

TO A MILLENIAL KINGDOM:
THE NAZI ARYANIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY

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Honors Thesis: Department of History
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Defense Date: April 5th, 2018

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One of the most defining characteristics of the Nazi regime was a virulent antisemitism, which manifested itself in the ideology and actions of the Nazi leaders and party. For instance, in his work *Mein Kampf (My Struggle)*, Hitler demonstrated virulent antisemitism by portraying the Jew as a parasitic being that corrupts others. As parasites, Hitler believed that Jews are “people without any true culture, especially their own.”¹ This disdain for the Jews manifested itself in many hateful laws and acts, one of the most important being the strategy of *Arisierung* (Aryanization), which began in 1933. The process of Aryanization, according to Roderick Stackelberg and Sally A. Winkle, largely refers to the process of confiscating and selling off of Jewish property.² However, Aryanization also encompassed the process of the removal of everything that was Jewish or perceived to have Jewish influence from Germany. Besides the confiscation of Jewish property, the process of Aryanization included, but was not limited to: the destruction of Jewish books in book burnings, the exclusion of Jews from participating in national sports teams, and the removal of Jews from the civil service and professions, the ban on Jews performing German music, and many other laws that seeped into every aspect of German society and culture during the Third Reich. These steps were all part of a process intended to make Germany into a pure “Aryan” society.

This disdain for and attempt to destroy everything that was Jewish in Nazi Germany was a step in the Nazi’s plan to create a thousand-year Reich. The very notion of a government lasting 1000 years, and it was not an accident that the Nazi Party chose 1000 as its number,

¹ Adolf Hitler. *Mein Kampf*. (München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1938), 331.

As a note, all German-language source quotations are my own translations, unless otherwise noted.

² Roderick Stackelberg and Sally A. Winkle. *The Nazi Germany Sourcebook: An Anthology of Texts*. Taylor and Francis, 2002. Accessed February 25, 2018.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucb/detail.action?docID=170682>. 192.

stemmed from the fact the Nazi movement was a millennial, or a millenarian, movement. A millennial movement, according to scholar James M. Rhodes, is defined by and relates to all expectations of a miraculous reign of the good for a thousand years.³ The millennial idea derives from the Book of Revelations 20, when Jesus casts the devil into hell for a thousand years and rules with his chosen people on earth. To Rhodes, all millennial movements have six characteristics: they all developed a notion that they had been hit by a catastrophe and developed disaster syndromes, or an experience of confusion and a strong fear of annihilation; they experienced sudden revelations that explained and promised salvation from their hardships; they have a prevailing notion that their difficulties had been caused by great evils that had surrounded them; they thought they were “chosen” to fight and defeat these evil forces; they believed that the eschatological hours for the destruction of the demons was at hand; and they would ultimately bring in a new paradise after the defeat of the great evil.

The leaders of the Nazi Party exhibited all of these signs of a millennial movement. In the early days of the Weimar Republic, the early Nazis appeared to be devastated by the loss of World War I, which stemmed from the *Dolchstoß* (stab). The term refers to the notion that an internal betrayal, or a “stab in the back” was what led to the German loss in World War I. After the war, the Nazis believed that the traitors who stabbed the Germans in the back were the ones who consented to the Treaty of Versailles and installed the Weimar Republic.⁴ Hitler constantly warned his countrymen in the early 1920s that doom was approaching, claiming that the Treaty of Versailles was like a death sentence for the German people. Nazi leaders Hitler and Joseph Goebbels also proclaimed that sudden realizations had fueled them and the Nazi movement.

³James M. Rhodes. *The Hitler Movement: A Modern Millenarian Revolution*. (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1980), 15.

⁴ Rhodes. *The Hitler Movement*. 90.

Hitler contended that the Nazi Party was a movement born out of sudden realizations of the current environment, one that catastrophe and great evils were threatening. In his novel autobiographical *Michael: Ein deutsches Schicksal auf Tagebuchblättern* (*Michael: A German Destiny in Diary Form*), a book to which I will return, Goebbels proclaimed through his character Michael that realizations fell upon him “like the man from Jericho to Jerusalem.”⁵ This quote refers to the Parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke, where a good Samaritan comes across and helps a man who has been beaten and left for dead by robbers on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem. In this proclamation, Goebbels is saying through his character Michael, revelations came upon him in the same manner that the robbers came upon the man they beat and left for dead, which is suddenly and unexpectedly.

The evil forces that had caused the Germans’ problems were the Jews and their creations, as Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and his speeches demonstrate. In a speech at Munich in 1922, Hitler proclaimed that “the Jew is the ferment of decomposition in peoples, ... [meaning] that the Jew destroys and must destroy because he lacks the conception of an activity which builds up the life of the community.”⁶ Nazi leaders believed that the Jews wanted to wipe out the German population, and so the Nazis had to do battle with the Jews. But it wasn’t Jews alone that had to be destroyed. It was also their perceived creations, which included but was not limited to Marxism and the international stock-exchange capitalist system. In the end, Hitler believed that the history of Germany after 1914 was a battle to the death between the Germans and the Jews.

⁵ Joseph Goebbels. *Michael: Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebüchblättern*. (München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1929), 23. Accessed February 12, 2018. <https://archive.org/details/Goebbels-Joseph-Michael-Ein-deutsches-Schicksal-in-Tagebuchblaettern>.

⁶ Adolf Hitler. *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler: April 1922 - August 1939*. Edited, Compiled, and Translated by Norman H. Baynes. Vol. 1. (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 1942), 17.

The Nazis believed that the destruction of the Jews and their creations would lead to the creation of a thousand-year Reich.

Regarding the topic of the millennial aspects of Nazism, James M. Rhodes' 1980 book *The Hitler Movement: A Modern Millenarian Revolution*, is a building block for scholars on the topic of Nazi Millennialism. He argues that strong millennial attitudes existed within a significantly large portion of the Nazi Party, and that *these* attitudes, not sociological or psychological problems, drove Nazi actions. In his work, he draws upon Norman Cohn's study of medieval millennialists in his 1957 book *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. Rhodes' argument is based upon drawing parallels between the attitudes of John of Patmos, who was the author of the Book of Revelations, medieval millennialists, and the Nazis, showing that the three demonstrated similar millennialist aspects.

Within his work, Rhodes provides a clear definition of what a millennial movement is, and he convincingly shows how the Nazi movement fit into this definition of a millennial movement. He outlines the six traits of a millennial movement and goes through each one in how it relates to the Nazi movement. In these separate analyses, he draws upon speeches and works of Nazi leaders such as Hitler's *Mein Kampf* fits into a millennial context. Rhodes clearly shows how the Nazi leaders believed that they were fighting for the realization of a millennial kingdom.

In his 2005 essay "Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Nazism as a Millennialist Movement," Robert Ellwood claims that the Nazi movement both was and was not a millennialist enterprise. He takes the position that while the Nazis did attempt to bring about a paradisaal society, their belief in any supernatural factor in bringing this about society was limited, if not nonexistent. Ellwood attributes this lack of supernatural belief to his claim of how the Nazis' belief of their ability to bring about a millennial society was "in their blood rather than

in the sky.”⁷ The Nazi leadership believed in its ability to bring about a millennial paradise through worldly political and military processes, rather than by supernatural means. Furthermore, Ellwood provides a few criticisms of Rhodes’ work in a footnote, claiming that Rhodes relies on too few medieval and biblical millennial movements for comparison with the Nazis.

With his work, Ellwood helps to bring a more “realist” (perhaps change) viewpoint to the topic of Nazism and millennialism. The chapter demonstrates how the Nazis believed that *their* actions, not divine ones, would bring about a millennial paradise. Since Ellwood argues that the Nazis believed in the power of earthly actions to achieve their goal, his chapter lends itself to search for Nazi policies and actions that can fit into the context of a larger “eschatological battle” against the Nazis’ great enemy and evil, the Jews. Specifically, “Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence” fits in with the idea that the Nazi policy of Aryanization was formed to try and achieve a millennial paradise.

In researching the secondary literature of the Nazi movement as a millennial movement, I have come across the question of how did Nazi attitudes towards religion morph into the Nazi millennial movement. Since Christianity dominated Germany since medieval times, I turned to looking at the secondary literature on the relationship between Nazism and Christianity.

Regarding the topic of Nazism and Christianity, scholars such as Richard Steigmann-Gall have produced a vast number of works, ranging from topics of the Nazi leaders’ perceptions of Christianity to religious movements in the Third Reich that attempted to marry the ideas of Nazism and Christianity. *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945*, which

⁷ Robert Ellwood. "Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Nazism as a Millennialist Movement." In *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases*, edited by Catherine Wessinger, 243. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005.

Steigmann-Gall wrote in 2005, claims that a wide section of the Nazi Party believed themselves and their movement to be Christian. He claims that for many of the leaders of the Nazi Party, their movement was “a radicalized and singularly horrific attempt to preserve God *against* a secularized society.”⁸ To Steigmann-Gall, the Nazis thought of themselves as Christians.

Steigmann-Gall’s work helps to demonstrate the beliefs of Nazi leaders in the Third Reich. He illustrates how the Nazi leaders, such as Hitler and Goebbels, always held a close relationship to and viewed the Nazi movement as Protestant. He demonstrates that these Nazi leaders continuously proclaimed their movement to be Christian since the 1920s, and that the attempt to form a Protestant Reich Church showed a favoritism of Nazi leaders for Protestantism over Catholicism. In this relationship between Nazism and Protestantism, Steigmann-Gall argues that while there were Catholics that followed the Nazi movement, a few nominally Catholic Nazis, such as Dietrich Eckart, tended to favor Protestant ideas over Catholic ones, and Steigmann-Gall shows that the Nazi dogma cast Protestantism as a natural expression of German nationhood.⁹

Doris L. Bergen’s 1996 work, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* is largely concerned with the *Deutsche Christen* (German Christians), or *DC* for short, and their position in the Third Reich. Bergen says that the Nazi leadership viewed National Socialism and Christianity as “un-mergable,” but that groups like the *DC* believed that a merger of the two ideologies was, and should be pursued. However, Bergen contends that the members of the *DC* were still religiously-focused people. Above all, Bergen claims, the *DC* were

⁸ Richard Steigmann-Gall. *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945*. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 12.

⁹ Steigmann-Gall. *The Holy Reich*. 7.

“church people with their own agenda for transforming Christianity.”¹⁰ This agenda, she argues, entailed building a Church for “true Germans,” infused with the ideas of National Socialism as a spiritual homeland for the Third Reich.

Bergen’s work gives a large amount of useful information on the *DC* movement, and *Twisted Cross* also helps to illustrate how the Nazi Party did not view the *DC* as a useful tool after 1933. *Twisted Cross* follows the movement from its beginnings in the late 1920s to its end in the late 1940s, all while narrating the developments in the movement that occurred along the way. Bergen shows that the *DC* was a religious group that saw a lot of success in achieving popular and Nazi support in the early days of the Third Reich, but that the movement was also troubled by internal division and opposition, such as from the *Bekennede Kirche* (The Confessing Church). Regarding how the Nazis viewed the *DC*, Bergen shows that the Nazi Party openly supported the *DC* during the first year of Nazi rule, but that an official Nazi policy of neutrality after 1933 ended this short relationship between the two groups. She demonstrates that the *DC* openly adhered to the ideas of National Socialism, but they were unable to garner the support of the National Socialistic ruling party after 1933.

