

June 2020

## No Nazis in Valhalla: Understanding the Use (and Misuse) of Nordic Cultural Markers in Third Reich Era Germany

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### Recommended Citation

Nighswander, Lena (2020) "No Nazis in Valhalla: Understanding the Use (and Misuse) of Nordic Cultural Markers in Third Reich Era Germany," *International ResearchScape Journal*: Vol. 7 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/irj/vol7/iss1/6>

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**I. Abstract**

While medieval concepts are frequently used as a means for the general public to understand emerging global political institutions around the world, they also have immense capability to be purposely misused by political groups due to the generally vague and misguided understanding of these concepts by the masses. At one core of these movements is the legacy of the Vikings and the misrepresentation of their history by far-right political groups, especially in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, in order to push a fictitious agenda of a prosperous, all-white race of seafaring warriors. Through the appropriation of medieval Old Norse imagery and mythology, as well as the construction of the idea of a pure Nordic race and the spread of propaganda through media by artists like Richard Wagner, the Nazi Party was able to utilize the newfound elevation of Nordic culture to legitimize its own ideas of racial purity and culture.

**II. Introduction**

Uses of various medieval tropes to define certain political movements and strategies is a common strategy used to make larger concepts more palatable to wider audiences, especially concerning central Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. While medieval concepts are easily used as a vehicle for the general public to understand emerging global political institutions around the world, they also have immense capability to be purposely misused by political groups due to the generally vague and misguided understanding of medievalism by the masses. At one

core of these movements is the Vikings, and the appropriation of their history by far-right, Nazi-aligned groups throughout history in order to push a fictitious agenda of a prosperous, all-white race of seafaring warriors in medieval Scandinavia.

Today's neo-Nazism is growing more associated with Norse imagery due to the incessant adoption and use of Norse symbols, like various runes or even Thor's hammer. These co-options have reached the point that such symbols, many currently in use by practitioners of the modern-day Asatru religion<sup>i</sup>, have now been officially catalogued as hate symbols by the Anti-Defamation League in its Hate on Display database. This sort of cultural appropriation is not at all unique to neo-Nazism; in fact, it actually finds its roots in the German *völkisch* movement of the mid-1800s, before developing through the Weimar era, until it culminates in the widespread use of Old Norse myth and imagery by Hitler's Nazi Party during the Third Reich.

The close association between Nazi politics over the course of history and the history of the Vikings is particularly troubling, in that it distorts the more accurate history of the Vikings into something that is constructed only for the means of pushing an oppressive political agenda. The closer this association between the Nazis and the Vikings becomes, the more legitimacy these groups' use of traditional Old Norse imagery gains. Using this correlation, Nazi-aligned groups let the symbols speak for them and the narrative they are injecting into the symbols as their new, constructed meaning is not in alignment with their traditional meanings. This is a net-loss for communities, especially those in northern Europe, that are still deeply tied to their Norse roots, as their cultural symbols and traditions have been radicalized in a way that pushes an extremely dangerous and negative image of the Nordic people – one which has been constructed on their behalf, and used for political gain.

However strong the association may be, the question of why Old Norse imagery specifically became such a fixture of Nazi attention and acclaim remains. Furthermore, in what ways were Nordic cultural markers, especially pertaining to Old Norse imagery and mythology, used to influence both the *völkisch* movement in Germany, as well as the greater Third Reich era as a whole? The answer is not as simple as one easily identifiable cause or reason; rather, it seems to be due in part to a culmination of various factors leading to the mythification of Nordic peoples based on conjured, elitist racial stereotypes and heightened importance of national myth as a source of pride and power. Through the appropriation of Old Norse imagery and mythology, as well as the construction of the idea of a pure Nordic race, the Nazi Party was able to utilize the newfound elevation of Nordic culture as an infallible pillar of admiration and aspiration to legitimize its own dangerous ideas of racial purity and culture.

### **III. Nazi Nordicism and the *Völkisch* Movement**

In the late 19th century up to the Nazi era in Germany, the *völkisch* movement served as the rejection of Christianity in order to revive pre-Christian Paganism in daily life for all Germans. This movement concerned itself not only with nationalism but also with ethnicity, as it aspired to create the “original nation” for the German people, with a focus on the fetishization and promotion of the Nordic race as superior beings. While a direct translation of the German word *volk* would simply mean people, its meaning shifted in the Nazi context to mean the “nation,” or “tribe.” When or how this slight transition in meaning took place is unknown, but it is the source of much speculation because of the nature of the heavy-handed ethnonationalist notions the word came to suggest.

