeinschaft* and *Judentum* – supported upon the premises of religious eschatological myth, suggests that there is a structural inter-relationship between the Nazi *weltanschauung* and its means of ritual presentation through analogy with traditional Christian myth and symbolism. For we have seen that the NSDAP relied not upon the explanatory qualities of revelatory or cosmological myth in order to underpin its symbol-world

and mythos, but rather upon the nebulous component of 'belief' when seeking legitimation and support for its *weltanschauung*. For the masses the exact form of the Nazi millennium remained tantalizingly vague and undefined. Salvation was certainly not to be achieved in the next world, as Christian myth promised, nor was the promise of this-worldly salvation over-elaborated by the Nazi regime once it had consolidated its political position after 1933. Increasingly the NSDAP demanded belief in its holy symbols *as such*, and the National Socialist 'soldier' was expected to fight and die for 'Flag, Führer and *Volk*' alone, as the German Fourteenth Army was to discover at Stalingrad.

The National Socialist ideal therefore demanded the qualities pertaining to 'religious' belief, and in particular the non-discriminate fanaticism common to those who believe that salvation is imminent in the coming apocalypse, without offering an authentic myth through which the 'mystery' is 'revealed'. Instead, by exploiting the relevant aspects of pre-existing Christian myth and symbolism, the NSDAP was able to represent and reinforce these 'qualities' through the mechanism of mass suggestion. The closed-in environment of the political ritual, free from contradictory images, and alive with the sensory *lebenswelt* of National Socialism provided an ideal context for the party leadership to stage-manage this psychological process of identification. It was essentially an attempt to mystify real social conflict, and to reduce political reality to a *weltanschauung* of 'meaningless' but none the less 'powerful' symbols of unity and cohesion.³³ This symbolic reductionism had important consequences with regard to the NSDAP's task of destroying its political adversaries through the means of state organized terror. And, second, it legitimated National Socialist rule through the maintenance of a broad level of popular support or acquiescence, particularly among the middle sectors of German society which had provided Nazism's political base prior to 1933.

The increasing reduction of social reality to the absolute categories of eschatological myth created an atmosphere simultaneously of imminent social crisis and heightened political expectancy - factors which naturally fed upon one another. During the *Kampfzeit* the NSDAP had identified the twin threats to the German *Mittelstand* - economic extinction through the increasing concentration of capital or 'proletarianization' through socialism - as the machinations of one and the same agent, i.e., the Marxist-Jew. Thus National Socialism promised an immediately 'achievable' Utopia which was free from the abuses of class struggle and 'crisis' or 'parasitic' capitalism, and at the same time warned against the catastrophic consequences of defeat by the forces of *Judentum*. The increasing reduction of social reality to the workings of two mutually antagonistic and competing *weltanschauungen* therefore provided ample justification for drastic

physical repression of the *Feind*, since this was an essential precondition for the achievement of the promised Utopia. At the same time an increasing flight into social reductionism based upon the reification of symbols of unity and harmony allowed the form of this utopia to remain sufficiently vague and undefined as to allow for the widest possible degree of social consensus. For a regime whose original support was based upon its promise to create a state free from the abuses of monopoly capital, high-finance and the encroachment of 'modernity', but whose historical role was to oversee an economic revolution in Germany through the rationalization which accompanied re-armament, the degree of flexibility and elasticity afforded by an ideological style which reduced socio-political conflicts and contradictions to the symbols of national cohesion was paramount.

The logic of our analysis of the relationship between ritual and the Nazi *weltanschauung* therefore suggests that political celebration constituted a fundamental means of both ideological presentation and of political legitimation for National Socialism. It cannot be considered merely as a peripheral phenomenon, as 'irrational' Führer worship, but must be examined within the wider context of German fascism's historical role. Clearly in this article it is only possible to sketch in some of the possible inter-relationships, in a manner which is necessarily schematic. However, if the element of political calculation seems to figure rather large, we can look by way of conclusion to the experience of the *Thingspiel* movement to support our overall hypothesis.