Another scholar who has made important contributions to the topic of the relationship between Nazism and Christianity is Ernst Christian Helmrich. In his 1979 book *The German Churches Under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue*, Helmrich chronicles the history of the church before, during, and after Nazi rule to try and get a better understanding of why the churches were the only institutions that did not succumb to the Nazi policy of *Gleichschaltung*

¹⁰ Doris L. Bergen. *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.) Accessed December 15, 2017. [7](http://web.a.ebscohost.com/colorado.idm.oclc.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=2&sid=3b2ec2fd-424e-42ac-a8f6-17454359ddb4%40sessionmgr4007&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZS5yY29wZT1zaXRi#AN=1588&db=nlebk., 4.</p>
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(coordination). Helmrich notes that the church resistance to Nazi rule and practices regarding Christianity was slow to manifest itself and was somewhat lukewarm. However, according to Helmrich, while the German churches' resistance "to Nazi practices is open to the charge of being belated and to some extent half-hearted, ... there were those who suffered for it, and the impact of their resistance has been felt far beyond Germany."¹¹ Even though church resistance to Nazi policies was not the strongest, Helmrich says, the ramifications of the resistance has extended far beyond the Third Reich, as for instance, the names of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Niemoeller, Cremens August Grast von Galen, and Michael von Faulhaber, all leaders of resistance to Nazi policies, are now known internationally.

Helmrich's book provides a vast depth of information on the relation between Christianity and the Nazi Party, such as with the early resistance groups to Nazi rule. He shows that these groups, like the *Pfarrernotbund* (Pastors' Emergency League), impeded the hegemonic aspirations of the *DC* to unite the German Protestant churches under the *DC*'s ideology in a larger *Deutsche Evangelische Kirche* (German Evangelical Church), or *DEK* for short. In addition to this point, his information on the religious history of Germany prior to the Third Reich shows that what the *DC* and the Nazis attempted with the policy of *Gleichschaltung* (coordination), or attempt to unite the German Protestant churches was not unprecedented. In his book, Helmrich illustrates previous attempts, such as with the creation of the *Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchenbund* (German Evangelical Church Confederation) in 1922, to bond the disassociated Protestant churches of Germany with each other.

¹¹ Ernst Christian Helmrich. *The German Churches under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue*. (Detroit, MI: Wayne University Press, 1979), 469.

I then wanted to investigate how Christian holidays transformed under Nazism. One of the few works that gives an apt examination of the state of Christmas in Nazi Germany is Joe Perry's chapter "Christmas in the Third Reich" from his 2010 book *Christmas in Germany: A Cultural History*. In *Christmas in Germany*, Perry argues that the Nazis attempted to "de-Christianize" Christmas to bring the holiday in conformity with the Nazi state's ideological and racial agendas.¹² To support his claim, Perry provides a wealth of information on Nazi policy towards Christmas, citing the resurrection of Yuletide festivals, the replacement of the birth of Christ with the birth of a stereotypical "Aryan" child, and the attempt to place the meaning of Christmas within the theme of "rebirth." As a whole, Perry's chapter provides an extensive look on Nazi attitudes towards the practice of Christmas.

What the scholars of the topic of Nazism and millennialism, as well as those of the topic of Nazism and Christianity avoid is the role of religion in the Nazis' attempt to create a millennial empire. Those who focus on the millennial aspects of the Nazi movement, such as Rhodes, concentrate on the Nazis' attempt to bring about a millennial paradise in a broad sense. These scholars do not delve into religion, except when comparing older millennial movements and examining the Nazis' antisemitism. The others who focus on the relationship between Nazism and Christianity, such as Richard Steigmann-Gall, concentrate on the issue of whether the Nazis considered themselves and could be considered as Christians.

Bringing millennialism in conversation with Nazism's views on religion, I will argue that an Aryanization of Christianity took place that emerged into a distinct Nazi theology, which emphasized the implementation of "Germanic customs" in place of the perceived Jewish aspects

¹² Joe Perry. "Christmas in the Third Reich." *In Christmas in Germany: A Cultural History*, 189. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

into religion and religious holidays, most notably in Christmas, as part of a larger millennial attempt to create their ideal thousand-year empire. In examining how the Nazis did so, this paper will begin with an analysis of the relationship between the *DC* religious movement and the Nazis in the first years of the Third Reich. I argue that the Nazis initially saw the movement as a way to spread their ideas among the German population, but as the *DC* struggled to gain hegemony over the Protestant churches, the Nazis distanced themselves from the *DC*. After their break, the Nazi Party realized that a better strategy would be to include Christianity itself into that which needed to be Aryanized. The party utilized other tools, like film, to propagate their ideas of Germanic rituals being incorporated into Christian holidays like Christmas, which is the focus of the next section. Finally, the paper examines how the Nazis portrayed Christmas through World War II. Largely, Nazi theology continued to emphasize “Germanic” themes in their idealized celebration of Christmas, but the party also began to emphasize a support for the ongoing war effort, the battle echoing Armageddon from the Book of Revelations. In this support of the war effort, the Nazis alluded to a “joyful peace,” or the imminent manifestation of their millennial paradise.

The State of Religion in Germany

Until the end of the Weimar Republic (1918-1933), the protestant churches of Germany were very divided not solely in terms of ideology, but also in coordination with another. With respect to this latter form of division, the churches were only connected through the state and the *Kirchentage* (Church Days), which were meetings between Protestant church organizations.

The state connected the churches through the local princes, dukes, and counts of Germany, who acted as *summi episcopi*, or the bishops of the Protestant churches. This title

meant that these heads of state acted as the heads of the Protestant church administrations. The *summi episcopi* took power over the local churches in the decades after the Reformation, as the territorial bishops of Germany lost their power as heads of the Church.

The *Kirchentage* were meetings of church organizations that began in the mid-19th century and continued through the Weimar Era. These meetings were initially consultative, but they eventually began to deal with policy issues, including the matter of mixed religion marriages in 1853 and the introduction of Lenten services, or church services that are exclusive to the Lenten period, in 1855.¹³ From the mid-19th century, a general sentiment gradually grew to unite the churches, such as with the formation of the United Churches in the early 19th century. The efforts failed, and over the 19th and 20th centuries, the church and the state gradually separated from one another. In the *Kulturkampf* (Culture Battle) of the late 19th century, the national government attempted to homogenize German populace along Protestant lines. This homogenization entailed legislative acts that removed normally state-associated matters from the hands of the Church, such as the removal of duties traditionally associated with the Church, including the recording of births, deaths, and marriages. The Weimar Republic almost completely severed any connection between the church and state, as the Republic's constitution declared that there shall be no state church, thus removing the princes' roles as local heads of the church. Nonetheless, connections between the state and church still existed, such as with religious education in state-run schools. In the case of elementary schools, common, denominational, and secular schools had equal legal status.¹⁴

¹³ Helmrich. *The German Churches under Hitler*. 35.

¹⁴ Frank J. Gordon. *The Evangelical Churches and the Weimar Republic, 1918-1933*. 2nd ed. (Greeley, CO: Westview Printing and Graphics, 2016), 140.

During the Weimar Republic, the German *Kirchentag* of 1919 took a step toward the unification of the churches with the creation of the German Evangelical Church Confederation. Although this association was not a unified church per se, the confederation did bring a stronger fellowship among the German Protestant churches. According to the confederation's constitution, the league was supposed to protect the interests of the German Protestant churches, to cultivate a German Protestant mindset in the world, and to support the religious-ethical view of life supported by the German Protestant churches of the Reformation.

Along with an increase in the idea of unifying the German Protestant churches of the Weimar Republic, *völkisch* (folkish) modes of thought began to manifest themselves, leading to a rise in thought of sacrifice for a greater good. In the Weimar Republic, according to scholar James M. Rhodes, the general *völkisch* mode of thought emphasized the will to place the common good before the private interest, and that when the German people all embraces this mode of thought, they would come into a divine ground of being. The Nazi Party, or NSDAP (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*), turned this *völkisch* mindset into a political party, advocating for the German, Aryan citizenry to place the common good before the private interest.

Since religious thought, notably in relation to the creation of a unified Church, was a growing issue during the Weimar Republic, Nazi ideology had to formulate a stance towards the issue of religion. During the Weimar Republic, the Nazi Party officially took an open stance towards Christianity. Hitler portrayed himself and the Nazi movement as Christian. At a 1928 speech in Passau, Hitler proclaimed that the Nazi movement was wholly Christian, and that the

Nazis would not tolerate anyone who attacked the ideas of Christianity.¹⁵ The 24th point of the 1920 Nazi Party's *25-Punkte-Programm* (25-Point Program) states the NSDAP's support of a "positive Christianity," most likely meaning a Christianity that conformed with the ideas of the NSDAP. According to the Nazi Party's *25-Punkte-Programm*, the NSDAP supported the proliferation of the German citizen (whom it defined along blood lines) and the state, detested the Jew, and pushed for increased national governmental power. The Nazis' "positive Christianity" probably conformed to these points of the Nazi Program.

The Ideological Tenets of the *Deutsche Christen* and their Relation to the NSDAP

Alongside the development of the Nazi Party in the Weimar Republic, the *DC* religious movement, developed and integrated this *völkisch* thought into its beliefs. With the increasing popularity of *völkisch* thought in the post-World War I era, the *DC* placed great emphasis on a reverence of Martin Luther and Adolf Hitler, claiming that these two figures were German prophets. The *DC* renowned Luther as he was the father of the Protestant Reformation, and the movement venerated Hitler as he was the "father" of the National Socialist Movement in Germany. Other key features of the *DC* were an attempt to remove all "foreign" or Jewish influences from their practices, and the *DC* hoped to unify the German Protestant churches into one *Deutsche Evangelische Kirche* (German Evangelical Church), or a Protestant Reich Church under its ideological tenets.

In the late 1920s, Thuringian pastors Siegfried Leffler and Julius Leutheuser started the *DC*. The pair preached and advocated for the renewal of religion along *völkisch* and nationalist

¹⁵ Steigmann-Gall. *The Holy Reich*. 60.

lines. These pastors formed their religious movement among people who wanted an increased emphasis on German culture and ethnicity. The *DC* claimed that their theology represented all German Protestants, and so the movement had aspirations to homogenize the churches under *DC* theology. Members from the Nazi Party, like Wilhelm Kube, wanted to fuse the strength of the Protestant churches with the National Socialist cause and join the churches together in the overarching policy of *Gleichschaltung*. The NSDAP formulated the policy of *Gleichschaltung* to “coordinate” all aspects of society under Nazi rule, so that any non-Nazi organization (e.g. the Church) would not be able to influence the German populace. In relation to uniting the churches, the desires of the *DC* and the Nazi Party aligned.

Kube was the *Gauleiter* (leader of a NSDAP *gau*, or district) of Brandenburg from 1928 to 1936. To the end of extending Nazi support to the *DC*, Kube suggested that the *DC* would be separate from the Nazi Party but would exist to help revive the church based upon German and Christian values, similar to the goals of Leffler and Leutheuser. Hitler was worried about this plan, but nonetheless endorsed it, “based on the assurance that this group would not be an institutional branch of the NSDAP.”¹⁶ The Nazis kept the *DC* separate from the party, but the leadership endorsed the movement. Thus, by the Nazis’ seizure of power in 1933, the NSDAP leadership officially endorsed the *DC*.

Of all the religious groups in the Third Reich, the only group to receive a NSDAP endorsement was the *DC*. The viewpoints of Nazi leaders, specifically Joseph Goebbels and Alfred Rosenberg, partially align with the movement’s ideas, which demonstrates similarity between the theologies of the two groups. However, even with the Nazi endorsement of the *DC*,

¹⁶ Steigmann-Gall. *The Holy Reich*. 72.

the movement was unable to achieve its goal of unifying the German Protestant churches into one larger Protestant Reich Church. The *DC* encountered divisiveness within the movement and they faced a great amount of opposition. These two factors led to a diminishing amount of support from the Nazi Party through the Third Reich.

The aspects of the *DC* that most differentiated themselves from the theological foundations of most other Protestant churches were a reverence of both Martin Luther and Adolf Hitler as German prophets and a desire to implement *völkisch* and remove foreign and specifically Jewish traditions in an attempt to create a unified Protestant Reich Church.

