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Hayes, Jennifer

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The Beautification of Evil: Hitler's Rise and Consolidation of Power Through Visual Imagery

*Jennifer Hayes*¹

Introduction

Hitler's rise to power was fueled strongly by the use of powerful imagery, and the fascist visual rhetoric displayed through his propaganda aided in establishing and naturalizing a unique set of ideals that imposed and glorified his ideals through an attractive national franchise justified by "science." For Hitler, his franchise revolved around the repeated imagery of racial and biological constructs of blond-haired, blue-eyed, physically fit, and biologically prosperous versions of an Aryanized Germany. Issues with clearly defining his idea of "Aryan" versus "non-Aryan" races arose. Because of this, his imagery became especially important for his audience to visualize his vague ideas of race. While not facts, these images, when recycled enough and depicted as truths, eventually became ideas that the German population believed to be facts, which is defined as the naturalization of ideas.

Reminiscent of the idealized facades of a movie studio, the visual facades of the Nazi Party (NSDAP) propaganda established Hitler's values in a party platform that allowed for mass exposure. Like the verbal rhetoric pushed by Hitler and the NSDAP, the imagery of his propaganda, or visual rhetoric, acted as an essential tool to the NSDAP's rise to power through mass persuasion. Hitler sold his ideals, virtues, and goals to the German people, wrapped in a veil of attractive public imagery that allowed his twisted ideals to exploit the preexisting context of a depressed post-war Germany. Having faced the effects of losing World War I, the Treaty of Versailles, the strike against Germany's nationalistic pride, and the waves of economic disparity due to the Great Depression, the NSDAP had the social protest to rally for national support to supposedly overcome these challenges. As the American orator and author Jenae Kilbourne remarked, "Ads sell more than products, they sell values, they sell images, they sell concepts of love, sexuality, of success, and perhaps most importantly, of normalcy."² To further his goal of rising to power, Hitler used effective visual propaganda to establish his ideas of success, beauty, biology, and normalcy, eventually defining the identity of the audience he wished to promote. He believed that propaganda should be utilized to "awaken the imagination of the

¹ Jennifer Hayes is a graduate of Modesto Junior College and California State University, Stanislaus, a Phi Alpha Theta History Society member, American Rosie the Riveter Association member, owner and operator of an online antique selling platform, and a lifelong lover of history and information.

² *Killing Us Softly: Advertising's Image of Women* (2010), Directed by Sut Jhally, 00:40:56.
<https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/216732?vp=wcl>.

public through an appeal to their feelings, in finding the appropriate psychological form that will arrest the attention and appeal to the hearts of the national masses.”³ With constant exposure and repetition to public imagery such as posters, images, ads, and illustrations within publications, Hitler’s ideals became closer to indisputable facts of nature and biology within the minds of his indoctrinated audience.

Various historians explore the extent of Hitler’s propaganda and the characteristics of its imagery that ensured the Party’s rise to power. Historian Ian Kershaw explores Hitler and his values within *Hitler: A Biography*, which is essential to linking Hitler’s ideals to the ideals portrayed in Nazi propaganda imagery. In his book, *Selling Hitler: Propaganda and the Brand*, Nicholas O’Shaughnessy underlines Hitler’s propaganda as an almost franchise-like brand in which he sold his values through his propaganda. Similarly, David Welch explores the importance of Hitler’s propaganda and its link to politics within his book, *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. With regard to Hitler’s biological and racial constructs, historian Richard Weikart highlights the Nazi’s emphasis on biology in his book *Hitler’s Ethic: The Nazi Pursuit of Evolutionary Progress*. Weikart’s focus on Hitler’s ethics is vital to understanding the depictions within Hitler’s visual rhetoric and what it attempted to accomplish. In her book, *Nazi Chic: Fashioning Women in the Third Reich*, Dr. Irene Guenther draws attention to the NSDAP’s manipulation of the image of women by a Nazi-controlled fashion industry. What Guenther highlights that is especially relevant to imagery are the key characteristics that the Nazis attempted to establish as the ideal image of the “Aryan” woman versus the non-ideal, “non-Aryanized” woman. Each of these historians’ works helps define Hitler’s values and the importance of propaganda. This essay demonstrates the NSDAP’s emphasis on propaganda, not solely focusing on it as a whole, but particularly on the evolution of imagery used and its importance for Hitler in defining his values for a larger national audience.

The NSDAP disseminated its propaganda into German culture as a means to spread its racial doctrine. Through this, the NSDAP established its idea of beauty, resulting in the cultural ostracization of those outside of the valued construct of beauty and race. The NSDAP’s visual rhetoric exploited Germany’s political, economic, and social circumstances to help influence the minds of the public to willingly support their doctrine through the naturalization of their ideas into perceived truths of beauty and biology.

Before Effective Visual Propaganda

To understand the eventual emphasis on imagery as a key tool in Hitler’s rise to power, it is essential to explore the NSDAP’s lack of popularity when Hitler’s propaganda was in its infancy. Before Hitler’s

³ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, (Elite Minds Inc., 2010), translated by James Murphy, p. 153.

establishment as the tyrannical leader of Germany and master of aesthetic visual propaganda, he was one of only 2,000 members of the NSDAP in 1921.⁴ Lack of popularity and public legitimacy coincided with the Party's lack of interest in propaganda as an effective political tool. The Party's reputation for use of brute force and immoral means of garnering support led to the Party's search for new tools of persuasion.