In response to the unique etymology of the word, Lawrence Birken states, “We are then able to suggest that it was in the course of the nineteenth century that the German word gradually took on the peculiarly “biological” connotation with which we are so familiar.” (Birken 138). In shielding its members under the unassuming *Volk* umbrella, the *völkisch* movement was able to push forward nationalist ideas about racial purity that would come to be intimately associated with the Nazi party in the coming years under the guise of preserving tradition and protecting German culture – keeping it free from outside influences and cultivating a German national identity, while still maintaining a pointed interest in absorbing various aspects of Nordic culture. The *völkisch* movement is also widely regarded as the foundation of Nazism in Germany, as it serves as the predecessor to – and, realistically, the normalizer of – ideas about who belongs in the German nation. Through these ideas, the *völkisch* movement also gave legitimacy to the concept of eugenics being used to achieve the goal of the “original nation.”

Although the link between Old Norse imagery and eugenics might not seem particularly clear, it is evident that the *völkisch* idolization of all traits that were considered Nordic is merely another step toward embodying the Viking idealism that was widely facilitated during this time. The idea was to replicate the desirable traits and aspects of the mythic heroes in the very same Norse mythology the *völkisch* movement and Nazi Party both utilized as a means for political programming and control at this time. This particular brand of idealism would come to be known as “Nordicism.” In general terms, Nordicism is commonly defined as being the celebration of the so-called “Nordic race.” However, one particular point to note is that Nordicism also views the Nordic race as one endangered and superior racial group, which was used largely to give accreditation and esteem to the idea that the Nordic race is something to be protected.

Rather than a celebration of Nordic heritage, Nazi Nordicism aligns itself more solidly with the fetishization of those of Nordic descent. In this way, the fictional Nordic race was considered to be the most superior branch of the Aryan race. Cynthia Miller-Idriss discusses the formation and spread of the myth of Nordic descent in her book, *Historical Fantasies, Sacred Myths: Sacred Origin Narratives*. Here, she acknowledges that while the origins of when exactly the link between ideas of Aryanism and Nordicism began developing are unknown, there are many clues that point to how the myth of the Nordic race might have developed, and subsequently have become intertwined with the myth of Aryan racial superiority (91).

Delving further into the historical background of this link, Miller-Idriss gives a bit of social and political context. She states:

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a growing number of antimodern, Germanic, religious groups rooted in ancient Germanic and pagan mythology, along with *völkisch* political and youth movements, began to explicitly link Nordic, Aryan, and Germanic groups into a blended form of nationalism and spirituality (91).

In doing so, *völkisch* affiliated groups were not only able to claim Nordic cultural markers for the purposes of establishing a uniquely German culture, but they were also able to give legitimacy to ideas of Aryanism as a structure for racial superiority that were gaining popularity at the same time. As for how this happened, philosopher Seyla Benhabib offers that *völkisch* groups “did this in part by defining the [German] religion and spirituality as an innate, racial inheritance that was a ‘living counterpart of the homeland, one’s blood, feeling and thinking.’” In absorbing Nordic ideals to promote a constructed sense of German superiority, the Germans would be able to argue that not only were Nordic people to be included in the new racial hierarchy, it was a natural fit.

Nordicism was to be seen as an organic extension of the growing vision of Aryan superiority in the new Germany, but it might have had more sway in the development of ideas seen in the Third Reich than one would expect. Miller-Idress states:

Such *völkisch* movements ... positioned the Aryan race as locked in an epic struggle with ‘non-Germans’ and ‘Semites’ who were forcing the nation away from its true, Nordic, natural roots; only a ‘regeneration of the German nation would offer possible salvation and an eventual future utopia.’ (91)

By pushing an “us vs. them” mentality, especially one so steeped in Nordic background, *völkisch* movements were able to leverage this constructed division between prescribed races in order to, as Lawrence Birken said, “direct racism against other Europeans as a means of uniting the German people” (139). The strength of the German people against the perceived threat of Jewish individuals comes from this same “us vs. them” vision of racial purity: the Germans, through the *völkisch* interpretation of Nordicism, are descendants of those very same fearless, all-white seafaring Viking warriors, and the Jews simply were not as lucky – or perhaps not as good at fabrication.