The *DC* especially appreciated Luther's antisemitism, but the founder of German Protestantism was not always anti-Semitic. During the 1510s and 1520s, Luther took a relatively positive viewpoint of Jews, suggesting that Christians should deal gently with them, so that the Jews may accept Jesus, especially after Luther had exposed the corruption of the Catholic Church. However, when he found out that the Jews' problems with Christianity went deeper than controversies over issues like indulgences, that they did not readily convert en masse, and instead, according to David Singer, they were converting Christians in Bohemia and Moravia, Luther began a deep resentment against the Jews.¹⁷ By the 1530s, Luther was composing anti-Semitic works lambasting the Jews. One of the most famous of these works is *Von die Juden und ihren Lügen*.

Most of *Von die Juden* is filled with extremely strong language spent towards debasing and dehumanizing the Jewish people. In *Von die Juden*, Luther writes that the Jewish people

¹⁷ David Singer. "Baptism or Expulsion: Martin Luther and the Jews of Germany." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 44, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 403. Accessed February 25, 2018. <http://search.ebscohost.com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rh&AN=ATLA0001745419&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

were possessed by Satan and his angels, and that nothing good could come out of the people. For instance, regarding the words of Jews, Luther claims that one cannot trust anything that a Jewish person says. He warns all Christians reading the text “that you have no more bitter, poisonous, or fierce enemy next to the devil than a Jew, who with earnestness wants to be a Jew.”¹⁸ For Luther, the Christian and the Jew are complete eschatological enemies. Luther also makes other outrageous claims about Jews, like how Jews do not respect the New Testament or its figures and worship gold and silver as a messiah. The father of the Protestant Reformation believes that Christians should stay far away from Jews.

The *DC* largely viewed Luther as a “German prophet” who fought for a German ethno-nationalism against Jews and other foreign influences and tried to bring about a reawakening of the Nordic spirit. In the *DC*’s reading of history, at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, Luther broke away from the “degenerate” Roman Catholic Church, bringing Germany out of a great “sickness.” To the leaders of the movement, completing Luther’s work would bring about a triumph of the Nordic spirit over the foreign and Jewish beliefs, deviating from previous thought that the Protestant Reformation was about a movement away from a corrupt Roman Catholic Church.

Leaders of the *DC* tried to impress new and existing members with the idea that Luther was a German prophet who had begun to lead Germany in the “right” direction. *Handbuch der deutsche Christen (Handbook of the German Christians)*, a 1933 manual written for recruiting new and serving as a guidebook for existing members of the *DC*, claims that listening to the words of Luther will help the Third Reich to blossom more beautifully than it ever could

¹⁸ Martin Luther. "Full Text of "Von die Juden und ihren Luegen." Archive.org. Accessed February 13, 2018. https://archive.org/stream/VonDenJudenUndIhrenLuegen/LutherMartin-VonDenJudenUndIhrenLuegen154318S._djvu.txt.NSDAP.

otherwise. According to the *Handbuch*, Luther is “the ‘German prophet,’ even in the Third Reich, which will blossom all the more exquisitely the more it listens to voice of this German prophet.”¹⁹ For the *DC*, the words of Luther were crucial to the prosperity of Nazi Germany. The book also chronicles Luther’s achievements, namely how he showed a “holy defiance” to the Roman Catholic Church that had led people towards a greater freedom, how he gave the German people a translation of the Bible, and how he gave the German people various hymns, like "*Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*" (“A Mighty Fortress is Our God”). According to the handbook, Luther was the German prophet, and listening to his words would help the Third Reich thrive.

Other *DC* leaders, like Siegfried Leffler, emphasized similar points as the *Handbuch* in his book *Christen im der Dritten Reich den Deutschen* (*Christians in the Germans’ Third Reich*), a 1935 work that describes the convictions of the *DC*. A few of these points echo the *Handbuch*, such as Luther leading the Germans to a new freedom from Jewish influence. However, Leffler adds additional points that go further than the *Handbuch*, such as how Luther laid the spiritual foundations of a German Christianity. In *Christen im Dritten Reich der Deutschen*, Leffler also claims that Luther made God’s word and mission clear for all to see, as the two were apparently unclear under the Roman Catholic Church. Leffler’s work argues that people should not completely rely on the words of Luther, but Luther’s work laid the foundation for the church and the cathedral of the German soul. In all of these ways, Leffler fused German völkism of the Weimar era with Christianity.

¹⁹ Deutsche Christen (Nationalkirche Einung), *Handbuch der Deutschen Christen*, 2nd ed. (Berlin-Charlottenburg, 1933), 26.

Luther was a prophet for all denominations of Protestantism, but the *DC* held a special reverence for Hitler. Some members of the *DC*, such as Arnold Dannenmann, viewed Hitler as a German prophet. As a Lutheran pastor in the *DC*, Dannenmann wrote *Die Geschichte der Glaubensbewegung "Deutsche Christen"* (The History of the "German Christians" Faith Movement). In it, he claims that Hitler had a "divine mission" to lead Germany through the National Socialist movement. Through this mission, Dannenmann claims that Hitler has brought a new awareness to every National Socialist. Using the same language as the *völkish* movement, Dannenmann contends that this new awareness revealed to the Germans that they must associate "from a community of the same blood and same history."²⁰ According to Dannenmann, all National Socialists voluntarily bound themselves to Hitler for having this new awareness. Since the *DC* viewed Hitler, and consequently his National Socialist movement, as divinely sanctioned, the members of the *DC* were most likely members of the Nazi movement. Thus, the members of the *DC* had voluntarily bound themselves to Hitler.

Like Dannenmann, Otto Brökelschen, a *DC* pastor from the Rhineland, believed Hitler to be a man sent from God. In Brökelschen's pamphlet *Was wollen die Deutsche Christen? 118 Frage und Antworten (What do the German Christians Want? 118 Questions and Answers)*, an evangelizing pamphlet for potential new members, he claims that Hitler is the modern German prophet. One of the questions in the pamphlet asks about what *DC* members believe, specifically, about the present history of the people. In answering the question, Brökelschen claims that "We believe that God reveals himself today in the history of the German people through Adolf

²⁰Arnold Dannenmann. *Die Geschichte der Glaubensbewegung "Deutsche Christen."* (Dresden: Oskar Günter Verlag, 1933), 6.

Hitler.”²¹ The *Führer* of the Nazi Party was God’s current instrument of revelation and the German prophet, hearkening to the days when regal leaders of the German states simultaneously functioned as heads of the Protestant churches.

This view of Hitler as a prophet and a man sent from God was a widespread, if not fundamental, tenet of the DC. In his 1933 book *Unser Kampf (Our Struggle)* DC leader Joachim Hossenfelder calls Hitler a great hero. *Unser Kampf* was a text to show the “struggle” of the DC, widening the scope Hitler’s singular *Mein Kampf* to all members of the movement. To Hossenfelder, Hitler was one of the few to rise and lead Germany in a fight against Marxism, a product of Judaism, and he helped to reawaken the German Soul. Hossenfelder claims that in times of need, God has sent men to Germany to help the *Volk* through their struggles. Hitler was fashioned by God, who had created “the greatest man since Martin Luther.”²² If the German people listen to Hitler, Hossenfelder claims, Germany can become great again.

Regarding the attempt to implement *völkisch* and remove Jewish or foreign traditions in a larger attempt to create a unified Protestant Reich Church, parts of the DC ideology fall in line with viewpoints of Nazi leaders like Alfred Rosenberg and Joseph Goebbels. As a member of the Nazi Party, Rosenberg acted as the self-appointed party philosopher and theorist and was the editor of the *Völkischer Beobachter (People’s Observer)* newspaper. In *Der Mythos*, Rosenberg praises Luther, claiming that he had helped to open up a “freedom of will” for the Germans, but he was still bounded by the chains of the Roman Catholic world. Rosenberg also criticizes Luther for not writing anti-Semitic works earlier, preferably so that the Old Testament would have been left out of Luther’s translation of the Bible. Alfred Rosenberg notes that by the time

²¹ Okol Brökelschen. *Was wollen die Deutschen Christen? 118 Frage und Antworten*. (Thüringen: Verlag Deutsche Christen, 1937). 11.

²² Joachim Hossenfelder, *Unser Kampf*, (Berlin-Charlottenburg: Verlag Max Grevemeyer, 1933), 15.

Luther had cast aside the Jews and their “lies”, the Bible was a “people’s book”, and the Old Testament had become a prophetic religion.

Alfred Rosenberg believed in the complete removal of the Old Testament from the Bible, and claimed that the Germans should practice a “true” Christianity based upon the Nordic spirit and sections of the New Testament.

He advocates for the practice of a “Positive Christianity,” which emphasizes a “Germanic Christianity,” or a Christianity that is based around Jesus’ life. In contrast to Positive Christianity was Rosenberg’s conception of “Negative Christianity,” which he detested. For Rosenberg, Positive Christianity could only be awakened by the Nordic spirit and is defined by German values. Positive Christianity is awakened by “the power of the Nordic blood, knowingly, like the simple-hearted first Germanic peoples of yore.”²³ For Rosenberg, Positive Christianity was a religion for the Aryan Nordic, or Germanic race. Rosenberg equates this race with his idea of a master race. According to *Der Mythos*, the Aryans Nordics (or Aryans for short) were light skinned people with blond hair who developed superior worldviews to other races, which in combination with their blood, separated the Aryans from other races. This development occurred in ancient times, when the Aryans colonized north Africa, Persia, India. When in India, the Aryans separated themselves based upon blood, and from this separation the Aryans “developed a world view that cannot be surpassed in depth, even today, by any philosophy.”²⁴ The Aryans held a superior status based upon their self-excluding tendencies, any form of miscegenation would thereby erode this superiority.

²³Rosenberg. *Der Mythos*. 79.

²⁴ Rosenberg. *Der Mythos*. 28.

Rosenberg's Negative Christianity was the product of Jewish and other influences. To Rosenberg, Negative Christianity not only manifested itself in an emphasis upon priesthood and witch mania, but also that foreign influences attached themselves to stories in the Bible, like how when Jesus drove out evil spirits from swine. In his book, Rosenberg states that "with the story of the expulsion of evil spirits by Jesus Christ, Syrian magic clung to Christianity through today."²⁵ For Rosenberg, "Syrian magic" is associated with Greco-Judean influence that is repressing the German spirit. Outside of wanting to base Christianity off of the life of Jesus, Rosenberg claimed that there were some stories in the Gospels that should be disregarded. Rosenberg believed that these stories may have been infused with magical conceptions from the Syrians, an evil foreign influence. In addition to the removal of the Old Testament, there were other New Testament sources that he believed did not belong in Positive Christianity, because they too "reeked" of Jewish influence: the Pauline epistles and the Gospel of Matthew.

Like Alfred Rosenberg, the viewpoints of Nazi leader Joseph Goebbels partially aligned with the viewpoints of the *DC*. Once Hitler came to power, launching the Third Reich, Goebbels' main roles were as the Propaganda Minister and the *Gauleiter* of Berlin. Goebbels' diaries from the 1920s emphasize his own nationalistic feelings, mainly in talking about his sentiments concerning the German state. In the entries of his diaries, Goebbels laments how Germany has lost its values and has been driven astray by the leaders of the then-Weimar Republic. He appears to want a return to tradition Germanic values. He thinks that the leaders of the Weimar Republic, and not just Weimar Germany, but the world at large are ruled by money. Goebbels also writes about desiring the destruction of the Jews and their creations, which included

²⁵ Rosenberg. *Der Mythos*. 121

Bolshevism. Goebbels despises these “Jewish” creations and wants everything related to Judaism to be gone from Germany.