Hitler and the NSDAP's lack of credibility was especially clear after the infamous failed 1923 Beer Hall Putsch, which resulted in the imprisonment of several party members, including Hitler. Additionally, during the 1928 German Reichstag election, Hitler and the NSDAP conjured a meager 2.6% proportional presence within the German Reichstag government.⁵ The failed attempt also resulted in the realization that their image as a violent gang using brute force could only carry the NSDAP so far, eventually encouraging the Party to utilize attractive public imagery to gain greater national popularity. Hitler was elected Chancellor of Germany after the fortuitous death of President Paul von Hindenburg in 1934, allowing for his seemingly natural segway into national leadership. However, with Hitler having assumed the position without the majority of national support, he still needed to persuade Germany to support, define, and normalize his values.

Eventually, the Party abandoned its Putsch-style attempts to seize power and devoted greater energies to gaining power by securing a seemingly more "legitimate" presence within German politics – including an emphasis on political propaganda to garner support (see Figure 2). Oxford historian Z.A.B. Zeman highlights this new emphasis on propaganda and imagery. Zeman claims that "for Hitler, propaganda and organization were closely linked...His skill and interest in propaganda raised him from the ranks after the war, and it gained him entry into the political group that he was to make into his own party."⁶ From there, Hitler and the NSDAP shifted their focus to mass persuasion through images rather than employing the unsuccessful brute force of the Party's early attempts at gaining national support.

The Party's early propaganda depicted ideas that were ineffective in gaining support from the masses. Hitler reflected this understanding by shifting his focus to what he claimed was an "appeal to the hearts of the national masses."⁷ This included shifting an emphasis from narrow, male-oriented, brute-force characteristics of early images to more widely attractive imagery of a refined nature and one that included more of his Aryan audience as a whole. These new images included visual propaganda targeting women, children, and the average "Aryan" individual that Hitler defined through his visual

⁴ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: A Biography*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008), p. 110.

⁵ "20. Mai 1928, Wahl Zum 4. Reichstag." www.gonschior.de/weimar. Accessed 15 November 2022.
<http://www.gonschior.de/weimar/Deutschland/RT4.html>.

⁶ Zbyněk A. Zeman, *Nazi propaganda*, (Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 3.

⁷ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, translated by James Murphy, p. 153.

rhetoric. Alongside the new inclusion of women and children, the Party established roles for the Reich, as deeply defined within the NSDAP imagery. For women, this included motherhood, domestic responsibilities, and all actions done for the betterment of the Reich. For children, it was the understanding of Hitler's constructed ideas of race, pride, and nationalism for the Reich. As Hitler and the Party shifted to alluring visual propaganda, national support also increased, and Hitler's ideas of race and beauty became increasingly ingrained in German culture.

The early and unrefined use of propaganda is evident in Figure 1, predating the Party's heightened emphasis on imagery following the establishment of the Reich Ministry of Propaganda in 1933. This early party poster exhibits three NSDAP soldiers depicted with stern facial expressions, as if ready for a future battle, and with strong jawlines, suggesting physical strength and dominance. This poster suggests an early NSDAP that had yet to fully invest in images as a tool for large public persuasion. This is evidenced by the poster's harsh and rudimentary use of color, its almost unfinished and quickly drawn character, as well as its unrefined use of drawing materials. Additionally, this piece, similar to other early works, focused on strictly recruiting the male Aryan population. This poster was also created before the onset of the NSDAP's Reich Ministry of Propaganda, led by Joseph Goebbels, demonstrating the obvious lack of formal investment in mass visual rhetoric during the early days of the NSDAP.

Hitler soon recognized the need for attractive imagery when advertising to a mass audience. As Historian Zeman highlights, "he [Hitler] realized that his propaganda itself acted as agent of natural selection: 'The more radical and inciting my propaganda was, the more it frightened off weaklings and irresolute characters and prevented their pushing into the first nucleus of the organization.'"⁸ The Ministry's propaganda shifted to more utopian imagery, targeting the common emotions of the average "Aryan" individual. With this new strategy, the Party abandoned its earlier harsh, unrefined, and narrow-focused imagery. As American theorist and propagandist Edward Bernays claimed, "one of the most effective methods is the utilization of the group formation of modern society to spread ideas."⁹ As Bernays suggests, the full utilization of a broader audience, or "group formation," was the necessary means required to spread ideas. Hitler's eventual influence over the public transformed into an empire of images. This image-defined empire spanned across depictions of a broad range of ages and both men and women to transmit his ideals into idealistic imagery of a national identity of strength, physical beauty, and racial superiority: Hitler's *Volksgemeinschaft* (the "people's community").

Bernays once claimed in his famous 1928 book, *Propaganda*, "Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society [propaganda] constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling

⁸ Zeman, *Nazi propaganda*, (Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 3.