This dynamic of race-based conflict leans largely into the idea of *Herrenrasse*, a concept which suggests the Nordic people are supposedly descended from the Proto-Aryans, and are thus considered to be racially “pure.” This origin story places mythical levels of value on Nordic peoples and their genetics, and thus the stereotypical Nordic imagery of what people should look like – heavily influenced by the tall, strong, blonde Vikings of medieval times – was often circulated to exemplify who was Aryan, and who was not. A 1933 scientific journal entry in *Scientific American* describes the Nordic Aryans of Europe as “having long, high heads, tall bodies, blue or gray eyes and light-colored hair” (Hartman 74). This sort of concrete prescription

of what Nordic Aryans would look like allows for easily identifiable traits to be distributed as a clear idea of what the “master race” should look like; there is no room for interpretation in the Nordic ideal for appearance. Along with a heightened importance of a so-called Nordic appearance, the historical success and accomplishments of the Nordic people were also brought into conversation as a means of supporting the notion of Nordic superiority.

The same article goes on to state, “What the modern Nordic race and the mixed Nordic race have accomplished is too well known to need any mention here...” (Hartman 74). The aforementioned accomplishments, naturally, refer to the Vikings of medieval Scandinavia and their storied success in sea-bound trading, pillaging, and exploration in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century. By drawing this distinct connection from the “modern Nordic race” to the Vikings, it becomes clear that Nordic peoples are not being considered in the contemporary context in which they lived; rather, they were seen as living embodiments of their Old Norse ancestors and expected to have retained that same fetishized Viking glory. Moreover, this expectation places weight on that same glory being genetic, meaning that the triumphs and success of the Vikings could be passed down from one “pure Aryan” to another.

The perception of Nordic individuals at this time is really rather curious, as it does seem to imply overwhelmingly the persistence of the perception of Nordic individuals as traditional Vikings well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rather than the truly culturally- and racially-diverse people they were at this time. The *Scientific American* article continues to paint a mythic portrait of the Nordic man, saying:

But the blond giant did have an in-born trait which set him apart from other races: he was not content with conditions as he founds them. Wave after wave of him spread over the face of the earth, where he found spots to his liking. Promptly he shed his savagery and



improved upon everything that he found about him. In every instance he kept right on advancing as long as the Nordic blood remained intact. The Eskimo in hard conditions, and the Negro of Africa in easy ones, did not advance. (Hartman 75)

This depiction of Nordic individuals is troubling, because it yet again refuses to acknowledge contemporary Nordic culture as progressing at all past the age of the Vikings. The “blond giant” is not only superior to all other races in terms of genetics, but also in terms of behavior. He improves upon everything he encounters, and it is explicitly stated that no other “lesser” racial groups have been able to do as much; this creates an unavoidable echo of the very same “us vs. them” dynamic the creation of the Aryan race as pure, advanced people that was weaponized against the Jews during the Third Reich.

One thing the idea of a Nordic-influenced *Herrenrasse* fails to account for is the racial diversity that is actually found in indigenous groups native to the Nordic region like the Sámi people, a Finno-Ugric group originating in the Lapland of Finland. *Herrenrasse* presents the “Nordic race” as an all-white monolithic culture, when no such thing is rooted in reality at all. The Vikings themselves were not even all-white, as Viking refers only to a title – the original Old Norse word *vikingr* meaning no more than simply a seafaring warrior – rather than a group of people. It could be said that any person who has ever stood in a boat holding a sword before is a Viking, but this sort of inherent multicultural inclusivity would not align with the ideals of either Nordicism and the *Herrenrasse*. Thus, not for the first time, the meaning of the word Viking would be shifted toward a more Aryan meaning; one that would only encompass the most stereotypical preconception of what a Viking would be.

In linking Aryanism back to the Vikings, the Nazis give their ethnonationalist ideas about race legitimacy: doing so roots the the concept of eugenics as a means to create more of these

highly-idealized modern Viking peoples in a constructed historical background. On the topic of the Nazi Party wielding an agenda of Nordic descent, Miller-Idress states, “This fantasy enables an expression of whiteness, evoking a sense of racial superiority without being overtly racist, and contributes to collective unconscious assumptions about the nature of German-ness and who belongs in the nation” (85). When associating the German people with the Vikings of the past, it creates a façade for who the Germans really were at this time; the narrative is shifted away from the rather fragile sense of German national identity during the Weimar era, and the image of the Germans as rightful ancestors of the strong, victorious Vikings is painted over this fragility. It is not rooted in reality, but rather in strategic wishful thinking.