Goebbels also wrote *Michael: Ein deutsches Schicksal in Tagebuchblättern* (*Michael: A German Destiny in Diary Form*). Scholars, such as James M. Rhodes, agree with the viewpoint that Michael’s ideological stances are reflect Goebbels’ own beliefs. Rhodes claims that based upon the character’s work toward and creation of a new Reich “based upon Nietzschean will, *völkisch* nationalism, proletarian heroism, and self-negating Nazi fanaticism ... it is quite evident that this ‘Michael’ was an idealized ‘Joseph.’”²⁶ The character of Michael was a projection of Goebbels’ nationalistic and anti-Semitic sentiments. The story revolves around the actions of Michael, a former front-line soldier in World War I, who returns home to Germany, is alienated with what he finds, but ultimately finds comfort in the ideas of National Socialism. Goebbels makes his nationalistic sentiment known through Michael as the character proclaims all Germans are a constitutive piece of Germany, and that Germans need to move away from “Russian” ideas, a nod to Judeo-Bolshevism. Michael shows his antisemitism by claiming that Jews are almost sub-human, fundamentally the opponents of the Germans, and synonymous with the devil himself. Within an entry dated August 9, Michael writes that he saw no Jews that day, which was a relief, since “the Jew is physically disgusting to me.”²⁷ Goebbels uses the character of Michael to express his own personal disdain for Jews. Through the character of Michael, Goebbels also partially attributes a loss of Christian religious feeling to the Jews, claiming that the Germans are now half-heathen, half-Christian. Goebbels does see a positive religious future for Germany, as he claims through *Michael* that Germany is in the midst of a spiritual awakening.

²⁶ Rhodes. *The Hitler Movement*. 24

²⁷ Goebbels. *Michael*. 57.

The *DC* did not stray far from the viewpoints of these two Nazi ideologues regarding what to keep and what to remove of Christianity. Unlike Rosenberg, the *DC* did not believe in removing parts of the New Testament but did believe in an inferiority of the Old Testament, due to the book's heavy Jewish roots. *Handbuch der deutsche Christen* claims that the Old Testament does not have the same value as and is inferior to the New Testament. In the *Handbuch* a section on the foundations of the *DC* claims the Old Testament is inferior because the Old Testament shows "the apostasy of the Jews from God and in that apostasy, their sin ... [which was later] obvious to the whole world in the crucifixion of Jesus."²⁸ The *DC* theology was centered around the life of Jesus and the New Testament; the Old Testament was to be pushed to the side. The *Handbuch* also advocates for racial exclusivity in Christianity, pressing for the inclusion of only German-Aryans in the movement. The *DC* believed that each race should practice the religion that "fit" that race the best, and since the *DC*'s form of Christianity was for Aryans, only Aryans should be allowed to join the movement. In the book's application to become a member of the *DC*, one must affirm that he is of German-Aryan descent. The form does not allow for notations that the applicant is of any other descent.

Other leaders of the *DC*, such as Reinhold Krause and Joachim Hossenfelder, kept in line with the ideology of Rosenberg and Goebbels in calling for the complete removal of the Old Testament and all "Jewish influences" from the Bible. Reinhold Krause was an undistinguished member of the Nazi Party, but he was the Berlin district leader of the *DC*. In a speech at the Berlin *Sportpalast* in November of 1933, Krause called for this renewed emphasis on the New Testament as a focus for Protestant Germans, advocated against race-mixing with non-Aryans, and called for the exclusion of all Jews in the future Protestant Reich Church. Even if Jews did

²⁸ Deutsche Christen. *Handbuch*. 13.

not want to be a part of this church, the exclusion of Jews was part of a larger expulsion of all Jewish influences from the hopeful Protestant Reich Church. Excluding Jews from membership meant there was no possible avenue for the Jews to influence the church. In the speech, Krause proclaims that “people of Jewish blood do not belong in the German people’s church ... either in the pulpit or in front of it.”²⁹

Krause’s wishes were synonymous with the idea of an implementation of an Aryan Paragraph within church life. An Aryan Paragraph usually refers to a clause in any organization that excludes Non-Aryans, most specifically Jews, from that organization. The implementation of the Aryan Paragraph in the *DC* would have meant that only “Aryans” would have been able to become members of the church, whether as clergy or just ordinary members. The application page in *Handbuch* demonstrates that the leaders of the *DC* ultimately agreed to implement an Aryan Paragraph at least in their own organization.

In *Handbuch der deutsche Christen*, Hossenfelder published ten “guidelines” for *DC* members, in which he emphasized the need for a “German” Christianity and also recommended against race mixing with non-Aryans. To Hossenfelder, to miscegenate would be to defy God. As he claims the *DC* “recognize in race, ethnicity, and nation orders entrusted to use by God, who has commanded us to preserve them. Hence race-mixing must be opposed.”³⁰ According to Hossenfelder, the Germans have had a mission to keep their race pure, and to race-mix would be to forsake that mission.

²⁹ Reinhold Krause. "Speech at the Sports Palace in Berlin" in *A Church Undone: Documents from the German Christian Faith Movement, 1932-1940*. Translated and Edited by Mary M. Solberg. (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2015), 258.

³⁰ Deutsche Christen. *Handbuch*. 9.

The *DC* tried to distance themselves from any association with the Jews, going so far as to say that Jesus was not a Jew but was the first great enemy of the Jews. The *DC* tried to characterize Jesus as the antithesis of the Jews because they emphasized the importance of the New Testament, of which Jesus was the focal point. Since the *DC* detested Judaism, the veneration of a Jew (Jesus) would be extremely hypocritical.

Groups within the *DC*, like the Organization for German Christianity (*ODC*), claimed that it was impossible for Jesus to have been a Jew. In the *ODC*'s work *Jesus und die Juden* (*Jesus and the Jews*), the group claims that the lineage trees of Jesus within the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are not reliable. The source claims that the lineages are unreliable because Matthew and Luke's lineages are different, seem to be clumsy, and the *ODC* does not understand why the lineages were written. Both lineage trees connect Jesus to Jewish figures of the Old Testament, such as Levi and David, with the Gospel of Luke connecting Jesus to Adam and the Gospel of Matthew connecting Jesus to Abraham. These lineage trees demonstrate Christianity's message of possible salvation for all, and the rejection of these lineages demonstrate the *DC*'s belief that Christianity could only be salvific for Germans.

The *ODC* has no choice but to deny this lineage in *Jesus und die Juden*, because a connection of Jesus to Judaism would reveal the self-contradictory stance of the *DC*. The *ODC* does not mention this hypocrisy, possibly as to avoid alienating any members or possible members of the *DC*.

Instead, in racial anthropology that was popular in the era, the organization relies on what they call the *Galilean hypothesis* to try and "prove" that Jesus was not a Jew. Houston Stewart Chamberlain, a British antisemite, popularized this hypothesis in the first of his two-part series *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (*The Foundations of the Nineteenth*

Century). Chamberlain was a British aristocrat who was fascinated in and believed in Germanic supremacy, going so far as to compose his works in German. In this book, Chamberlain claims that during the Jewish Assyrian Exile, pure Aryan blood came to Galilee. After the exiled Jews returned, they forced the Galileans to convert to Judaism. The Jews refused to intermarry with these converted Jews and eventually migrated to Judea, staying there through the time of Jesus' birth. To Chamberlain, this hypothesis shows that Jesus was almost certainly not a Jew. Jesus was from Galilee, and since the Jews all left for Judea, Jesus could have not been born to ethnic Jews. From this hypothesis and denial of the lineages presented in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the Organization concludes that there was no way that Jesus could have been a Jew.

For the *DC*, these ideological foundations were the basis for their future creation of a larger Protestant Reich Church, officially titled the *Deutsche Evangelische Kirche (DEK)*, which would encompass all the German Protestant churches. Joachim Hossenfelder called for an emphasis on nationalist sentiment in his version of Christianity. Hossenfelder was the national leader of the *DC*, and under this leadership, the *DC* proclaimed that this unifying church was for the *DC* and the Aryan race. In the movement's guidelines for the *DEK*, the *DC* states that "'The Evangelical church is the church of the German Christians, that is, Christians of the Aryan race.'"³¹ The *DC* wanted to unify the German Protestant churches with their ideological foundations, those of racial exclusion, of nationalism, of a Christianity infused with *völkisch* traditions, and of reverence for Luther and Hitler.

Leaders from the *DC*, specifically Joachim Hossenfelder, did not view themselves as part of an individual religious sect, but rather as representative of all Protestant Germans.

³¹Helmrich. *The German Churches under Hitler*. 135.

Hossenfelder states that “the name ‘German Christians’ does not connote an ecclesiastical political party ... it addresses itself to all Protestant Christians who are Germans.”³² Hossenfelder thought that the Protestant churches of Germany had failed in their “battle” against the heathenistic demons that plagued Germany (e.g. Marxism). The *DC* arose to represent and be the forefront in the battle against these demons. Thus, to leaders like Hossenfelder, the beliefs and ideas of the *DC* represented the entirety of the German Protestant population.

The Failures of the *DC* Movement

In the few years after the Nazi *Machtergreifung* (seizure of power in 1933), problems of internal divisiveness, oppositional movements, and a dwindling amount of support from the Nazi Party prevented the *DC* from unifying the German Protestant churches under the banner of a Protestant Reich Church.

In the first election of a Protestant Reich Bishop, the only *DC* candidate, Ludwig Müller, lost to the pastor Freidrich von Bodelschwingh. Only after facing “great difficulties,” such as failing to gain any Nazi support, in his first months of his tenure did Bodelschwingh resign, and Müller took his place.

In his position as the Reich bishop, Ludwig Müller began to take a moderate stance towards all Protestant Germans, deviating from the stances taken by the ideological leaders of the *DC* like Hossenfelder and Krause. This division between the two created a fractional *DC* movement with an impaired ability to accomplish any task, most importantly the unification of the German Protestant churches. Müller’s position as the Reich bishop gave him a position of

³² Deutsche Christen. *Handbuch*. 8.

leadership, and with a different viewpoint, Müller stood in opposition to the more extremist *DC* leaders. Hossenfelder and Krause believed in the supremacy of *DC* beliefs, and therefore that their creed should take precedence over other Protestant denominations in Germany, like Lutheranism. By contrast, Müller talked about the importance of all Protestant beliefs and tried to please all Protestant German denominations. In a statement issued after Krause's November 1933 speech in the *Sportpalast*, Müller stated that the Old Testament gave the Bible its unique position as the foundation of the church. This position deviated from *DC* leaders such as Leffler, who believed that the Old Testament did not have the same value as the New Testament, or that the Old Testament should be removed from the Bible altogether. Although Müller's statement did not give equal worth to the Old Testament, his word did give the book more importance that Leffler would have been willing to concede.

Regarding Protestant denominations, Müller tried to appeal to their specific beliefs, and rather than enforce *DC* ideas, specifically the implementation of an Aryan Paragraph, upon these religious groups. Müller halted all consideration of the implementation of an Aryan Paragraph by November 1933. This openness marked a break from beliefs of other *DC* leaders, including Hossenfelder. Accommodating other denominations that went against the beliefs of the *DC* would have been unfeasible for Hossenfelder. As a consequence of these differing beliefs, the *DC* had its own schism within the first year of the Third Reich. One section followed Müller and another followed Hossenfelder.

This internal divisiveness was not the only problem that the *DC* faced. The movement also faced problems in gathering support from other German Protestant churches, a crucial step in the formation of a Protestant Reich Church. During the formation and the first years of Nazi rule, the *DC* enjoyed much popularity in certain areas of Germany, specifically Schleswig-

Holstein, where the *DC* held 75 of the 79 seats in its synod, or the assembly of Schleswig-Holstein's clergy. The *DC* enjoyed similar support in Thuringia. However, the *DC* did not have this popularity everywhere in Germany, and this lack of popularity prevented the *DC* from gaining control over the Protestant Reich Church.

Moreover, oppositional groups arose to counter the *DC* and their goal of a *Gleichschaltung* of the German Protestant churches. One notable example of this was being the *Bekennede Kirche* (The Confessing Church), formed in 1934 at the behest of a pastor named Karl Immer from a union of German Protestant churches. Early resistance to the *DC* manifested itself in statements and declarations such as the *Altoner Bekenntnis* (Altona Confession), which declared sole obedience to Jesus Christ, the one true God, deviating from the *DC* dual loyalties to National Socialism and Christianity. This movement rejected *DC* beliefs, which included a belief in the inferiority of the Old Testament, and the overall attempt of the *DC* to unite the German Protestant churches under a fusion of National Socialism and Christianity. The Confessing Church also competed with the *DC* over the unification of the German Protestant churches. As a unified group of churches, the movement "always claimed to be the true German Evangelical Church."³³ Through this notion and ideological differences, the Confessing Church stood in direct opposition to the efforts of the *DC*. The Confessing Church successfully resisted *DC* attempts of unification throughout the Third Reich as part of a struggle commonly known as the *Kirchenkampf* (Church-Struggle).