⁹ Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda*, (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928), p. 57.

power.”¹⁰ Coincidentally, not only did Hitler achieve this status, but his propaganda ministry had possibly drawn inspiration from Bernays’s work within the NSDAP’s strategic plan to construct an effective propaganda campaign to rise to power. Bernays later discussed this in his 1965 autobiography, *Biography of an Idea: Memoirs of Public Relations Counsel Edward L. Bernays*. He recounts that in 1933, the Hearst foreign correspondent, Karl von Weigand, was given a tour of Joseph Goebbels’ propaganda library, which included the work of Bernays.¹¹ Bernays emphasized that “they were using my book *Crystalizing Public Opinion* as a basis for his destructive campaign against the Jews of Germany. This shocked me, but I knew any human activity can be used for social purposes or misused for antisocial ones.”¹² While Goebbels does not specifically mention Bernays’ work in sources such as *The Goebbels Diaries, 1939-1941*, much of Bernays’ work with propaganda is reflected within the NSDAP’s eventual propaganda imagery. From the broad use of propaganda as an “unseen mechanism of society,” to the more specific use of preexisting ideas within new imagery – such as racial constructs, nationalism, and the loss of WWI for the Germans – these ideas seen within NSDAP imagery mirror those of Bernays and reflect how energy and research were invested in creating effective propaganda by an eager NSDAP.¹³

Actualization of Propaganda’s Potential

The NSDAP eventually valued and recognized the importance of propaganda so highly that they created a government apparatus to control national propaganda and the resulting imagery. Through this new apparatus, the field of visual propaganda truly flourished and was invested in as a key tool to gain power and spread Hitler’s ideals to a willing audience. The same year Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, Joseph Goebbels officially established the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. The Ministry included “Seven Chambers of Cultures,” controlling media within the film, fine arts, literature, theater, press and media, music, and radio sectors. At least four of the seven chambers emphasized mass visual propaganda. Everything, including the imagery within school education, movies, books, and posters, was guided by Hitler’s ideals and managed by the heads of each chamber and their various teams of propagandists.

With the addition of the Ministry, the broad-reaching visual imagery of the NSDAP transformed the Party into what historian of Nazi Germany, Ian Kershaw, describes as a “super interest movement.” Kershaw highlights the NSDAP’s tendency of “linking quite different, sometimes

¹⁰ Bernays, *Propaganda*, p. 9.

¹¹ Edward L. Bernays, *Biography of an Idea: Memoirs of Public Relations Counsel Edward L. Bernays*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), p. 652.

¹² Bernays, *Biography*, p. 652.

¹³ Bernays, *Propaganda*, p. 9.

incompatible, social demands to a unifying vision of national regeneration.”¹⁴ One can see these “sometimes incompatible” combinations of far-reaching concepts with the Party’s imagery of ideas, ranging from an emphasis on “Aryan” women and child-rearing to the strength of men in the German military – two drastically different concepts that were combined into one national doctrine within propaganda. As such, with an eventual broad-reaching presence of propaganda over social topics, the Party’s use of propaganda demonstrates their growing interest in using it as a tool to increase and maintain their national support. Goebbels reinforced propaganda’s role as vital to the *Gleichschaltung*, or the “Nazification,” of the German public through visual persuasion as “we [Ministry and the NSDAP] want to work on people until they have capitulated to us, until they grasp ideologically that what is happening in Germany today not only must be accepted but also can be accepted.”¹⁵ Here, Goebbels underlines the Party’s goal to ensure their values are not just forced upon their audience as something that “must” happen, but are presented in a way that “can be accepted.”¹⁶ With a greater understanding of the potential of propaganda imagery, a greater emphasis on the NSDAP’s intended audience for images also grew.

Nicholas O’Shaughnessy covers the eventual importance of propaganda in his 2016 book *Selling Hitler*. He argues that propaganda played a critical role in the image it carefully constructed for Hitler’s rise to power. As O’Shaughnessy emphasizes, “Rather than attributing the mass slaughter of that era to ideology alone, it is important to recognize that the unique nihilism of the century, in fact, arose from the union of propaganda and ideology, with the two working together.”¹⁷ He explores Hitler’s “sensory assault” and “mass suggestion” that worked alongside Hitler’s manipulation of German history to construct a new image of the German people. These methods, as O’Shaughnessy claims, were how Hitler was able to sell his agenda to his audience. They also allowed Hitler to construct the imagery that painted a picture of society in the image of his values and simplified it for mass exposure.

Using Understanding of Audience for Imagery

Hitler’s audience played a crucial role in the way he constructed his visual rhetoric and imagery. Both Goebbels and Hitler agreed that propaganda “must be addressed always and exclusively to the

¹⁴ Kershaw, *Hitler: A Biography*, p. 89.

¹⁵ Joseph Goebbels, “Speech to the Press on the Establishment of a Reich Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda,” German History in Documents and Images (GHDI), spoken 15 March, 1933, https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1579.

¹⁶ Goebbels, “Speech to the Press.”

¹⁷ Nicholas O’Shaughnessy, *Selling Hitler: Propaganda and the Brand*, (London: Hurst and Company, 2016).

masses.”¹⁸ They did not target an intellectual class through reasoning but rather aimed toward the emotions of the common German citizen and those who made up the majority of Hitler’s national support. In Hitler’s case, it was the German citizens of his constructed “Aryan” race that were the “masses.” By mere chance for the NSDAP, the onset of the 1929 stock market crash in the United States considerably impacted Germany’s economy and its “masses.” This left an estimated 4.5 million people unemployed in Germany by January 1930.¹⁹ By January 1933, unemployment increased to a staggering thirty-four percent, with 6,013,612 unemployed, creating a ripe environment of fear and concern that Hitler and the NSDAP used to help dominate an economically depressed nation.²⁰ This shift, combined with the memory of Germany’s fall during World War I, impacted the characteristics of the NSDAP’s propaganda and led to its imagery being elevated to target this specific audience.