#### **IV. Appropriation of Old Norse Mythology in Reconstructed German Culture**

One particularly interesting way in which Old Norse mythology was co-opted in Germany during the *völkisch* movement is through the assimilation of the Poetic Edda into mainstream German culture, in a move to reconstruct German art and literature into its own cultural monolith. The Poetic Edda is a collection of anonymous poems written in Old Norse, and the characters and events contained within the Edda serve largely as the basis for many stories from Norse mythology. These poems weave together a sort of national myth and sense of identity for many Scandinavian countries, and their widespread influence on art and culture can be seen in nearly every aspect of the canon of Scandinavian art and literature. These poems are inherently Scandinavian, and their importance as a series of national myths to Nordic communities cannot be understated.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss also speaks to the importance of national myths and their role of in a region's cultural landscape. She states:

National myths' effectiveness is bolstered by their ubiquity; they are evoked in rituals and enacted in performances from presidential speeches to national sporting events. They are embodied in visual and material culture like national symbols, slogans, images, flags, anthems, monuments, memorials, and marches. (85)

In this sense, the Poetic Edda is no different; with its influence visible in nearly every facet of Scandinavian culture even still today, these poems and the heroes they describe become incredible well-known and significant in the culture to which they belong, to the point where the poems almost become symbolic themselves. These symbols are then transmitted and re-transmitted, adapted and readapted, countless times over throughout history from the dawn of their very inception in the Scandinavian oral tradition.

Still, they are poems, and the common poem is not typically seen as a means for control or fostering a sense of national identity. When examining the intended usage of national myths on the national conscience, it becomes nearly obvious. The concept of a national myth serves to not only boost national morale and sense of identity, but also to instill certain values into the population. Miller-Idris states, "Myths and mythic ideas are thus thought to help individuals navigate the uncertainty and unpredictability of modern, industrialized life. They do this in part by demarcating clear lines between good and evil, providing a sense of clarity and certainty in the face of increasingly complex life choices" (85). In the wake of uncertainty and political unrest, not at all unlike what Germany experienced leading up to World War II, national myths provide a sort of blueprint for citizens to follow. The stories are often black and white: a clear struggle between good versus bad, with the heroes valiantly defeating the villains. In this sense,

the characters are also often archetypal. When a character is an archetype, they are a prototype and something for others – people or objects – to emulate. This lack of depth is easier for a reader to project themselves onto the character since the archetypes, whether that be the strong man, or the brave woman, or the noble hero, are so broad-reaching. Through projection, the common person can become as much of a hero as Thor or the Valkyries, and thus have a part in the stories valued so heavily by their culture. When you live the nation's myth, you live the nation's ideals.

Furthering the discussion about the potential effects of national myths on a nation's identity and what sort of ideals they may encourage in citizens, Miller-Idriss states:

[National myths] also help evoke and naturalize a wide range of emotive signifiers and traits to which one might aspire, such as heroism, valor, nobility, purity, loyalty, integrity, strength, or independence. Such mythical attributes serve the nation well, particularly in unsettled or uncertain epochs, but also help to motivate and mobilize potential nationalists during more stable periods, in part by conveying normative expectations, visions, and values for the collective. (85).

When these are the types of stories that are being fed to a nation's conscience at large, it becomes aspirational to emulate the traits of the protagonists. Traits like Miller-Idriss' aforementioned heroism, valor, nobility, purity, loyalty, integrity, strength, and independence are all valuable to possess, and often serve to create a nationalistic model of what a citizen should look like. In a period of political uncertainty, it is clear how the lauding of these desired traits might influence citizens into action to embody these traits and embrace the values the nation would like to put forward as their own. When the nation's cherished folklore includes characters that are admired for possessing certain traits, it only makes sense that the citizens – in the best interest of the

country – would want to emulate these traits, especially when they are being tied to the pinnacle of Nordic idealist perfectionism in the form of Old Norse gods and goddesses present in the Edda.

It seems peculiar, then, if the purpose of a national myth is to inspire certain traits among citizens and facilitate pride in the nation, that the *völkisch* Germans would opt to endorse Norse mythology in their country as a source of pride. Rather than pulling from what may exist of old German pagan beliefs, drawing on the national myths of Scandinavia seems to be counterintuitive in the mission to create a culture that is free from any outside, non-German influences. However backwards as it may seem, the idea of integrating Norse myth into German culture stems from the notion of *Kulturnation*, meaning a nation built on an organic culture values and not defined by a state apparatus (Von Schnurbein 300). In order to achieve the *Kulturnation*, German art in all forms was to be cultivated in order to carve out a unique German identity; under the assumption that Scandinavian mythology stems from the same sources as German mythology, Old Norse mythology would be able to be used to reconstruct Germany's own mythological and literary identity based in a heightened vision of culture from a pre-industrial era.