Other resistance groups, like the *Pfarrernotbund* (Pastors' Emergency League), formed early in the Third Reich. Martin Niemoeller, a Lutheran pastor, founded the *Pfarrernotbund* in

³³ Helmrich. *The German Churches*. 167.

October of 1933. The foundations of the *Pfarrernotbund* were based upon a rejection of the implementation an Aryan paragraph in the church, an act that the *DC* was spearheading.

According to Wolfgang Gerach, the pledge of the *Pfarrernotbund* “explicitly opposed the Aryan paragraph and promised ‘shared responsibility ... with those who are persecuted.’”³⁴ The *Pfarrernotbund* rejected the *DC*’s Aryanization of Christianity, proclaiming that membership of church was based upon baptism and faith, not upon the blood and race.

The failure of the German Church to unify the German Protestant churches convinced the Nazi Party to move away from open support of the *DC*. Instead, the Nazi Party opened itself up to all Christians and separated itself from any specific denomination. The Nazis continued to support “Positive Christianity,” as they explicitly stated in their *25-Punkte-Programm* from 1920, but the party moved away from supporting any specific religious denominations. What is more, the Nazi Party began removing clergy from political offices. In 1938, Martin Bormann, a member of Hitler’s inner circle, ordered that clergy members who held Nazi offices be replaced, with no new clergy members taking office in the NSDAP.

During the war, in the 1942 edition of *Das Parteiprogramm: Wesen, Grundsätze, und Ziele der NSDAP* (*The Party Platform: Character, Principles, and Goals of the NSDAP*), writer Alfred Rosenberg claims that all Germans were free to practice any denomination of Christianity. In the 24th point of the program, Rosenberg continued to maintain the Party’s support of Positive Christianity, but he does not attach the idea to any denomination. He claims that the Nazis “represent the viewpoint of a positive Christianity, without binding itself to a certain religious denomination.”³⁵ The Nazis wanted the support of all German Protestants, and

³⁴ Wolfgang Gerlach. *And the Witnesses Were Silent: The Confessing Church and the Persecution of the Jews*. Translated and Edited by Victoria J. Barnett. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 71.

³⁵ Alfred Rosenberg. *Das Parteiprogramm: Wesen, Grundsätze, und Ziele der NSDAP*. (München:

since there was a huge sect of German Protestants against the *DC*, the Nazis distanced themselves from sole support of the *DC*.

Bormann and Rosenberg were not the only Nazi leaders to vehemently detach the NSDAP from any set of religious beliefs. Heinrich Himmler, the leader of the *Schutzstaffel* (Protection Squadron), instituted similar policies to the *SS*. In September 1935, Himmler restricted all *SS* members from taking leadership roles in *any* confessional organization. By 1937, Himmler forbade any *SS* members from attending church services while in uniform, as part of the effort to distance the Nazi Party from Christianity. Notwithstanding this prohibition, Himmler still emphasized a need to believe in God. In 1942, Himmler wrote a letter to the mother of a potential *SS* member that he would not tolerate any man who does not believe in God. Himmler took a general stance towards religion, and this policy reflects the position that the Nazis eventually took towards religion.

“Germanic” Depictions of Holidays

The Nazis’ movement away from the *DC* was illustrative of the NSDAP’s broader move away from involvement with religious confessions. However, the NSDAP still appropriated religious holidays in their larger “battle” against the perceived Jewish threat. The offices of the NSDAP, most notably the *Reichspropagandaleitung*, which was the main propaganda branch of the NSDAP, appropriated, or took “ownership” and morphed the holiday of Christmas as part of a larger struggle to create their millennial paradise. In all manner of culture and society, whether through film, law, music, or books, the Nazi Party tried to expunge Jewish or foreign influences

Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1942), 18.

from Christmas. This decoupling of perceived Jewish influence from Aryanism also permeated religious holidays such as Christmas. Rather than create a unified church, the Nazi Party de-Judaized Christian holidays and replaced them with “Germanic” themes and customs.

Luis Trenker’s film *Der verlorene Sohn* (*The Lost Son*) is a prime example of the Nazi Party re-presented a Christian holiday increased emphasis on these Germanic customs and removal of so-called Jewish ones.³⁶

Der verlorene Sohn was released in Germany in 1934. The movie chronicles the actions of Tonio Feuersinger, a peasant who leaves his village in the mountains of Austria to explore the world. Tonio leaves his hometown as well as his girlfriend, Barbl, in the hopes of contacting his rich American acquaintance, Lilian, who lives in New York City, and becoming financially successful. Unfortunately, when Tonio visits Lilian’s home, her butler quickly turns Tonio away, preventing him from seeing Lilian. In New York, Tonio attempts to find work and make a living, but he is unable to find any job and becomes homeless. There is no explicit reference to the events of the time, but the mass numbers of homeless people and the intense competition for day labor implies that Tonio is living in New York during the Great Depression. While economically struggling, Tonio becomes homesick and looks to return to his home in Germany. Although Tonio later connects to Lilian in America, it is too late, and he returns to his village.

When Tonio returns on Christmas Eve, he comes across his village lightly blanketed in snow. Upon seeing his home, a smile forms across Tonio’s face, and the “lost son” runs to the village to take part in the festivities. In the village, Tonio takes part in the local village celebration of *Rauhnacht* (“hairy”-nights, referring to fur-wearing performers who roamed about

³⁶ For a link to the film on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnFKJtf_gak&t=1082s

night), a pagan custom associated with the mythological “Wild Hunt.” Tonio’s village celebrates a combination of the historical *Rauhnacht* and a winter solstice celebration. However, Tonio not only takes part in this neo-pagan celebration, but Tonio and his girlfriend also participate in a Christmas Eve mass, as shown at the end of the film.

Tonio’s village celebrates *Rauhnacht* as a veneration of the sun and fire. In a bit of foreshadowing, when the rich Lilian and her father come to visit Tonio’s village early in the film, her father sees the sun mask used in the *Rauhnacht* celebration. As a crass capitalist American, he offers to buy it from a local villager for Lilian. Refusing the sale, the village man explains the importance of the mask, that the village people use it in their celebration of *Rauhnacht*. When Lilian’s father asks about *Rauhnacht*, the village person explains that it is when ghostly forms of the forest, the field, and the meadow appear. These apparitions and others venerate a sun-god through methods like lighting fires. The man explains that twelve women also offer themselves up to the sun-god as potential wives during the *Rauhnacht*. After hearing the explanation of the celebration, Lilian’s father remarks that *Rauhnacht* is very interesting and orders the villager to make a copy of the sun mask for himself.

The concept of the *Rauhnacht* celebration only reappears at the end of the film, when the village celebrates the holiday with Tonio on Christmas Eve.

Trenker shows the viewer a depiction of the *Rauhnacht* celebration within the village. As Tonio runs to his home village in his return, the camera shifts to the movements of a few hooded figures who are gathering branches together to burn for a winter solstice celebration. Once the figures have gathered wood, they begin to move back to the village in a slow procession. Meanwhile, more masked men gather together young village women, most likely virgins, who are wearing veils, masks, and crowns. The masked men bring the women to a “courtroom”

through such methods as pulling them on sleighs. At the courtroom, the masked women move to the outskirts of the courtroom, where they wait to offer themselves up to the sun-king as potential wives.

As Tonio is wandering into his home village, he bumps into some friends who are piling wood for the burning for the celebration. Tonio and his friends talk, and the “lost son” and his friend run off into a barn to prepare themselves for *Rauhnacht*. While the two friends run off, a masked figure ignites a pile of wood, and another blows a horn, which incites other masked people to run off, presumably to the courtroom and the sun-king.

So far in the movie, the *Rauhnacht* celebration has been a combination of a traditional *Rauhnacht* festival and a winter solstice celebration. Traditional *Rauhnacht* celebrations usually are demarcated by processions of masked figures, whereas winter solstice celebrations have included the burning and veneration of fire. The Nazis resurrected both of these concepts to bring back in a “Germanic Christmas.” Since the movie depicts both aspects of the festivals, Luis Trenker combines *Rauhnacht*, a winter solstice festival, and Christmas in a new “German Christmas.”

The next few scenes illustrate the villagers playing different parts in the *Rauhnacht* celebration. The camera shows other masked men looking out of windows, a few masked villagers are skiing through the town, and more people are gathering branches for burning. The film shows these gatherers walking back to the village in a processional manner with branches in their arms, and one of the branches is burning. Another group of masked figures is dancing in a ceremonial manner and in a circle around another masked figure. Like the group of people who ran off after the sounding of a horn, this group looks to be headed to the courtroom.

In the next scene, Tonio enters a house in the village, where he is joyously greeted by

masked figures. Tonio has been assigned to wear the sun mask, which is quite an important role, as the village's celebration of *Rauhnacht* is centered around a veneration of the sun and flame. In the house, a masked figure hands Tonio the sun mask. Tonio then goes outside, puts on a pair of skis, and takes a burning torch, with a procession of masked people following him. Holding the torch, Tonio skis down a slope, the procession skiing behind him, and passes a few burning piles of wood. All the people behind Tonio are wearing masks, and a few are holding torches. Eventually, Tonio stops and hands off the torch to an unmasked man standing next to a pile of wood, who then sets the pile ablaze. The man hands the torch back to Tonio, and Tonio exits the scene. The camera pans out to include a larger scene of the celebration, showing a few hundred-people dancing and cooking meat on spit-roasts. Without the torch in hand, Tonio then meets up with another dressed-up figure, takes the person's outfit, gives the villager the sun mask, and sets off, presumably in search of his old girlfriend. Tonio has cast off his role as the sun-king to find his girlfriend.

Finally, the film returns to the courtroom, which is crowded and full of dancers who are entertaining the man playing the role of the sun-king, sitting on a makeshift throne. After the dancers are finished, villagers dressed up as representations of the forest, the meadow, and the field come to present themselves to the sun-king. The trio pays homage to the sun-king for the proliferation of each of the three natural features. After they present themselves, the masked women offer themselves to inspection by the sun-king as potential wives. As the sun-king is moving from woman to woman, Tonio, dressed-up in his disguise, quickly moves into the courtroom and takes his girlfriend, who is one of the masked women. The two quickly exit the building and find a secluded place to be alone together. The sun-king appears to become angry at

Tonio for taking away the girl, which suggests that Tonio's action was not part of traditional custom.

After the celebrations, the movie turns to a scene with all the unmasked villagers in a state of feasting. From the feasting scene, the camera slowly turns to a scene of burning wood, which emphasizes the importance of the fire. Next, villagers donned in black slowly move to the Christmas Eve church service. This scene signifies that the *Rauhnacht* celebration is over for most of the villagers. A few people dressed up in witch costumes try to harass the church, but the priest effectively shoos them away. Tonio and his girlfriend eventually join in the church service, which is where the movie ends.

The *Rauhnacht* celebration that the viewer sees on Tonio's return home is part of a bigger celebration termed *Rauhnächte*. While the celebration may have connections with Christianity, other aspects of the *Rauhnächte* are connected to paganism. The *Rauhnächte* are a sequence of twelve nights that denote the nights that end one year and bring in the next; the dates most likely derive from an attempt to synchronize ancient German or Celtic calendars to the Roman calendar. The *Rauhnächte* align with Christian celebration dates, as the *Rauhnächte* begin on Christmas Eve and end with the Epiphany's Twelfth Night, the second date helping to show an importance to the number twelve in the holiday.

