Public rituals played an important role in the culture of the Third Reich. Although events like the mass rallies at Nuremberg were highly choreographed and carefully planned, the image that they conveyed was one of enthusiasm and genuine accord. This essay will consist of four sections in which I will endeavor to cast more light on the phenomena of Nazi public rituals and understand how they fit into our current understanding of Nazism. The first part will be a review of the literature on how Nazism's belief-system/world-view has been classified. A variety of terms have been put forward by social scientists from various disciplines in an attempt to understand its historical, social, cultural and psychological dynamics. I propose that a way into the heart of the matter is to look more closely at the word Weltanschauung, a concept so important that it was used by the Nazis themselves to describe the reality they were attempting to solidify in Germany. By understanding exactly what this word connotes we find that an analogous term used by scholars of fascism, “mythos,” may be useful—especially since mythos is directly connected to ritual practices. Thus to describe Nazism as a mythos seems to make sense in methodological terms and also coincides with what the Nazi leadership was attempting to accomplish culturally in German society—namely to bring about the adoption of a specific Weltanschauung on the popular level.

In the second section I will discuss four key beliefs or narratives (myths) making up this Weltanschauung and discuss why they were so important to the Nazis for the maintenance of social power and the manipulation of mass opinion. They appear constantly in both the literature of the Reich and in the academic work analyzing that literature.

The third section will draw the connection between myth and ritual, especially as it relates to these terms in the realms of political practices. Many scholars have studied the use of public rituals in political systems,
both totalitarian and democratic. I will briefly discuss their key ideas and their relationship to Nazism.

In the fourth section I will examine certain Nazi public rituals as the enactments of specific Nazi myths. As socio-political embodiments of core concepts of the Nazi Weltanschauung, ritual performances such as the Nuremberg Rallies, the Resurrection of the Dead, the Hitler salute, and the public book burnings, may be used as evidence to show that the Nazis understood the power that such acts signaled in the process of manufacturing consent, projecting a public image of state power and giving voice to German ideas of racism, volkisch, might and national destiny.

The title of this paper reflects the fact that these Nazi rituals used forms already found in German culture. Participation in these rituals was encouraged and their seeming significance exploited by the Nazis in their attempts to influence the consciousness of the German people under the Reich.

I. Towards a Category for the Nazi Weltanschauung

Each element in the design [of the Nazi Weltanschauung] is old. But the ensemble is new and resplendent in dazzling colors. Even the political connoisseur who is unwilling to concede its merits as a piece of original political theorizing must at least grant that it is the work of sheer genius as a masterpiece of practical political psychology.¹

—Frederick L. Schumann

The volkisch Weltanschauung of our present has as its ideal a community of the nation in its space that is cleansed of the alien.²

—Heinrich Himmler

I know that problems of this sort can be avoided if one interprets totalitarian movements as a new—and a perverted—religion, a substitute for the lost creed of traditional beliefs. From this it would follow that some need for religion is a cause for the rise of totalitarianism. I feel unable to follow . . . the concept of secular religion.³

—Hannah Arendt

These three quotes give a hint at the difficulty facing scholars across the disciplines in their attempts to understand the complex and bizarre

realm of Nazi ideologies, especially those cloaked in a language that is both deeply mythic and seemingly religious. Nazism has been called a political religion, religious politics, Religionersatz, spiritual revolution, and a mythos by those analyzing Nazi concepts, which exhibit either religious and/or ritualistic characteristics. Weltanschauung is the word often used by scholars as they attempt to encompass the vast complex of nationalistic dogmas, political beliefs, cultural metaphors, and official propaganda used during the Third Reich. The Nazis themselves used this word frequently to describe the belief system of their party. Usually translated as “world-view,” Weltanschauung enfolds more shades of meaning, and “world-outlook,” a more literal translation, gives the English reader a better sense of the psychic space conjured up by the word Weltanschauung. Writing in 1934, social scientist Frederick L. Schumann, clearly understood that the Weltanschauung of National Socialism was a patchwork quilt of ideas and prejudices deeply rooted in the Germanic past, with militaristic theatricality and strong mass-emotional appeal being two of its hallmarks. For Heinrich Himmler, Weltanschauung was a constellation of black and white beliefs about “us” (pure, Aryan Germans) and “them” (those outside this category). In Himmler’s tone one senses the convictions of the religious. It is of interest to note that Himmler viewed Nazism’s arch-political rival Bolshevism as a “diabolic religion of destruction... this religion is aimed at the destruction of the whole world.”

As a Jewish exile of the regime, philosopher and social critic Hannah Arendt sought to satisfactorily define totalitarianism. Viewing the Nazi Weltanschauung as the product of both racism and imperialism, she roundly rejected the concept of political religion theory (understanding of Nazism as a twisted substitute for religion) promulgated by her contemporaries Eric Voegelin and Gerhard Ritter.

Richard Steigmann-Gall believes that Nazism is better defined as religious politics rather than as political religion. While he does not discount the historical evidence that Nazism drew upon religious forms “the use of physical space and prophetic language was indeed often consciously derived from religious sources” (also citing a quote from Hitler about the Catholic mass as inspiration for Nazi night rallies) he finds that the political religion theory falls short since it does not focus enough on the realities of “audience reception” choosing instead to focus

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on the “ambitions of Nazi propagandists.”6 Those within the party who wished to create a neo-pagan, ersatz-religion such as Rosenberg and Himmler were joined in the cause of sacralizing Nazism by a sectarian named Artur Dinter who wished to do the same thing in the name of Christianity.7

Steigmann-Gall quotes both Albert Speer and others who reported that Hitler, always less than enthusiastic about Rosenberg’s work, called it “stuff nobody will understand . . . A relapse into medieval notions,” and “. . . nonsense! Here we have an age that has left all mysticism behind, and now he wants to start that all over again . . .”8 Hitler consistently claimed allegiance to Christianity and publicly spoke of Christ as a figure of admiration: “[W]e place the great fundamental idea of Christianity in the center of our ideology [Ideenwelt]—the hero and sufferer, Christ himself, stands at the center.”9 The “totalizing quality” of Nazism does not qualify as a religion, argues Steigmann-Gall. Rather, it is a political movement with religious overtones, appropriating forms borrowed from religion; however, its content does not show it to be a new religion in the traditional sense of the word.