German writer Ludwig Fahrenkrog was an outspoken advocate for the inclusion of the Poetic Edda in *völkisch* German practices. This idea was especially prevalent within his own religious group *Germanische Glaubensgemeinschaft*, through the medium of organized readings of the Edda and the production of plays inspired by Norse myth like his own *Baldur* and *Wölund* (Von Schnurbein 316). Aside from just these cultural events, his advocacy reached far beyond the constraints of only the group he had jurisdiction over; he, like many others, endorsed the idea of absorbing Old Norse mythology into the newly-constructed German mythos. While the

inclusion of the Edda not only feeds into the aforementioned notion of a *Kulturnation*, it also provides a very Norse-centric ideal for citizen behavior.

This absorption of Scandinavian cultural markers in the form of mythology – Fahrenkrog’s advocacy being just one example in a movement filled with countless other likeminded individuals with similar goals – sets the precedent for the appropriation of Nordic cultural markers in the *völkisch* movement, through the Weimar era, and continuing into the Third Reich. Additionally, it could also be argued that Fahrenkrog’s inclusion of the Poetic Edda as a contribution to the larger German *Kulturnation* illuminates a greater point about the assimilation of Nordic identity into German culture at the time. In an attempt to emulate the “Nordic race,” defining aspects of Nordic culture were taken and claimed as something that is rightfully German. If the transformation to the idealized “Nords” is not physically possible, then it will have to be made culturally possible as Germany assumed the façade of the “Nordic race” through the adoption of their mythology and cultural values.

## V. Nazi Appropriation of Norse Symbolism

The appropriation of Old Norse imagery does not stop at mythology, and instead pervasively envelopes otherwise benign symbols rooted in the Nordic cultural tradition to be used to represent the Nazi Party. From small-scale practices like uniform detailing to well-known symbols that represent the entire movement as a whole, Norse symbolism can be seen in countless facets of traditional Nazi imagery. However widespread a trend this may be, this appropriation does not come without modification.

The most well-known example of this phenomenon can be found in the insignia of the *Schutzstaffel*, a major Nazi paramilitary operation commonly known as the SS. The insignia used by the SS consists of two *sig* runes (ss) next to each other. In the Old Norse language and cultural context, the Younger Futhark rune *sigel* (s) is documented as being representative of the sun (Simms). However, when co-opted by the Nazi Party for the purpose of being used on uniforms, the meaning was altered away from this more pagan-inspired meaning, toward something more aligned with Nazi Party goals and values: victory.

This change in meaning can be documented in Austrian mysticist Guido von List's Armanen runes, which were published in a book entitled "The Secret of Runes" in the early 1900s, and heavily popularized during the *völkisch* movement. Von List's work frames runes in general as having secret meaning, which allows for him to skillfully cast any significant meaning they could have had in their original Norse context aside and insert new meanings with targeted rhetorical goals instead. Miller-Idriss also approaches the issue of appropriated symbolism in her analysis. She states:

Even when implicit and coded, images and symbols of national myths are not arbitrary but rather still have intentional signification ... Whether used explicitly or implicitly, through coded references or overt representations, symbols, icons, images, and material elements help connect visual and sensory experiences with emotional attachments. (87)

When symbols with pre-set definitions, like the Futhark runes, are used by the Nazi party, their original meaning becomes arbitrary; however, what does not become arbitrary is the new meaning that is prescribed to them. A change in definition, as seen in von List's "The Secret of Runes," is intentional and while these new definitions (i.e. *sigel*'s translation from the Norse 'sun' to the Armanen 'victory') may not inherently embody nationalist values, the uses for which

the Nazi Party has adopted these symbols certainly do. The usage is intentional, and the old meaning is forcefully erased while the common association of the symbols like the *sig* rune comes to be related to the interests of the Nazi Party.

Another example of an intentional shift in a Old Norse symbol's meaning by the Nazi Party can be found in the *swastika*. While the *swastika* is likely the most recognizable symbol of the Nazi Party and Third Reich as a whole, it also finds roots in an ancient Viking sun symbol. Furthermore, its meaning has also been documented as a Nordic representation of Thor's Hammer (Miller-Idriss 93). Unlike the *sigel* rune, where its definition was changed from one specific word to another, the *swastika* deals heavily with symbolism itself. As a Norse symbol, it symbolizes the sun and Thor's hammer: both things possessing similar qualities of being very powerful, or all-mighty. As the symbol of the Third Reich, it stands as all-encompassing symbolism of the Nazi Party, rather than one specific prescribed definition or meaning. This association has come so far that the Norse roots are largely unknown, as the *swastika* is so commonly associated with the Third Reich. Certainly, it has equivalents in other areas, such as countries that practice Buddhism as well, but its meaning has been so deeply bastardized by the Nazi Party that its far-right, nationalist implications cannot be denied or called into question.