For his audience, Hitler used visual propaganda constructed with unified and all-encompassing imagery, simplified into concepts easily understood and replicated for effectiveness. Hitler made it clear that “effective propaganda must limit its points to a few and these points must be repeated until even the last member of the audience understands what is meant by them.”²¹ This statement conveys that the NSDAP’s values were compressed into simplified imagery so that a broad audience could understand them as Hitler and Goebbels intended. Similarly, the American theorist and propagandist Edward Bernays emphasized the usage of preexisting ideas in tandem to create effective contemporary ideas worth following: “It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind, who harness old social forces and contrive new ways to bind and guide the world.”²²

Even if this included broad concepts combined into one doctrine, it was this philosophy that the common onlooker was thought to have understood. Goebbels especially understood this concept as he considered their earlier images “all too contrived and complicated. We expect too much of the people, and because of this they frequently find us completely incomprehensible. I urge a more primitive approach in our entire propaganda.”²³ This philosophy included an eventual depicted role of “Aryan” women within a growing Nazi society. Further depictions included women in child-rearing, marriage, the role of children, and the continued role of men within society as already depicted in

¹⁸ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943 & 1999), translated by Ralph Manheim, p. 179.

¹⁹ Kershaw, *Hitler: A Biography*, pp. 110, 196.

²⁰ Dan P. Silverman, “Fantasy and Reality in Nazi Work-Creation Programs, 1933-1936.” *The Journal of Modern History*, 65:1 (1993): pp. 113–51.

²¹ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, translated by James Murphy, p.180.

²² Bernays, *Propaganda*, p. 11.

²³ Joseph Goebbels, *The Goebbels Diaries, 1939-1941*, (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1983), translated by Fred Taylor, p. 45.

earlier images. The depiction of a constructed “Aryan” race in a preferential portrayal over “non-Aryans” was especially central to this new imagery. From depictions of Jewish people as physically frightening to “Aryan” Germans as more physically fit and idealistic, Hitler’s propaganda established an easily understandable “us-versus-them” contrast. This construct of racial differences, prominent in imagery aimed at the public, led to the perception of beauty standards based upon Hitler’s ideas of race (“Aryans” versus “non-Aryans”). These visual concepts established by Hitler, as well as the inclusion of a greater audience within imagery, paved the way for increased public support for the NSDAP.

The reception of the visual rhetoric is worth exploring because Hitler’s audience was an important part of the effectiveness of his images. The reception of Hitler’s propaganda is explored by historian and political scientist Dr. Janosch Steuwer through a collection of pre-war German diary entries in his book, *A Third Reich, as I See It: Politics, Society, and Private Life in the Diaries of Nazi Germany, 1933-1939*. While detailed accounts of people’s reception vary among the documents that exist, diary entries suggest that Germans were making changes in their daily lives to reflect the propaganda of the NSDAP better. As covered by Steuwer, 1933 diary entries written by eighteen-year-old Rudolf Briske adopted NSDAP values from the propaganda-led education, which embodied ideals such as patriotism and nationalism.²⁴ Mirroring the idea of preexisting ideas, particularly in the case of adolescent Briske, the propaganda education he received effectively influenced the teen to adhere to the ideals of the NSDAP. As stated by Steuwer, “Briske would feel that the Gleichschaltung [“coordination” of the consolidation of the NSDAP power] was necessary.”²⁵ Steuwer also established that “these first ‘thoughts’ were quite typical of the other entries of the young man.”²⁶ Steuwer further claimed, “the educational efforts did not just reinforce existing convictions....Rather, they led many people, at least in individual contexts, to begin aligning their life management and self-contemplation with the new models prescribed by the Nazi regime.”²⁷ With Hitler’s audience so essential to the *Gleichschaltung*, or the further rise to power, Hitler expanded whom his imagery targeted.

Inclusion of Women

Unlike in earlier propaganda, women of all ages were eventually heavily targeted with visual propaganda. The NSDAP recognized the need to include women within a growing NSDAP, as women were indispensable to Hitler’s goal of uniting his construct of a German race. While earlier propaganda

²⁴ Janosch Steuwer, *A Third Reich, as I See It*. Kindle Edition, (Indiana University Press, 2023), p. 188.

²⁵ Steuwer, *A Third Reich, as I See It*, p. 188.

²⁶ Steuwer, *A Third Reich, as I See It*, p. 190.

²⁷ Steuwer, *A Third Reich, as I See It*, p. 327.

focused on the male population, later propaganda broadened its audience to include women. It also pushed the standards to which women could aspire. These social roles were depicted as the gifts women could bestow for the betterment of the German people. In Figure 3, while the blonde and chiseled male figure dominates the image, it is the woman holding an infant who is the central object of the image. Her proud face and central placement suggest an emphasis on her, but especially her ability to bear and nurture a child. She fulfills her role in the “Aryan” family and the German nation, increasing the population of the *Volk*. She does so under the watchful eye of her partner and an eagle overhead – a sign of the *Volk* and the NSDAP. Similarly, Figures 4 and 5 demonstrate the NSDAP’s emphasis on women’s motherly role for the betterment of the *Volk* (Volk/NSDAP eagle as the backdrop for the family in Figure 5) and the glorified construct of the “Aryan” family.