However, supernatural beliefs and practices also surround the period, some of which are strongly connected to the ancient mythological Wild Hunt. The Wild Hunt was a group of ghostly riders that rode through Germanic regions during the winter time. Commonly, the Wild Hunt was known, according to Rudolf Smiek, to "ride through the storms at the head of a ghostly

army during the Twelve Nights of Yuletide [or *Rauhnächte*].”³⁷ Encounter with these beings was generally not desired. One superstition that connected the Wild Hunt and *Rauhnacht* propagated the idea that women and children would be attacked by a supernatural entity, such as a rider of the Wild Hunt, at night. During the *Rauhnächte*, as scholar Al Ridenour suggests, “women and children would not to go unescorted after sunset for the fear of the Wild Hunter, roving spirits, witches, and werewolves.”³⁸ These two “vulnerable” groups of people were thought to fare much better indoors during the *Rauhnächte*. Other customs, like the idea to not hang up laundry during the *Rauhnächte* or the idea to open doors and windows, supposedly helped to facilitate the passage of the Wild Hunt. Since the celebration’s revival in the early 20th century, the *Rauhnächte* have been characterized by processions through streets with figures dressed up in fur coats and masks in an attempt to scare off spirits, usually thought to be from the mythological Wild Hunt. To scare these beings off, people would dress up in masks and fur coats, and then proceed to roam the streets.

The winter solstice celebrations usually involved burning a fire in the celebration of light, which differ from the *Rauhnächte* given the absence of the Wild Hunt and customs relating to the myth. During the Third Reich, the Nazi Party’s theology emphasized the idea that the ancestors of the modern Germans celebrated light at the time of Christmas, and that the German people should return to using the time as a celebration of light and the return of the sun after a series of long dark nights. In *Die neue Gemeinschaft (The New Community)*, a sort of guide for Nazi leaders on how to observe festive times, the roots of Christmas are painted as a celebration

³⁷ Rudolf Simek. *Dictionary of Northern Mythology*. Translated by Angela Hall. 3rd ed. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1996), 372.

³⁸ Al Ridenour. *The Krampus and the Old, Dark Christmas: Roots and Rebirth of the Folkloric Devil*. (Feral House, 2016)

of light.³⁹ *Die neue Gemeinschaft* was the Nazi Party's periodical for those who carried out party ceremonies and events, issued throughout the duration of the Third Reich.⁴⁰ According to the publication, the festival began after the sun became first visible again after the shortest day of the year (the winter solstice). Ancient Germanic ancestors lit fires in celebration of the return of the sun after this shortest day of the year. Nazi theology, or the religious beliefs of the NSDAP, advocated for a return to this type of celebration, where people would light fires in veneration of the sun. *Die neue Gemeinschaft* claimed that this return of the sun symbolized the circle of life, so every Christmas night "is the hour of birth, the hour of young, new life, the hour of the child and the power of maternal birth."⁴¹ Not surprisingly, there is no mention of Jesus Christ. According to *Die neue Gemeinschaft*, this symbolism, not the birth of Christ, was the meaning of Christmas. The Party's theology emphasized that returning to such practices during this time would help people to celebrate what was "truly" important during Christmas-time.

Die neue Gemeinschaft lacked the power of law or of Hitler's will. It was just a how-to manual of Nazism, and so the Nazi leadership could have neglected to implement its doctrines. The Nazis did not. In her memoir *On Hitler's Mountain*, Imgard Hunt recalls how the Nazis tried to emphasize the winter solstice and the return of the sun at Christmas-time. She says that the party's theology advocated a "neopagan, Nordic/Germanic concept that focused on the winter solstice, the harsh, dark times, forbearance and strength, followed by the long-awaited return of

³⁹ The term presented in *Die neue Gemeinschaft* and all other German sources I've used is *Weihnachten*, a common term used to denote Christmas. However, the term has no direct connection to Christianity, as a more direct translation of the word is along the lines of "Holy/Consecrated Night." The disassociation of the word *Weihnachten* from Christianity may have helped the Nazis in appropriating the holiday, but for the sake of consistency, "Christmas" is used in place of *Weihnachten*.

⁴⁰ Randall Bytwerk. "Much Grain Grows during Winter's Night..." German Propaganda Archive. 2016. Accessed March 17, 2018. <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/ng-lazarett1944.htm>.

⁴¹ Germany. Reichspropagandaleitung. *Die Neue Gemeinschaft*. Edited by Hermann Liese. München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP. 495. Accessed January 30, 2018. <https://dds-crl-edu.colorado.idm.oclc.org/item/361761>.

the sun.”⁴² The Christmas-time celebrations the Nazi Party tried to force on people like Ingrid Hunt were nothing like the Christian holiday of Christmas.

Hunt was not the only German to notice the changes that the Nazis implemented toward the practice of Christmas. Victor Klemperer, a Jew who lived through Germany’s Third Reich, notes a similar change. In his diaries, entitled *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten* (*I Want to Bear Witness to the Last*), Victor Klemperer notes how the Nazis removed any references to Christianity in the 1938 Christmas-edition of the local newspaper. Like with most forms of media, the Nazis had control over the newspapers, allowing the NSDAP to censor and change content within them. Instead of Christian content within the paper, Klemperer writes that the Nazi Party has implement a neo-pagan focus within the newspapers. The Christmas section on the paper revolves around “the new birth of light in the German soul, denotative of the resurrection of the German Reich.”⁴³ Klemperer believes that this change was implemented for all newspapers in the Third Reich.

On this backdrop of the Aryanization of Christianity, *Der verlorene Sohn* was released in 1934, relatively early into the Third Reich. Based upon my previous discussion, the Christmas Eve celebration in *Der verlorene Sohn* is a combination of a winter solstice celebration and a commemoration of *Rauhnacht*. The wood-burning aspect and the feast during the *Rauhnacht* celebration in *Der verlorene Sohn* draws from winter solstice celebrations. The winter solstice celebrations centered around the veneration of light and included instances of wood-burning but

⁴² Ingrid A. Hunt. *On Hitler's Mountain: Overcoming the Legacy of a Nazi Childhood*. (New York City, NY: Harper Collins, 2005), 44.

⁴³ Victor Klemperer. *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten: Tagebücher 1933-1941*. Edited by Walter Nowojski. (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1995), 448-449.

also included sacrificial feasts. Most of the other aspects of the celebration of the film draw from *Rauhnacht*, such as the masked people parading and dancing through the streets.

Even though the *Rauhnacht* celebration in *Der verlorene Sohn* is not a direct representation of any historical celebration of the *Rauhnächte* or winter solstice celebration, the movie emphasizes the ways the Nazi theology aimed to present Christmas for the thousand-year Reich. The Nazi theology advocated for a Christmas-time celebration that prioritized domestic German customs, like the veneration of the sun and light, and moved away from the celebration of “foreign concepts”, which included celebrating the birth of Christ. The state-produced *Die neue Gemeinschaft*, and the beliefs of the *DC*, the only state-endorsed religious group, stressed this movement towards Germanic traditions and customs. The emphasis of the *Rauhnacht* celebration in *Der verlorene Sohn* aligns with the ideas and beliefs that both *Die neue Gemeinschaft* and the *DC* promoted.

Ten years after the film, the October/November 1944 issue of *Die neue Gemeinschaft* supported the Nazi Party advocacy for a “shift” away from the focus on “foreign” celebration through both what the text mentions and what the source leaves out. Most of the text within the issue stresses a return to ancient Nordic customs and a need to support the military, as this issue was released near the end of World War II. There is nothing in the magazine that stresses the need to observe Christ’s birth, and the only references of the Christ’s birth are made in context of how the Roman Catholics “placed” the observance of Christ’s birthday over traditional Germanic festivals. The overall tone implies that Christianity coopted ancient Nordic or Germanic customs, and that the German people need to undo that historic injustice.

The *DC* pushed for Christmas to remain a celebration of Christ’s birth, but the movement also emphasized the need to include more “Germanic” elements in their practice of Christianity.

The *DC* attempted to include many German components in many aspects of their practice, for instance in masses. During church services, as Doris Bergen points out, the *DC* “relied especially on responsive readings and choral speaking, mixing biblical texts with hymns and passages from German heroes.”⁴⁴ The *DC* version of mass, and the movement as a whole, emphasized German tradition and folklore in place of traditional Christian scripture and practice. The *DC* pushed for the exclusion of elements the movement saw as “foreign,” and the inclusion of elements that the movement saw as having domestic roots. Winter solstice celebrations and the *Rauhnächte* fall into this category of domestically cultivated traditions.

The aspects of the *Rauhnacht* tradition celebrated in *Der verlorene Sohn* fall in line with Nazi theology. The majority of Christmas Eve festivities are centered upon the pagan celebration of Trenker’s version of *Rauhnacht*. The movie ends with Tonio and his girlfriend participating in the Christmas Eve mass, but importantly, the mass is not the central focus of village’s celebration of Christmas Eve. *Rauhnacht* is. The Aryanization of Christianity, which led to a new Nazi theology, claimed that the true meaning of Christmas-time was the celebration of the sun, and the *Rauhnacht* celebration in the film does just that.

Since Trenker’s closing scenes of *Der verlorene Sohn* appeared in the final cut of the movie, the Nazi film censors did not oppose the Christian Christmas celebration of the film. The mass probably conformed to Nazi ideas of “positive Christianity.” From the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, all film writers had to submit their scripts through the office of the *Reichsfilmdramaturg* (The Reich Office for Screenplays) for review and possible censorship. After a film script received approval shooting could commence.⁴⁵ Nor did they oppose the

⁴⁴ Bergen. *Twisted Cross*. 47.

⁴⁵ Susan Tegel. *Nazis and the Cinema*. (New York City, NY: Continuum US, 2007), 42.

pagan-associated *Rauhnacht* and winter solstice aspects of the celebration shown in the film. Instead of preventing these aspects of the film being seen by film goers in Germany, the censors supported presenting these activities in film, as “the lost son” readily takes part in the celebrations.

However, this festival is not a celebration of Christ’s birth at all. In fact, Christ does not really figure in the celebration at all. In the film, Nazi theology is on full display as it promotes *Urdeutsch* (ancestral German) celebrations during Christmas time, and *Der verlorene Sohn* falls in line with this movement.

Since the Nazis established a film censor in the first years of the Third Reich, the appearance of these rituals means that the Nazi Party supported them. The fact that the main character Tonio readily takes part in these rituals also implies that the Nazis supported the proliferation of these celebrations in the Third Reich. Nazi theology stressed the celebration of the sun and of light, as the party believed that this type of celebration symbolized the “true” meaning of Christmas-time. According to the Nazi theology, the veneration of the return of the sun after the winter solstice symbolized the birth of new life and all things associated with the topic. While the *Rauhnacht* celebration in the film was a combination of a winter solstice festival and *Rauhnacht*, the celebration in the film emphasized the key feature of the veneration of the sun and light. When the audience sees Tonio readily take part in this pagan ritual, the audience might be more inclined to participate in similar rituals as well because the audience identifies with the character.

The Aryanization of Christianity During the Third Reich

The Nazis must have agreed with or advocated for Luis Trenker's depiction of Christmas in *Der verlorene Sohn*, as the Nazi film censors did not delete the celebration from the final cut of the film. Nonetheless, the NSDAP did not leave depictions of Christmas celebrations to filmmakers like Trenker. Laws imposed onto Christmas markets and a 1937 video of Christmas celebrated in Nazi Germany show that the Nazi Party continued to emphasize Germanic traditions within Christmas celebrations and stressed a non-denominational commitment to Christianity through World War II.⁴⁶ These sources continue to Aryanize Christianity and put forth a NSDAP theology thought more appropriately to fit in the millennial paradise.