It is also important to note that the appropriation of Norse symbolism, especially that which is rooted in Nordic myth, is also deeply intentional, in that it gives legitimacy to German far-right nationalist movements like the Third Reich. Miller-Idriss speaks to this idea, saying:

This intertwined set of Aryan and Nordic myths became the sacred origin myth of German far right nationalists and extremists ... culminating in the Third Reich, when the Nazi party emblazoned its divisions with symbols drawn from runic letters ... and used



propaganda that was ‘driven by the genuine and fanatical belief in the imminence of Germany’s rebirth.’ (93)

This idea lends itself well to the overarching notion of the *völkisch* attempt to turn Germany into a *Kultur* nation. In absorbing both Nordic symbols and mythology, Nazi-era Germany makes an attempt to appropriate the cultural significance of these entities. However, given that the power of Nordic symbols and mythology is largely context-dependent since it is so intrinsically reliant on the Scandinavian setting in order to be as culturally relevant as possible, the same significance simply cannot be duplicated; instead, the meaning is changed. In changing the meaning, the association of the symbols changes. There is already power to be found in Norse symbolism, but it is found within the original Nordic context; a German soldier wielding the *sigel* rune on his SS uniform has his own power, but the power’s source is no longer Norse. Instead, the source is now the constructed German meaning in the shell of what once was Norse.

## **VI. Wagner’s Influence on the Third Reich and the German *Kultur* nation**

Although Richard Wagner himself was deceased before the rise of the Third Reich, his work still served as its musical backdrop, due to Hitler’s personal fascination with Wagner’s compositions. Additionally, Wagner’s music created an almost perfect means of establishing the German *Kultur* nation through shifting the perception of German culture by the German people, thus reclassifying culture as what is then “Nazi-approved.” It is no historical secret that Hitler had an affinity for Wagner’s work by any means; Hitler is quoted as saying, “I recognize in Wagner my only predecessor ... I regard him as a supreme prophetic figure” (Jacobs 81). After viewing a performance of *Rienzi* as a teenager, Hitler’s own private writing seems to point to the

idea that Wagner's work "made him understand for the first time his destiny: to strengthen and unite the German Reich" ("Richard"). Additionally, for his 50th birthday, Hitler is documented as having requested the originals of several Wagnerian operas and taken them into his bunker, counter to the wishes of Wagner's own living relatives at the time.

It is evident that Wagner's work was deeply and personally influential to Hitler specifically, but what is often contested is Wagner's own personal support of the movement with which his music would later come to be so heavily associated. As Wagner died before the rise of the Third Reich, whether or not he would have agreed with its values cannot truly be known; however, there are certain speculations that can be made due to the themes in his personal writing – both prose and musical – and his involvement with the *völkisch* movement, an acknowledged predecessor to the rise of Nazi ideology in Germany.

Most pertinent would be the clearly antisemitic beliefs that Wagner is documented to have held. Wagner's personal antisemitism is most famously documented in his 1850 essay, *Das Judenthum in der Musik*, in which he attacks the Jewish people both on a larger scale and with a narrower focus on Jewish composers, Giacomo Meyerbeer and Felix Mendelssohn. His writing echoes the same "us vs. them" dynamic advocated for by the later creation of the Aryan race ideal, in which he claims the Jews – specifically Jewish creators, like Meyerbeer and Mendelssohn – were to be seen as "those evil, grasping 'un-Germans' who had turned the theater into an industrial concern designed to produce a profit and who in their greed had foisted off of the German people shoddy art-works by such Jewish composers as Meyerbeer and Mendelssohn" (Josserand 226). Even in Wagner's time, well before the rise of the Third Reich, the same sort of pervasive "othering" of the Jewish people was a persistent theme in his personal writing. By presenting the Jews as not being "truly" German, Wagner is intrinsically linking

himself to the *völkisch* idea of *das Volk*, the rightful heirs of the then-growing German empire. Including himself in *das Volk*, Wagner aligned himself with those “humble, simple, supremely gifted mortals who, like himself, were abused and frustrated in the search for their true identity” (Josserand 226). In this way, it seems as if Wagner endorses a line of thinking that would later develop into ideas of an Aryan *Herrenrasse* as well.