Alongside the NSDAP’s shift to including depictions of women, the 8 September 1934 rally speech to the National Socialist Women’s League further reflected this shift. Here, Hitler glorified the role of an “Aryan” woman, saying, “What the man gives in courage on the battlefield, the woman gives in eternal self-sacrifice, in eternal pain and suffering. Every child that a woman brings into the world is a battle, a battle waged for the existence of her people.”²⁸ The responsibility of “Aryan” women to bear children for the betterment of Hitler’s *Volk* was reflected in the visual propaganda and fundamental to his values – values that he believed were shared amongst all German people. The imagery glorified the role of the “Aryan” woman, giving the domestic sphere of child-rearing newfound importance within German national identity. In 1936, diary entries by Marianne Köhl, a young German woman, include her everyday experiences, including her support of the League of German Girls as well as her support of a masculine ideal, saying, “We can be good, solid German men [Menschen] who also in their place do something for the good of our Volk and fatherland.”²⁹ In this case, Köhl had internalized Hitler and the NSDAP’s ideals to the point of writing in support of such concepts of gender. Such ideas of the supportive woman and the “solid German man” were internalized because of the Party’s imagery – now including the female population more than ever.

Historian Irene Guenther explores this concept of the inclusion and manipulation of the image of women in her book, *Nazi Chic: Fashioning Women in the Third Reich (Dress, Body, Culture)*. While focusing on the fashion perspective, Guenther also highlights the overall image of women established and encouraged by the Nazi regime as a means to “mirror official gender ideology, create feelings of national belonging, contribute to the nation’s identity, promote a German cultural

²⁸ Adolf Hitler, “Hitler’s Speech to the National Socialist Women’s League,” The Rally of the German Women’s League, speech presented at the Nuremberg Party Rally, 14 September 1936.

²⁹ Institut für Zeitgeschichte (Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History), 11 January 1937, as found in Janosch Steuer, *A Third Reich, as I See It*, (Indiana University Press, 2023), Kindle Edition, p. 195.

victory.”³⁰ Additionally, Guenther states that this imagery of women’s fashion was also to “uphold and extend the governmental policies of economic autarky, anti-Semitism, and Aryanization, and support plans for a Nazi-controlled European fashion industry.”³¹ While referencing the fashion industry, this idea of influencing the image of women also extends to the control of Hitler’s society as a whole. His visual rhetoric ultimately provided a platform by which the NSDAP could visually define these standards for their audience, including Hitler’s ideas of race, beauty, and biology.

Along with this, Guenther also highlights the NSDAP’s shift to images of the “new” woman as a means to distance Germany from ideas that did not fit into their idea of beauty and “Aryanness.” This included the encouragement of traditional German ideas of femininity, right down to fashion. As supported through much of the NSDAP’s images, like Figures 4 and 5, a true German woman was defined by nods to traditional femininity and the *Tracht* (traditional regional German women’s garb). An enamored author in the *Völkischer Beobachter* newspaper contributes to the fashion discourse, “When I think of how charming our old cotton dresses looked... A time will come when one will yearn for simplicity and will attempt to find out if a young girl in a cotton dress with long pigtailed is not, after all, the most beautiful of all.”³² Here, the author emphasizes the image of the young, braid-adorned woman as the ideal, helping to establish a standard of beauty for “Aryan” women. This also corresponds with the child-rearing aspect as the Party’s imagery supported the standard of not only appearance but also of the physical aspect of “shining with health, [and with] sturdy child-bearing hips.”³³ Guenther also stated that the image of women, specifically clothing, in Guenther’s case, was something the “Nazis hoped would serve as a visible sign of inclusion into – or exclusion from – the Volksgemeinschaft, the national community.”³⁴ In essence, the image of women would help Hitler define his ideas of race and beauty as ones that established concepts of “Aryans” versus “non-Aryans” within his rise to power.

Inclusion of Youth

³⁰ Irene Guenther. *Nazi Chic: Fashioning Women in the Third Reich (Dress, Body, Culture)*, (New York and Oxford: Berg, 2004), p. 13.

³¹ Guenther, *Nazi Chic*, p. 13.

³² “Ein Wort an die Frauen,” *Völkischer Beobachter*: Beilage, Die deutsche Frauenbewegung (11 March 1928). As cited in Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic*, (New York and Oxford: Berg, 2004), p. 76.

³³ Erica Carter, “Alice in the Consumer Wonderland: West German case studies in gender and consumer culture,” in Angela McRobbie and Mica Nava, eds., *Gender and Generation*, (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 213, as cited in Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic*, (New York and Oxford: Berg, 2004), p. 11.

³⁴ Guenther, *Nazi Chic*, p. 13.

In addition to women, the effective imagery of the youth population became an essential asset for the influence of Hitler's ideals over a mass audience. Children's books, such as *Der Giftpilz* and public propaganda instilled the same ideals for the adult audience in this younger population (see Figures 7 and 8). Ideals encouraged in the youth included the role of a German woman (see Figure 7) as a traditional, domestic staple of a German family. This, paired with the construct of the oppositional depicted unattractive Jewish person, helped define the "non-Aryan." Figure 9 furthers the idea of national pride through the support of the NSDAP for the youth. As mentioned by Hitler and Goebbels, these ideas were intended to be simplified concepts easily understood by the vast audience they wished to target effectively. Here, the "us-versus-them" concept of stratification is aimed at the youth of Germany. As with the addition of women within visual propaganda, the inclusion of children showed the Party's ability to widen its base through expansive yet simultaneously targeted imagery.

Julius Streicher, an early NSDAP member and famous demagogue within Germany, published the 1938 children's book *Der Giftpilz*, which disseminated hateful stereotypes and false narratives about Jewish people, depicting them as deceitful and harmful to society, ultimately promoting hatred and intolerance among German youth (see Figures 6 and 7). As explored later, science became the justification for Hitler's ideologies and something used heavily within propaganda imagery, as demonstrated by illustrations such as those found in *Der Giftpilz*. Dr. Daniel Feldman claims *Der Giftpilz* was an "example of a society that venerated science to the point of making biology the organizing principle of its educational system, yet produced children's literature shot through with fabrication and falsehood."³⁵ Here, Hitler established his ideals as standards of fact through a constant reputation of imagery in forms specifically aimed at the youth. Influencing his younger audience allowed for the manipulation of further generations. As Hitler once said, "When the older generations can barely walk anymore, the youth will dedicate itself to continuing our work."³⁶ To ensure the longevity of his efforts, Hitler incorporated the German youth – a previously under-utilized demographic (see Figures 8 and 9).