Nazi ideology promoted the view that the Jews had taken over the Christmas markets. In all types of businesses, Nazi ideology held that the removal of Jews from face-to-face commercial transactions was one of the party's highest obligations. Once the Jew was expelled from the Christmas market scene, the Nazi-controlled market scenes promoted the sale of "German" ornaments. The Nazis attempted to repress the proliferation of Christian-related goods, as 1936 guidelines from the German *Wirtschaftsgruppe* (Economic Group) instructed shop-owners to show "restraint" (forbade) from displaying religious items (i.e. Christian items) from store windows.⁴⁷ However, this law was extremely unpopular with the people, and the Nazis repealed it within a few weeks.⁴⁸

The 1937 video on a Christmas celebration within Nazi Germany integrates elements of Christianity and neo-paganism. The film begins with a bell ringing, calling people dressed in

⁴⁶ Link to the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPbtyT6weK4>

⁴⁷ Hans Bohrmann ed. *NS-Pressanweisungen der Vorkriegszeit*. (De Gruyter Saur, 1993.), 1268.

⁴⁸ Judith Breuer and Rita Breuer. *Von Wegen Heilige Nacht!: Das Weihnachtsfest in Politischen Propaganda*. (Mülheim an der Ruhr: Verlag an der Ruhr, 2000), 71.

black to a Christmas service. People are shown kneeling in the pews, faithfully participating in the mass. There is no reference to any specific denomination of Christianity. The Nazi theology is advocating for a generic practice of Christianity, as the film is implying that the ideal Christmas celebration should include a trip to mass, no matter the confession.

Echoing *Der verlorene Sohn*, the 1937 documentary film then moves to a scene of a fire burning, and a man is rolling a burning wheel down a hill. The wheel is in the shape of a sun cross, a pagan symbol. Next, the film shows women making bread pastries in the same shape of these sun crosses, with children readily eating the finished products. These scenes demonstrate the Nazi theology's emphasis on their neo-pagan Germanic traditions of Christmas, such as the burning fire, and images of Odin's cross. Along with a Christian mass, the Nazi theology emphasizes these Germanic traditions within Christmas time.

The next part of the video begins with a child ringing a bell, after which the camera immediately moves to scenes with Nazi leaders Hermann Goering, the president of the Reichstag, and Joseph Goebbels, the propaganda minister. The camera depicts the two figures separately in a crowd of people. The two leaders look to be spreading joy amongst the populace, especially with the children, as the Nazis are shown handing them presents. After the scene with Goering and Goebbels, the video shows German families happily taking part in Christmas festivities, specifically showing a family having a traditional Christmas dinner. The film ends with a scene of a choir singing around a large Christmas tree, which appears to be decorated with traditional ornaments. At the top of the Christmas tree, where one would normally see an angel or star, the viewer sees a swastika.

The scenes with Goering and Goebbels attempt to instill friendly and approachable qualities the Nazi leaders. The film sequences show that the Nazi leaders are approachable, and

that they can be trusted. This film sequence is also a reference to the *Winterhilfswerk des Deutschen Volkes* (Winter Relief of the German People), the only state-sanctioned charity organization, except for the German Red Cross.⁴⁹ The Nazis treated any other charity organization badly and ran them out of business.

The replacement of the angel or star with a swastika on the Christmas tree at the end of the documentary film demonstrates the Nazi intent to Aryanize Christianity. The traditional angel or star on top of the Christmas tree references the birth of Christ. According to Rudolf Koch's *Book of Signs*, the swastika is a symbol derived from the sun cross.⁵⁰ Since the sun cross is a representation of the sun, and the NSDAP's *Die neue Gemeinschaft* holds a clear connection between the veneration of the sun and the practices of ancient Germans, Nazi theology probably held a connection between the swastika and German identity. To the Nazi Party, the replacement of the traditional angel or star on top of the tree with a swastika symbolizes an increased emphasis on Germanic values within the Third Reich.

Nazi Depictions of Christmas During World War II

As Germany entered World War II, Nazi theology meant the successful Aryanization of Christianity. In practice, this meant being open to all Protestant denominations and advocating a Germanic aspect to religion and religious holidays. During wartime, the party also used this newly Aryanized Christianity to support the war effort. In this war support, the Nazis began to

⁴⁹ Perry. "Christmas in the Third Reich." 205.

⁵⁰Rudolf Koch. *The Book of Signs: Which Contains all Manner of Symbols Used from the Earliest Times to the Middle Ages by Primitive Peoples and Early Christians*. Translated and Edited by Vyvan Holland. (New York City, NY: Dover Publications, 1955), 18.

allude to the imminent coming of their thousand-year empire, claiming that the paradise would come after the Nazis had won World War II.

Issues of *Die neue Gemeinschaft* from the World War II period demonstrate a combination of a support of the war effort with an Aryanized Christmas. In addition, a 64-page pamphlet titled *Vorweihnachten (Advent)* and a propaganda book entitled *Deutsche Kriegsweihnacht (German War-Christmas)* corroborate this movement of the party's theology, showing a combination of a Christmas based upon Germanic traditions with a support for the war effort. These sources lack any reference to a specific denomination of Christianity and thereby are open to any denomination attaching itself to the ideas within the sources

Die neue Gemeinschaft contained information on the Party's beliefs on these holidays and how the NSDAP believed the holidays should be carried out. For example, issues of *Die neue Gemeinschaft* from the World War II period placed great importance on the mother and child, the themes of light and life, the themes of family and community, and the war effort, claiming that these themes were essential to Christmas.

The October/November 1944 issue of *Die neue Gemeinschaft* places importance on and emphasizes these themes throughout the issue's articles. One section, entitled *Deutsche Kriegsweihnacht*, the same name as the stand-alone pamphlet, emphasizes the themes of light and life, the importance of the mother, and the community. The article claims that Christmas is a festival for the rebirth of light, shown in the solstice, which symbolizes the sprouting of new life from the death of the old. According to *Die neue Gemeinschaft*, Christmas is "the holy night – the night of rebirth of all life."⁵¹ In addition to Christmas being a celebration of life, the article

⁵¹ Reichspropagandaleitung. *Die neue Gemeinschaft*. 477.

claims that Christmas is a celebration of the mother, as she is the one who gives new life. After this section, the article attempts to tie in the idea of life with the theme of community, asserting that the lives of the people are vested within the community. Thus, *Die neue Gemeinschaft* claims, Christmas is also a celebration of the community.

Another article within the issue, *Von Brauchtum in der Weihnachtszeit* (“On Customs at Christmas Time”), focuses on the themes of light and life, of the mother and child, and of community within the family in the origins of Christmas-time. This article’s main purpose is to explain the origins and meanings behind Christmas-time customs. The article explicitly claims that every Christmas night is the hour of birth, young new life, the child, and the power of maternal birth. The article claims that the Germans’ ancestors celebrated the return of the sun after the solstice as the appearance of a new light. *Die neue Gemeinschaft* claims a metaphorical connection from this celebration of a new light to the celebration of new life.

From the idea that Christmas-time celebrations are also centered around the commemoration of new life, the article then derives a link to the concept that Christmas-time celebrations are centered around the celebration of young life, or children. One specific child that *Die neue Gemeinschaft* claims to symbolize this young life is the child in the rocker, of who. The overall description of this child is a clear allusion to the image of Jesus in the manger, but the article strips the image of all Christian connections, claiming that the child is one that Aryan myths and sagas speak of. For this child, the German people “sing old and new Christmas songs.”⁵² Along with singing songs for the child, the people also sing for the mother of the child.

⁵² Reichspropagandaleitung. *Die neue Gemeinschaft*. 496.

According to the article, the German people venerate the mother because of her ability to give the people the gift of new life.

Concerning the theme of community within the family, *Von Brauchtum* contends that due to the climate of Germany, people spend a relatively long amount of time in their houses. This time spent indoors means that the home is more important to the German than to other cultures, and that the times of the year that the family is kept inside of the house connects them as a community. The article claims that there is no other time than Christmas time when “husband and wife, parents and children were more closely connected.”⁵³ Thus, the Christmas time was a celebration of community within the family as well.

Towards the end of the issue of *Die neue Gemeinschaft* is a section that places much more emphasis on the celebration of Christmas for the soldier, entitled *Deutsche Soldatenweihnacht* (“The German Soldier’s Christmas”). This article provides insight on how a good soldier should spend his Christmas, the meaning behind the soldier’s celebration of Christmas, and his efforts in protecting the ability of the women and children to celebrate Christmas. The meaning of the soldier’s celebration of Christmas is deeply rooted in the sense of community, as *Die neue Gemeinschaft* claims that during Christmas time, the soldier is connected to his home and to his comrades, who are like a second home. *Die neue Gemeinschaft* claims that in this time of war “our unities and our comrades have turned into a second home.”⁵⁴ These connections to the soldier’s homes gives him new power that lasts for months. *Die neue Gemeinschaft* also mentions that the soldiers are on the front lines to protect their mothers,

⁵³ Reichspropagandaleitung. *Die neue Gemeinschaft*. 496.

⁵⁴ Reichspropagandaleitung. *Die neue Gemeinschaft*. 526.

wives, and children. The actions of the soldiers on the front lines allows these people to celebrate Christmas.

The *Vorweihnachten* was an advent booklet given out by the Nazi Party to German mothers in 1943, who were told to go throughout the booklet one day at a time. Since the Nazis produced this source, *Vorweihnachten* contains Nazi propaganda and Nazi imagery of their ideal Christmas during the war time. Specifically, the pamphlet contains multiple references to and emphasizes aspects of the Nazi Party's Germanic features of Christmas time, and the source supports the ongoing war effort. Importantly, again, there is not a word about the birth of Christ.

The second page of the booklet, a letter to a reading mother, gives the reader information on importance of the war effort in preserving the sanctity of Christmas. *Vorweihnachten* claims that the soldiers on the front lines are protecting the children's ability to celebrate Christmas in a traditional manner, and the mother of the household must teach the child the customs of Christmas, so that the child may celebrate Christmas appropriately. Thus, in proclaiming its role to the reading mother, the "*Vorweihnachten* should help you to give your children a happy Christmas time, in spite of harder times."⁵⁵ Through the first page of the booklet, *Vorweihnachten* identifies three of the most important figures in the NSDAP's Christmas during World War II: the mother, the child, and the soldier.

The rest of the pages within the *Vorweihnachten* pamphlet contain references to Germanic Christmas time traditions and themes, as well as a support for the war effort. Germanic stories, like *Frau Holle*, and figures fill the pages of the booklet, replacing any references to Christianity. These Germanic figures, such as Rupprecht, the farmhand-companion of Saint

⁵⁵ Reichspropagandaleitung. *Vorweihnachten*. (München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1943).

Nicholas, replace the Christian figures entirely. In figure 1, shown below, Rupprecht is shown carrying out the traditional job of Saint Nicholas, who is nowhere to be seen in the picture.

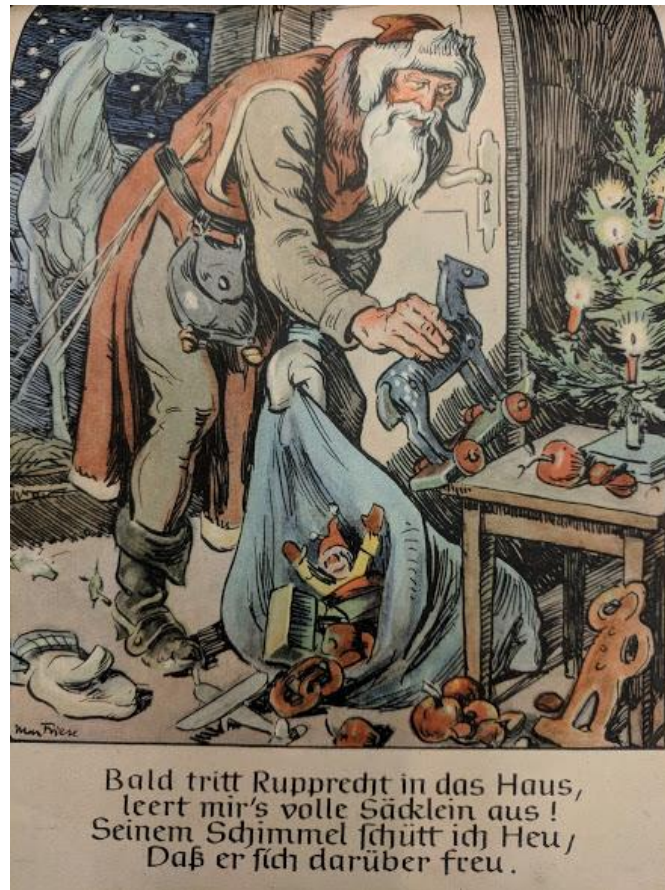


Figure 1: An untitled image of Rupprecht setting out toys. The poem below the image says: "Soon Rupprecht comes in the house and empties for me his full sack out! To his horse I give hay, that about it he will be happy."