Wagner’s personal politics may seem largely irrelevant to the greater catalog of his work, but both the way he aligned himself with the growing *völkisch* movement and the way his work was later co-opted by the Nazi Party are undeniable. In fact, Wagner’s *völkisch* beliefs contributed greatly to the very creation of his famous work: *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, a four-part operatic cycle rooted in stories from Norse mythology, written between 1848 and 1874. In her book, *Germanic Neopaganism – A Nordic Art-Religion?*, Stefanie von Schnurbein examines the *völkisch* implications that grew from the *Ring* cycle, saying that “Wagner’s work popularized the idea that a Pagan Germanic religion that was preserved in the far north should form the basis for the national renewal of Germany” (Von Schnurbein 303). Wagner’s creative decision to base the *Ring* cycle in Norse mythology is in no way coincidental, and bears a lot of resemblance to the general notion of *Kulturnation*; in claiming Norse mythology and the Nordic pagan religion surrounding it as something that rightfully belongs to the German nation, Wagner is not only constructing a very curated and idealized vision of German culture but also attempting to employ a highly-mythicized version of Scandinavian culture markers to serve as this “national renewal.”

Though the appropriation of Norse mythology and imagery in Germany would come to be especially rampant in the later 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Wagner was indeed the first German artist to use the medieval Scandinavian iterations of the Nibelungen material on which the opera is based. While a German source text of the same subject material exists in the form of

the *Nibelungenlied*, it is more centered around a courtly, Christian setting than a Nordic one. In using the original Old Norse source as the foundation for the *Ring* cycle, Wagner chose what he considered to be the “more original” context because he found it to be more “apt to express myth’s timeless character” (Von Schnurbein 303). Had Wagner made the decision to center his epic around the German *Nibelungen*, the opera would not have had the same significance in regards to the Old Norse origin and setting, and thus could not reflect the same sort of Nordacist value of the medieval Scandinavian myth.

The *Ring* cycle proved to be intensely successful in Nazi Germany. In his 1968 article, “Reopening the Case of Wagner,” Harvey Gross attempts to reckon with the widespread influence Wagner’s music, especially the *Ring* cycle, had over the Nazi movement in Germany. He claims, “Hitler not only appropriated Wagner’s prose style; he made Wagnerian stage ritual and symbology part of the larger spectacle of Nazi life. A new Nazi religion was put together from the *Ring*; Nordic mythology replaced Christian belief” (120). Although a replacement of Christianity by Old Norse mythology seems farfetched, it connects perfectly with the original goal of the *völkisch* movement: the rejection of Christianity in order to revive pre-Christian Paganism in daily life for all Germans. Wagner’s work highlighted the importance of the preservation and adoption of Norse mythology into the daily lives of the German people. In the *Ring* cycle, the Nazis saw themselves through a “Wagnerian looking-glass ... they are gods, they are heroes, and the others are Nibelungs to be enslaved, chastised, killed” (Jacobs 82). Through adaptation, Wagner created a Germanized portrait of Norse myth that was easily palatable to the Nazi cause, transmissible through performance, and likely to be claimed as culture by the common person. This sort of appropriation of Norse myth as German culture, particularly high

German culture, only serves to add esteem to the rampant ideas of Nordicism that were so heavily valued by Hitler and his comrades during this time.

In addition to this, Wagner's own personal fixation on Norse mythology also serves to further the notion of the reclaiming the Nordic past in order to shape the image of a Nationalist future in Germany. Through his focus on national myths and the "racial heroes" they provide, Wagner sees that the "Nordic race" is elevated to a higher status, and feeds into the *völkisch* fetishization of Nordic peoples. Additionally, Wagner also used his platform as a creator to smuggle in antisemitic representations of certain characters in his operas to more clearly otherize the Jewish people as a "them" separate from the German national identity, only serving to further foster the budding Nazi idea of the us versus them dynamic. Ideas of antisemitism are blatantly present in the *Ring* cycle, specifically in the way Alberich and Mime as characters both display characteristics that are in alignment with contemporary antisemitic stereotypes of the Jewish people (Von Schnurbein 305). These negative caricatures of Jewish individuals transfers a coded, antisemitic message to an audience that, in the peak of Nazi politics, would be poised to be especially receptive of such a coded message.

Richard Wagner came under scrutiny from his contemporary, Friedrich Nietzsche, who critiqued his former idol's increased involvement with the *völkisch* movement and antisemitism, in his 1888 book, *The Case of Wagner*, and once again in his 1889 essay, *Nietzsche contra Wagner*. Nietzsche asserts in *The Case of Wagner* that Wagner's association with the German *völkisch* movement contributed greatly to his antisemitic beliefs, and expresses concern in the way these beliefs have shaped the canon of Wagner's work. Indeed, the bulk of Nietzsche's writings on Wagner suggests a sort of disappointment in the lifestyle choices the latter had begun to make regarding political rhetoric and ideology, which suggests a sort of radicalization which

sees numerous echoes throughout the history of Nazi utilization of the same Norse imagery and mythology on which Wagner fixated.