Beauty Construction Through Imagery

Hitler, understanding his audience's crucial role in gaining adequate national support, created an ideal of worth and beauty depicted as scientific fact through imagery. Hitler expressed his values regarding Jews within both *Mein Kampf* and the NSDAP's 25-Point Program. With the proclamation by Hitler of the 25-Point Program in 1920, the NSDAP's values were formalized in a statement of twenty-five

³⁵ Daniel Feldman, "Reading Poison: Science and Story in Nazi Children's Propaganda," *Children's Literature in Education*, 53:2 (2021).

³⁶ *Triumph of the Will* (1934), Directed by Leni Riefenstahl, 01:39:55.
<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6uajey>.

points that declared the Party's goals, values, and attempts at defining the constructed racial idea of "Aryans" versus "non-Aryans" (specifically referencing Jewish people within Germany). However, both works found difficulty in defining what a Jewish person was, leading to vague and sometimes avoidant definitions of Hitler's idea of what constituted a Jewish person versus an "Aryan." As the 25-Point Program stated, "Only a member of the race can be a citizen. A member of the race can only be one who is of German blood, without consideration of creed. Consequently, no Jew can be a member of the race."³⁷ This vague construct describes those with "German blood" as those qualified to be citizens, regardless of "creed." However, he then continues to ostracize Jewish people as outside of the boundaries of *Volk*. This implies that Hitler had a particular idea of what a true German was that was different from the Germans who happened to be of Jewish or other non-Aryan descent. In the case of propaganda, it played a vital role in giving the public visual cues to better define what Hitler's idea of the appearance of a proper German race and individual should look like. Within his propaganda, this standard was portrayed as a standard of beauty (see the preferable depiction of "Aryans" versus negative depictions of "non-Aryans" in Figures 6 and 7).

Hitler's obsession with physical health and the "Aryan" ideal of beauty evolved to become the national identity of a genocidal Germany. The NSDAP propaganda embellished biological characteristics to create an unrealistic depiction of beauty standards. Creating a visual standard for reference was especially essential to Hitler with his attempts to define what an "Aryan" was versus what a Jewish person and "non-Aryan" were. This tactic also corresponded with the claim of physical superiority of one over the other within the imagery. Furthermore, Hitler extensively claimed that these beauty constructs would not need to exist if only the beautiful and "Aryan" Germans existed without the presence of any "non-Aryans." He claimed that "aesthetic ideals will disappear from the inhabited earth when those races disappear."³⁸ Furthering his definition of beauty, he claimed that Jewish people and "their whole existence is an embodied protest against the aesthetics of the Lord's image," thereby claiming that the Jewish ethnic features went against nature and biology.³⁹ Hitler proclaimed that "since these criteria of humanitarianism and beauty must be eliminated from the struggle, they are also inapplicable to propaganda."⁴⁰ He created a biological standard of beauty, resulting in what became a national identity and a visual aesthetic. Most notably, this included a more preferential portrayal of the supposed "Aryan" people versus "non-Aryans." Through this, Hitler's

³⁷ "25 Points of the Nazi Party," *Virginia Holocaust Museum*, (Tolerance Through Education, 1920), <https://www.vaholocaust.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/25Points.pdf>.

³⁸ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, translated by Ralph Manheim, p. 178.

³⁹ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, translated by Ralph Manheim, p. 178.

⁴⁰ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, translated by Ralph Manheim, p. 178.

beauty-to-biology campaign made his Aryan standard of beauty from a mere cultural beauty norm into racial stratifications.

From Beauty to Biology

Hitler's deployment of racially stratifying rhetoric imagery paired with the appropriated language of science was a politically savvy technique used to subtly incorporate Social Darwinism within socio-political legitimacy. Within the *Rassenpolitik*, or the State's "race politics," much emphasis on legitimizing Hitler's goals corresponded with linking ideas of race to ideas of beauty. Dr. Richard Weikart explores Hitler's scientific justification of racial categorization within his 2011 book, *Hitler's Ethics: The Nazi Pursuit of Evolutionary Progress*. He states that "Hitler was inspired by evolutionary ethics to pursue the utopian project of improving the human race."⁴¹ As Weikart highlights, Hitler's pseudoscientific views on race were familiar concepts to the European public, including scholars, anthropologists, and scientists. As Bernay stated, there is a greater efficacy when new ideas are established upon grains of pre-existing social concepts. Through this, an audience can supposedly accept "new" ideas on the premise that there is a certain level of familiarity. For the sake of Hitler's racial ideas, his imagery used the pre-existence of biological racial theories, as assessed by David Welch in his book, *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. Welch explores how Hitler's "conquest of the masses" occurred as a result of effective imagery as "propaganda, if it is to be effective, must in a sense preach to those who are already partially converted."⁴² The concept helped Hitler's ideals gain a stronger impact on society, as such concepts had already seeped into public awareness. However, Hitler's ideas of superior biological traits were not only the basis of his ideology, but also the very basis for state propaganda – further naturalizing such ideas into scientific facts and national identity.