Source: Friese, Max. "Weihnachtsmann." In *Vorweihnachten*, 6.
(München: Zentralverlag Der NSDAP, 1943)

One of the pages marking 22 days until Christmas, a short essay entitled *Von abendlichen Licherstunden* ("On Evening Hours of Candlelight") remarks on the importance of light in the time of Christmas. A picture accompanying the text shows a candle held up in a sun-cross, further emphasizing the roles of light and the sun in the time of Christmas. The essay claims that the candles light in this time represent the good times that come after the bad. The *Vorweihnachten* booklet uses this idea to immediately pivot to the subject of the war, claiming

that the candles represent good times that will come soon, “after the difficult war years will come the happy time of victorious peace!”⁵⁶ According to Nazi ideology, the time of the thousand-year Reich was at hand, to become manifest after the war.

On one of the pages demarcating five days until Christmas, there are visual and textual instructions on how to make a “sun wheel” to place on top of the Christmas tree in replace of other symbols, specifically a star or an angel. The symbolization in this page shows how far the Nazi had progressed in successfully Aryanizing Christianity. In the 1937 video, the Nazis had to place a swastika on top of the Christmas tree, but in *Vorweihnachten*, the NSDAP promotes the use of a sun wheel on top of the tree. The Nazi Party’s theology is clearly pushing for the primacy of Germanic customs and themes over Christian ones. In the first sentence of the instructions on how to make the sun wheel, the booklet displaces the Christian meaning of Christmas by proclaiming that meaning behind Christmas is in the solstice.⁵⁷ *Vorweihnachten* replaces the Christian meaning of the “tree topper” with a German one.

On one of the pages demarcating two days until Christmas are the lyrics of “*Hohe Nacht der klaren Sterne*” (“Grand Night of the Clear Stars”), a song that emphasizes the mother and fire in the time of Christmas. The first two verses of the song are centered around the themes of stars and fire in the time of Christmas, and the last verse of the song is centered around the mother, claiming that they are the foundation of the world. The last half of this verse proclaims to all mothers that “deep in your hearts beats the heart of the entire world!”⁵⁸ The inclusion of the song in the *Vorweihnachten* demonstrates the Nazi theology’s emphasis on the importance of

⁵⁶ Reichspropagandaleitung. *Vorweihnachten*. 1a.

⁵⁷ Reichspropagandaleitung. *Vorweihnachten*. 18a.

⁵⁸ Hans Baumann. “*Hohe Nacht der klaren Sterne*.” In *Vorweihnachten*, 22. (München: Zentralverlag Der NSDAP, 1943)

mothers in the time of Christmas and demonstrates the messianic urges of Nazism with phrases like “the entire world.”

Deutsche Kriegsweihnacht was the title of a series of Christmas books produced for those at home and at the war front every year of the war by the *Reichspropagandaleitung*. Following the ideas espoused by *Die neue Gemeinschaft*, the *Deutsche Kriegsweihnacht* books reflect the NSDAP’s openness to all Protestant denominations, an emphasis of Germanic customs and themes, and a new focus on the German war effort. Rather than a swastika, which might have been seen on the cover of the book in the 1930s, during the war, the cover is a sun-cross, denoting the importance of a veneration of the solstice and the sun in the NSDAP’s Christmas.

One page of the book, shown below in Figure 2, demonstrates a clear combination of the Nazi emphasis on the Germanic traditions of Christmas with a support for the war. Figure 2, a drawing with a mother and child at the top, and three German soldiers at the bottom is an example of this fusion. As *Die neue Gemeinschaft* indicates, the mother and child were central figures in the *Weihnachtszeit*. The pair in the picture are the same size as the soldiers, suggesting an equal relevance between the two parts of the drawing. The mother and child sit behind the soldiers, suggesting that the soldiers are fighting to protect the lifestyle of the two, aligning with the ideas of the *Vorweihnachten* pamphlet. Accompanying the drawing on the next page is a poem entitled “*Soldatenweihnacht*” (The Soldier’s Christmas). The poem combines the themes of light and the war effort, talking about a “light” that enflames the soldiers and gives them energy to keep fighting. According to the poem, this type of energy is exclusive to the German soldiers, as in no other people “on Earth is [the light] so bright and absolute.”⁵⁹ The poem claims

⁵⁹ Herybert Menzel. “*Soldatenweihnacht*.” In *Deutsche Kriegsweihnacht*, 22. (München: Zentralverlag Der NSDAP, 1944).

that this light will help the Germans win the war, and the poem ends by tying in the shine of the light to a mother's face, connecting to another theme in Christmas.



Figure 2: A untitled drawing of a mother and child with German soldiers in the foreground

Source: Reichspropagandaleitung. *Deutsche Kriegsweihnacht*. (München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1944), 22.

Another drawing, Figure 3, which is shown below, shows a group of soldiers huddled around a small Christmas tree with a letter from a soldier's wife. The image achieves a similar effect of combining the Nazis' emphasis on Germanic traditions in Christmas with a support of the war effort. The soldiers' poor condition provoked sympathy from a reader in their home. Moreover, the group of soldiers also represent the idea of community, another important aspect of Christmas time to Nazi ideology in *Die neue Gemeinschaft*.



Figure 3: An untitled image of soldiers around a small Christmas tree.

Source: Reichspropagandaleitung. *Deutsche Kriegswihnacht*. (München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1944), 47.

The letter from a soldier's wife, entitled "*Es is Nacht und mein Herz kommt zu dir*" ("It is Night and My Heart Comes to You") reflects on the theme of light in an overall support of the war effort. The woman begins the letter by lamenting how she will have to spend Christmas home again with the children, as she has found out that her husband's U-boat has been sent out on another mission out of the country. She then talks about her situation, how she is alone, and what her great-grandmother thought when she was in a similar situation. The woman writes that her great-grandmother says that while children can enjoy Christmas during the wartime, the adults cannot necessarily take that view. They must believe in the concept of a returning "light," or a messianic future, which must be restored so the people can "once again establish peace."⁶⁰ It

⁶⁰ Reichspropagandaleitung. *Deutsche Kriegswihnacht*. 46.

was these words, the woman writing to her husband proclaims, that led her to the realization that it is the duty of mothers and women to light up the darkness of night with the lights of joy from their hearts. The woman proclaims that her heart, which is with her husband, helps to give light at the war front. She says that millions of women have “light of their hearts shine today so that this light shines the front and may illuminate the longest night.”⁶¹ The wife claims that this light will lead to a rejuvenation in the German war effort and possibly victory.

Towards the end of the book is a section entitled “*Das Hohelied der Mutternacht*” (“The Song of Songs of the Mother’s Night”), which transitions into a speech from Dr. Goebbels. Both of the texts continue to emphasize the importance of the mother in Christmas time. They both alludes to a supposedly happy peace, the millennial “paradise,” that will come after the war is over, and emphasizes the theme of community in the time of Christmas. The section is divided into eight different “verses,” or separated blocks of text. “*Das Hohelied der Mutternacht*” begins with a section on the mother, talking about her “holy” role in childbirth. Then the text moves into words from Dr. Goebbels. These words clearly directed at a child reader, which illustrate the reactions of a mother when her husband comes home, presumably after winning the war. When the father comes home, the mother will weep for joy with her children in arms. Then, at the end of the war, “peace and happiness will be sustained among the people.”⁶² The section claims that this hour can only come through sacrifice and hardship, and the feeling of happiness that can come through the feeling of community can make that pain more tolerable.

⁶¹ Reichspropagandaleitung. *Deutsche Kriegsweihnacht*. 46.

⁶² Goebbels, Joseph. “*Einmal wird die Stunde kommen.*” In *Deutsche Kriegsweihnacht*, 184. (München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1944).

These three sources lack any clear reference to Christianity, focusing instead on Germanic traditions of Christmas and a support of the German war effort. However, the lack of any such reference does not indicate a complete move away from Christianity. Rather, the absence of any mention of Christ kept the party in a position to support all Protestant denominations. In Nazis' Party Platform of 1942, NSDAP leader Alfred Rosenberg states that the party supports all forms of "positive Christianity", with no discrimination between denominations. So long as the German citizenry supported the Nazi Party's "positive Christianity", which seems to have entailed the observance of Germanic customs during holidays like with Christmas, they could practice any form of Protestantism. The absence of any Christian reference allows any confessional believer to attach themselves to the Nazi ideology.

Conclusion

Throughout the Third Reich, the Nazi Party attempted to Aryanize all aspects of Christianity, which meant an expungement of all that the Party perceived to be related to Judaism, the NSDAP's great enemy, from everything good and German. This meant Christianity. What I posit as a Nazi theology, what Christianity looked like after it was Aryanized, emphasized Germanic customs and themes to replace these perceived Semitic aspects all with the goal of bringing on the end of times. This "battle" against Judaism in religion was part of the Nazis' larger war against Jews, as the NSDAP perceived Judaism as a great evil that the party had to destroy.

As the Third Reich progressed, the Nazi Party employed tactics, such as the distribution of propaganda, to fully expel Semitic aspects from Christianity, replacing them with Germanic

features. In the first year of the Third Reich, the Nazi Party extended an endorsement to the *DC* movement. The *DC* was a religious movement that fused the ideas of National Socialism and Christianity, and their race-based theology aligned with the theology of the leaders of Nazi Party. The Nazis and the *DC* hoped to unify the Protestant churches of Germany into one *Deutsche Evangelische Kirche*, Protestant Reich Church, under the ideological tenets of the *DC*. However, the *DC* quickly faced problems that impeded the movement's ability to unify these churches, one of which being internal fracturing. This fracturing stemmed from the election of Ludwig Müller, a moderate *DC* member, to the position of Bishop of the future Protestant Reich Church. The leadership position of Müller helped to create a division in the *DC* from the more extremist leaders, such as Joachim Hossenfelder. Additionally, resistance to the *DC*, like from the *Bekennede Kirche*, further hindered the *DC*'s ability to unify the churches.

These problems pushed Nazi support away from the *DC* in the early 1930s, but Nazi theology pushed its idealized version of religion, most notably regarding Christmas, through culture and society (in the form of books, film, and law). In *Weihnachten*, which meant the celebration of Christ's birth as Christmas, but eventually came to mean a celebration of light's return, the Nazi theology emphasized similar points to their ideas on religion; a replacement of Semitic aspects with Germanic themes and traditions. The Christmas celebration in Trenker's film is a prime example of this emphasis, as the movie is almost entirely focused on a combined celebration of the German celebrations of *Rauhnacht* and a winter solstice festival. At the German Christmas Markets, the Nazis attempted to prevent Christian items from being displayed in windows, as to prevent the sale and proliferation of these items. This attempt quickly failed, as the German populace quickly displayed dissatisfaction with this effort from the NSDAP.

During World War II, the NSDAP's theology continued to emphasize these Germanic aspects and themes in Christmas through propaganda material, but the Nazi Party also began to stress support for the war effort. In this support for the war effort, the Nazi Party mainly focused on the period after the war, in the messianic times, claiming that the Germans were about to enter a "peaceful victory." Within its sections on the war, *Die neue Gemeinschaft* concentrates on current events, with articles on the soldier's celebration of Christmas, all with the view towards future victory. Other sources, like *Vorweihnachten* and *Kriegweihnacht* clearly make remarks on the state of Germany after the war. These statements allude to the Nazis' perception that their thousand-year Reich, or millennial paradise, was close at hand. After a final push in the war effort, the NSDAP theology claimed that their millennial kingdom would become manifest. It never did.

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