Additionally, Nietzsche criticizes the extent to which Wagner infused his works with his own personal beliefs, which can prove to be especially problematic when Wagner's own radicalization toward violent antisemitism through the *völkisch* movement are taken into consideration. In *The Case of Wagner*, Nietzsche asserts:

The problems [Wagner] sets on the stage are all concerned with hysteria; the convulsiveness of his emotions, his over-excited sensitiveness, his taste which demands ever sharper condimentation [sic], his erraticness which he toggled out to look like principles, and, last but not least, his choice of heroes and heroines, considered as physiological types. (28)

While it may theoretically be possible to separate Wagner from his work, the extent to which his personal beliefs were infused into his writing, especially those reflecting a *völkisch* ideology of antisemitism and German ethnonationalism, makes it especially difficult to take his work out of that specific political context. This task becomes more demanding when such work has been appropriated for oppressive political causes to the extent of which the *Ring* cycle was.

Through the presentation of Old Norse mythology in the undeniably German context of the Wagnerian opera within the *Ring* cycle, Wagner created the perfect vehicle for the transmission of ideas regarding the construction of a Nordic-centric *Kultur*. An overarching concern from the *völkisch* movement to the Third Reich is the redefinition of German culture to something that can inspire more national pride, and give the citizens a shared sense of identity through this culture. It is clear that high-culture media, like art, music, and

literature, played an important role in the establishment of a newly-constructed German culture and elevated these ideas of German excellence into a place of societal esteem, despite the fact Nordic cultural markers are used as the face of German excellence time and time again. Wagner took the idea of a national myth, and brought it to the stage; here, he gave the German people something to believe in: a vivid depiction of all their deepest hopes and fears, dreams and aspirations playing out in an extravagant spectacle viewed through the lens of Old Norse mythology. While Wagner certainly did not invent Nordicism, he gave it a vehicle to invade German popular culture in the Third Reich era.

## **VII. Conclusion**

The connection between the Nazis and the medieval Scandinavian roots from which the Third Reich pulled inspiration is not one that is typical to make, as the imagery of the Third Reich is so pervasively recognized as its own entity – and that is precisely the point. By painting their ethnonationalist goals and values with a wide, Nordic brush, the Nazis and their *völkisch* forbears were able to put on the mask of the “Nordic race” they valued so much, in order to push larger ideas about racial purity as it pertains to national identity.

This desire to create a uniquely German cultural identity, while simultaneously riding the coattails of the medieval Vikings of Scandinavia, led to the mythification of Nordic peoples based on conjured racial stereotypes. With the heightened importance of national myth as a source of pride and power, the Nordic people became nearly as mythic as the stories of Old Norse gods and goddesses themselves – an almost unachievably brave, giant caricature of what a Viking would be, without any thought for how the Nordic people have progressed and evolved

past this time, and especially without any note for the cultural and racial diversity seen in the Nordic region even then.

Through its appropriation of Old Norse imagery and mythology in anything from uniforming to cherished musical works, as well as the construction of the idea of a “pure Nordic race,” the Nazi Party was able to utilize the newfound elevation of Nordic culture to mythical levels of admiration and aspiration in order to legitimize its own dangerous ideas of racial purity and culture. These ideas are still prevalent in neo-Nazi groups today, like Sweden’s Nordic Resistance Movement. As shocking as the blatant use of well-known symbols like Thor’s Hammer as Nazi propaganda may be in the current day, understanding how these symbols came to be associated with the original Nazi Party through the rise of the *völkisch* movement can potentially shed light onto why and how these symbols specifically have been chosen. This study also allows for understanding about how Norse imagery has historically been popularized for such a twisted political meaning. It is only through education and understanding that we can combat this warped image of who the Vikings really were, and prevent their stories and religious symbols from being used as a tool for oppression.



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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Asatru is a modern, polytheistic pagan religion based on the worship of traditional Germanic gods and goddesses, like Odin, Freyja, or Thor. It was founded in the 1970s in Iceland, but retains popularity today. Followers of this religion – often also known as Odinism, Wotanism, or Germanic neo-paganism – are referred to as “Asatruars,” or sometimes “heathens.” For more information regarding Asatru, see *A Practical Heathen’s Guide to Asatru* by Patricia M. Lafayllve.