The NSDAP's depiction of their constructed race of "Aryan" superiority is seen in its propaganda. Hitler used the talents of German film director Leni Riefenstahl, who constructed Hitler's biological emphasis on the German physique quite literally within the 1938 film, *Olympia* (see Figure 11) and the 1935 film, *The Triumph of the Will*. These films glorified the physical aesthetic of what was defined as a "superior race," resulting in constructs of beauty and biological differences. In Figure 10, the female German athlete is depicted in motion, displaying a fit physique, with the backdrop of the swastika as a reminder of what that athlete stands for. Her forward motion mirrors the motion of the NSDAP flag, representing the nation's physical strength, which helps move the nation forward into the future. In the case of Figure 11, the extreme lighting and shadow effects help exhibit the athlete's fit physique, reminiscent of a Greek god or athlete embodied within stone. Incidentally,

⁴¹ Richard Weikart, *Hitler's Ethics: The Nazi Pursuit of Evolutionary Progress*, (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁴² David Welch, *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2002).

figure 12 demonstrates the biological or physical emphasis within a sculpture by Georg Kolbe, who constructed the idea of the NSDAP's "Aryan" race into a bronze statue, the 1937 "Couple." Reminiscent of classical Greek statues, this couple embodies the updated standards of 1930s German hairstyles with the physical body features often associated with the NSDAP's construct of an "Aryan" race depicted within party imagery. Images such as these propelled Hitler's ideas of race and biology to become visually defined and glorified.

Conclusion

Hitler and the NSDAP's use of visual rhetoric as a key principle within their "legitimate" rise to power enabled the mass exploitation of a national audience to naturalize Hitler's ideals as facts. The German ideal that Hitler believed to be the standard for human beauty was carefully constructed, elaborated, proliferated, and enforced by the imagery of propaganda. The NSDAP's eventual vast coverage of their understood audience allowed for a larger national participation spearheaded through the attractive imagery of "Aryanness" and national identity. This campaign included the addition of women and children, as well as their glorified social roles and potential to spread his discriminatory views. Moreover, Hitler's visual rhetoric, grounded in a eugenicist justification of nature and biology, eventually became known as his attempts at bettering the human race and his *Volk*, underscoring Bernays's assertion that "Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society [propaganda] constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power."⁴³ Bernays also stressed how Hitler and the NSDAP's "attack on the Jews... was no emotional outburst...but a deliberate, planned campaign."⁴⁴ Not only can Hitler's use of imagery be considered a "deliberate" and well-thought-out "misuse," but it can also be considered a falsification of imagery and an attempt at the beautification of evil. As the nineteenth-century Austrian Expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka once remarked, "The awareness of imagery is part of living...a life which derives its power from within itself will focus on the perception...of images."⁴⁵ While Adolf Hitler and the NSDAP misappropriated the power of visual rhetoric for evil intent, their actions must be continuously analyzed to maintain a profound awareness of the power of imagery.

⁴³ Bernays, *Propaganda*, p. 652.

⁴⁴ Bernays, *Propaganda*, p. 652.

⁴⁵ Oskar Kokoschka, "Von der Natur der Gesichte-On the nature of visions", lecture, Vienna, 1912, as found in Robert Tracy, "Oskar Kokoschka and the Expressionist Side of the Vienna Secessionists," *The Visual Arts From 1890-196*, 13 September 2013,

<https://roberttracyphdart473fall2013.wordpress.com/2013/09/18/oskar-kokoschka-and-the-expressionist-side-of-the-vienna-secessionists/>.

Appendix



Figure 1. A crude NSDAP poster created by the artist Hans Schweitzer before the establishment of the Reich Ministry of Propaganda. The poster features the German text ‘Nationalsozialismus: Der organisierte Wille des Volkes,’ which translates to “National Socialism: The Organized Will of the Nation.”⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Hans Schweitzer, “Mjölnir,” possibly late 1920s, *German Propaganda Archive*, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/posters1.htm>.



Figure 2. Two Nazi stormtroopers on the left side, engaged in visual propaganda aimed at building public legitimacy for the Nazi Party, amongst other political parties.⁴⁷



Figure 3. This imagery glorifies the idealized concept of an “Aryan” family and emphasizes the role of an “Aryan” woman in the context of *Volksgemeinschaft* for the betterment of the German *Volk*.

⁴⁷ 31 July 1932, *German National Archives*,
<https://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/dba/de/search/?query=Bild+102-03497A>.

(people).⁴⁸



Figure 4. The slogan “Germany Grows Through Strong Mothers and Healthy Children,” circulating around 1935, epitomizes the Nazi regime’s emphasis on promoting maternal and child health as crucial components of national growth and strength.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ludwig Hohlwein, cover artwork for a Neues Volk Calendar, circa 1938, created for an Office of Racial Policy monthly publication.

⁴⁹ Image found in Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), p. 16.



Figure 5. The slogan “The NSDAP Protects the National Community, Citizens If You Need Counsel and Help– Turn To Your Local Organization,” circulated in the mid-1930s, reflects the Nazi Party’s efforts to portray itself as a guardian of the national community and a source of support for German citizens.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Image found in Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), p. 16.



Figure 6. Page from the National Socialist children's book, *Trust No Fox and No Jew*, "The German is a proud man/ who can work and fight./ He is beautiful and full of courage,/ that is why the Jew hates him forever." "Here is the Jew, You see it right away, The greatest scoundrel in the whole nation! He thinks he is very beautiful/ But he is really ugly."⁵¹

⁵¹ Image found in Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), p. 12.