The so-called *Thingspiel* celebrations were theatrical events modelled on earlier lay productions and written in great numbers by National Socialist authors after 1933. Again the aspect of monumentality plays a major role. The Dietrich Eckart stage in Berlin held 20,000 spectators, and the event by which it was consecrated, 'The Frankenburger Würfelspiel', had some 1,200 participants. The architectural model for the *Thingspiel* was the circular Greek cult theatre, but the stage area was almost always divided into three levels, corresponding to the three stages of the Passion plays of the Middle Ages. These three levels denoted three levels of meaning. The lowest level, the arena, was the entrance field of the common people - the spectators. On the second level stood the worldly powers and sovereigns. On the highest level ruled the 'law': 'The highest level . . . is embodied in seven judges, the power of true might, the voice of the people, and the expression of that which we Germans conceive of as the Führer.'³⁴ The common people constituted the community of the celebration acclaiming the Führer. Their integration into the events was attempted by having the cast stream through the ranks of the spectators towards the stage, just as occurred at Nuremberg.

Goebbels went to great lengths to mould the *Thingspiel* movement

to the direct needs of the party, and founded in 1933 a separate organization to oversee its development, the *Reichsbund der deutschen Freilicht- und Volksschauspiele*. The Labour Service began to build the first of a planned 600 circular theatres; but it was the ideological content rather than the architectural form which was critical. The party-controlled media made great efforts to eulogize the 'holy' nature of the *Thingspiel*. A special meeting of forty writers was called, who were urged by Goebbels to create 'feeling and belief', the 'soul of the movement' and 'mythical effect' in their work.³⁵ But the results were disappointing. Only a few works were suitable, for most of the proposed productions were short of plot and needed a choir to relate the story. It gradually became apparent, even to the party leadership, that tedious theatrical productions were an unsuitable medium for expressing the themes of the Nazi *weltanschauung*. In 1937 Goebbels was forced to admit defeat: the plays and the building of the theatres were quietly dropped from the level of Reichspriority.

It was precisely because the *Thingspiel* movement attempted to intellectualize, or at least lend 'explanation' to the various aspects of Nazi ideology that it failed. The plays were unable to convince through the medium of conventional theatre. 'Feeling and belief', the cornerstones of the Nazi *weltanschauung*, could not be expressed through dramatic interpretation without becoming laughable; they resisted 'logical' explication. It seems, therefore, that the NSDAP's increasing flight into symbolic reductionism (itself a consequence of the need to mystify ideologically those socio-economic contradictions which could not be overcome politically) forced an increasing reliance upon forms of ideological presentation which persuaded by means of 'association' rather than 'explanation'. The various tenets of Christian myth, and in particular its eschatological aspects, provided a 'model' which was both ideologically suitable, and equally important, widely comprehensible. Political ritual, with its capacity to create the 'community' experience through cleverly organized sensory effects, was the means by which this 'conversion' or reinforcement took place. Removed from this particular environment, the whole ideological façade of Nazism comes dangerously close to collapse. 'Flag! Führer! Volk! Eternal Germany! Who can interpret their meaning?' asks the Nazi ideologue Ernst Berthold. It is:

The Absolute. We sense it, and therefore we believe in it, and trust in the work of our fellow believers . . .

Let us therefore take care that in the honouring of the flag, youth is overcome by a reverential thrill, through which the ultimate and deepest meaning of the flag is revealed. Only then are the forces which form the soul and character of our movement revealed, which inspire the inner and outer behaviour which

corresponds to the Being of the Eternal Germany, which we all serve as followers of the Führer. . . . for the deepest meaning of the flag is not to be understood from the deliberate interpretation or rephrasing in one's own words, but from *erhalten* (to sense or divine meaning) which is the very deepest understanding.³⁶

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NOTES

1. Burden, H. T., *The Nuremberg Rallies 1923-1939*, London, 1967.
2. See Vondung, Klaus, *Magie und Manipulation: ideologischer Kult und politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus*, Göttingen, 1971. Gamm, Hans-Jochen, *Der Braune Kult*, Hamburg, 1962.
3. Burden, op. cit., p. 91.
4. See *Völkischer Beobachter*, 13 March 1933.
5. Vondung, op. cit., p. 79.
6. One of Hitler's first acts on attaining the Chancellorship was to order the construction of a massive stone Temple of Honour in Munich's Königsplatz. Its construction lasted over two years, and the Celebration of 9 November 1935 was the event by which it was consecrated. See Brandt, A. I., *Meilensteine des Dritten Reiches*, Munich, 1938.
7. *Völkischer Beobachter*, 10 November 1935.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Brandt, op. cit., p. 119.
11. The concept of the *Volk* had a particularly profound significance for National Socialism, meaning not only a 'people', but also a racial entity. It was believed that a transcendental essence united the members of the *Volk*. This essence may be variously defined as 'nature' or 'mythos', but it was always linked to the creativity of a group which had its source in the same cultural or racial heritage.
12. Böhme, Herybert, *Gesänge unter der Fahne*, Munich, 1935, p. 49.
13. Baumann, Hans, 'Wir zünden das Feuer', in *Deutsche Reihe* nr. 39, Jena, 1936.
14. There are many leaflets which were circulated by the NSDAP and its secondary organizations which attempt to explain the 'mystical origins' of the swastika in German pre-history. In particular Rausch, Friedrich, *Das Hakenkreuz, sein Sinn und sein Bedeutung*, Munich, 1933, who equated the swastika with ancient German sun-worship, and suggested that it possessed magical powers against the forces of darkness.
15. It is however worthy of note that during the early years of the NSDAP's *Kampfzeit*, when the notion of *völkisch* radicalism was still an integral part of the National Socialist *weltanschauung*, the red backcloth was portrayed as the colour of socialism.
16. Möller, Eberhard Wolfgang, 'Die Verpflichtung', *Volksspieldienst* nr. 5, Berlin, 1935, pp. 15ff.
17. See Gamm, op. cit., p. 72.
18. Böhme, Herybert, *Das deutsche Gebet*, Munich, 1936, p. 14.
19. Brandt, op. cit., p. 118.
20. Vondung, op. cit., p. 164.
21. Böhme, *Gesänge unter der Fahne*, p. 44.
22. Hitler, Adolf, *Mein Kampf*, Munich, 1925, p. 492.
23. Burden, op. cit., p. 57.
24. Schmeer, Karlheinz, *Die Regie des öffentlichen Lebens im Dritten Reich*, Munich, 1956, pp. 10ff.
25. See for instance, *Nürnberg 1935*, Berlin, 1935, and *Parteitag der Arbeit*, Berlin, 1937, for details of the Reichsparty-day celebrations.
26. Vondung, op. cit., p. 105.
27. Schumann, Gerhard, *Gedichte und Kantaten*, Munich, 1940, pp. 44 and 50.

28. See *Vorschläge der Reichspropagandaleitung zur Nationalsozialistischen Feiargestaltung 1/205 March 1936*.

29. Vondung for instance (op. cit., pp. 162ff.) refers to National Socialist myth as 'ideological myth', since the 'borrowed symbols are taken from the context of their experience. . . . it is the symbolic expression of speculative entities which have no real status'.

Even so there is a sense in which the SS's decision to carry out the Final Solution of the Jewish question could be considered as a 'revelation' of the meaning of the Holy-History.

30. It must however be stressed that the various Nazi symbols are themselves plagiarized from various cultural traditions, although the basic structure appropriates to Christian eschatological myth.

31. From the Foreward to *Bolschewismus und Judentum*, Berlin, 1934, published under the auspices of the Institute for Research into the Jewish Question.

32. Huge banners with mottoes such as 'The Jew is our Downfall!' were

hung along the walls and the fronts of the balconies of the halls in Nuremberg where the NSDAP leaders spoke to the assembled party members during the Reichsparty celebrations.

33. Interestingly Rabinbach in his examination of the role of the National Socialist Bureau for the Beauty of Labour, notes how the NSDAP's policies with regard to aesthetizing the place of production enabled 'social realities to be eliminated by social reductionism'. See Rabinbach, Anson, 'The Aesthetics of Production in the Third Reich', *Journal of Contemporary History*, II, 1976, p. 63.

34. Junghans, Ferdinand, 'Die theatre geschichtliche Stellung des "Frankenburger Würfelspiels"' in Möller, *Das Frankfurter Würfelspiel*, 2 Aufl. Berlin, 1936, p. 62.

35. See Trunz, Erich, 'Tatsachendichtung und Weihedichtung', in *Zeitschrift für Deutsche Bildung*, 11, 1935, p. 549.

36. Berthold, Ernst, *Heiliges Brauchtum um die Fahne des Reiches*, Leipzig, 1936, p. 24.