Figure 7. Imagery from the 1938 children's book, *Der Giftpilz*, portraying a distorted and almost disfigured-looking Jewish man attempting to exploit a helpless yet idealized German woman.⁵²

⁵² Image from Alex Autographs, promotional flier for anti-Semitic children's book, https://www.alexautographs.com/auction-lot/promotional-flyer-for-anti-semitic-children-s-boo_DB44C0699D.



Figure 8. Children reading *Der Giftpilz*, published in 1938. This image is part of the Stadtarchiv Nürnberg (Nuremberg City Archives) collection.⁵³

⁵³ Image from “German children read an anti-Jewish propaganda book titled ‘Der Giftpilz’” on Sutori, <https://www.sutori.com/en/item/german-children-read-an-anti-jewish-propaganda-book-titled-der-giftpilz-the-poisonous-mushroom--PXKDT2d8dAabFQrNax98NY8C>.



Figure 9. This 1936 imagery created by artist Ludwig Hohlwein was designed to promote support for the NSDAP among German “Aryan” youth.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Spartacus Educational, <https://spartacus-educational.com/GERyouth.htm>.



Figure 10. This poster, created by contemporary artist Ludwig Hohlwein for the “Reich Sports Day of the B.D.M.” or the “Reich Sports Day of the League of German Girls,” on 23 September 1934, celebrates Hitler’s idealized concept of the female form as a biological embodiment of NSDAP values.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Image from Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/96523423/>.



Figure 11. Promotional film still from director Leni Riefenstahl's 1938 film *Olympia: Festival of Beauty*, which celebrates the physical prowess and beauty of “Aryan” athletes within the context of the Nazi regime.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Image from artnet,
[http://www.artnet.com/artists/leni-riefenstahl/der-diskuswerfer-glenn-morris-nDzi4OfX8wZu7Lxytc
btDA2](http://www.artnet.com/artists/leni-riefenstahl/der-diskuswerfer-glenn-morris-nDzi4OfX8wZu7LxytcbtDA2).

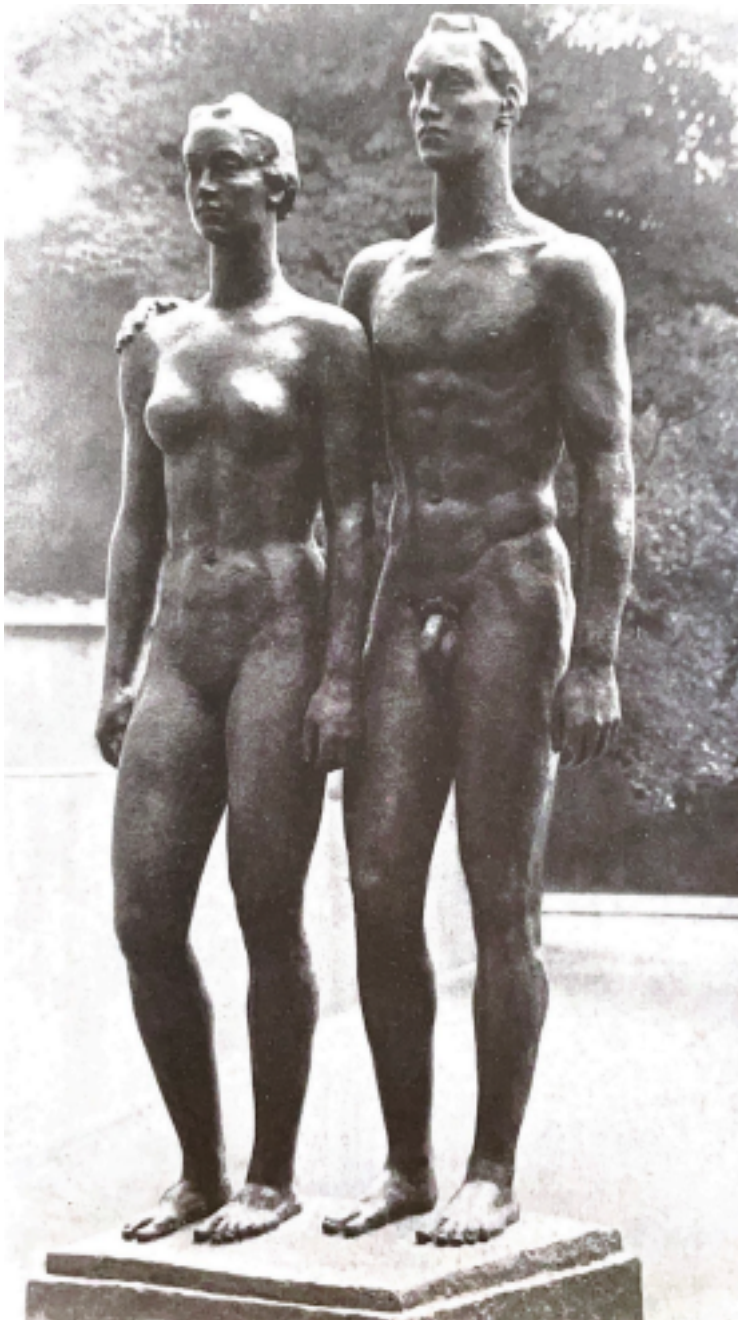


Figure 12. This sculpture titled “Couple” was created by German artist Georg Kolbe around 1937.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Image found in Peter Adam, *Art of the Third Reich*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), p. 15.