Theorists Emilio Gentile and George Mosse both see sacralized politics as a strong trait of generic fascism. These sacralizations (infallibility, power from a higher source, the idea of transformation) do not pertain to the supernatural; instead, they make the state the focal point, replacing the supernatural with the current political order as the source of salvation. In Richard Evans’ The Coming of the Third Reich, he states: “Hitler always insisted that Nazism was fundamentally about this world, not the next.”10

Roger Griffin has posited a more interdisciplinary approach to the study of Nazism and fascist regimes. As scholars we “have a professional duty to take advantage of our privileged vantage point in society to avoid allowing the dissection of concepts to become desiccation.”11 It is understandable then that Griffin has analyzed his topics from psycho-historical, socio-political, and cultural points of view. “To ask in a spirit of open-ended inquiry how such a thing was possible forms part, no matter how insignificant, of the humanistic tradition . . .”12 Griffin explores many theoretical avenues in his search for connections between

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7 Ibid, 91.
8 Ibid, 92–93.
9 Ibid, 98.
10 Griffin, “God’s Counterfeiters?,” 19.
12 Ibid.
religious/mythic connotations and forms of fascism when he reviews scholars "whose research...converges on the notion that ancient psychological mechanisms of mythopoeia and self-transcendence...continue to operate just under the surface of modern consciousness."

These include such diverse authors as George Bataille, Eric Fromm, Wilhelm Reich, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell and Arthur Koestler. The word "myth" is used prominently in Griffin's theoretical work on generic fascism and Nazism. The core theoretical concept of Griffin's work is "palingenetic ultranationalism" or more simply, the nominalized form, "palingenesis." Griffin speaks frequently of the palingenetic myth. Translated from the Greek as "becoming again," Stoics used "palingenesis" to describe the process of the universe originating out of its own essence. What is striking about this word is that it is tied to the idea of the "eternal return"—in other words, the world goes through successive stages of flowering and decline. This concept is a shadowy echo of the morphological concept of civilizational process found in Spengler's The Decline of the West, a work that had no small impact on the culture out which Nazism was born. Indeed as Arthur Hermann has said of Spengler's Decline: "Once the wells of European self-confidence were poisoned, a new generation of intellectuals, artists, and writers celebrated the unleashing of sexual desire, racial power, violence, and cruelty as new forms of human 'authenticity.'" This anomie and devastation of value, brought on by the tumultuous nineteenth century with its mass industrial displacement, nationalistic strife, colonial grasping and loss of faith among the intelligentsia, led to crisis. "If the 'sense-making crisis' leads to personal conversions to a new form of sense making myth in sufficiently large numbers, this [new] myth will produce its own political movement..." Thus the ascent of the Nazis to the place of absolute authority in Germany is not to be read as a purely mythic or psychological phenomenon (they were after all "helped into power"), but the official constellation of beliefs about the reality of their cause, their relationship to the people and the future of Germany (call it ideology, Weltanschauung, or religious politics) was rooted in what we could call (to use Joseph Campbell's term) psychological postures or what Carl Jung labeled the archetypes.

13 Ibid, 192.


16 Griffin, The Nature of Fascism, 193.

17 Joseph Campbell, The Hero's Journey (New York: New World Library, 2003), 23; "Helped into power" is the title of the first episode of an excellent five hour 1997 television
Paul Mazgaj sees in Griffin’s elaboration of palingenesis the key myth of Nazism, not merely as a description but as the Weberian ideal-type: “based on a range of observed phenomena and rising above regional peculiarities and time bound contingencies.”\(^8\) Weber’s concept closely matches those of Campbell and Jung.

The Greek word mythos means story or plot, as in the plot of Greek drama. Thus the Nazi stories or plotlines regarding the role of Germany in the world, its glorious past and more glorious future have been called myths (or mythic) by many writers. In one of the most famous and lucid of these examinations Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy tie the concept of Nazi myth directly to the concept of \textit{Weltanschauung}, for them “a vision of the world.” This links the constructed aspect of myth (the Platonic idea of a fiction whose role is to propose, if not impose models and types) directly to the idea of a deliberately created paradigm.\(^9\) \textit{Weltanschauung} seeks to be “a total explanation or conception. This totality signifies that the explanation is indisputable . . .”\(^{20}\) The “Nazi Myth” is the Nazis’ deliberately created worldview about Nazism that “proceeds always by affirmative accumulation, never, or hardly ever, by argumentation . . . there is neither knowledge to establish, nor thought to overcome. There is only an already acquired, already available truth to declare.”\(^{21}\) These declarations resemble religious dogma. One may not question their veracity. The \textit{Volk}, the destiny of Germany, the eternal degeneracy of the Jewish people, the rightness and greatness of Adolph Hitler and his mission are the given, foundational truths on which societal success hinges. For Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, the Nazi mythos is about identification, with myth being an instrument of identifying self with a greater level of knowing or of reality. As David Gross has said, Nazi myths were calculated to elicit at least three types of responses: self abandonment or identification with the group (\textit{Volksgemeinschaft}); patriotism and thus total loyalty to a racially superior group; and most powerfully, deep all-consuming hatred of otherness.\(^{22}\)

Despite the fact that there were hundreds of political right-wing groups representing varying interests within Germany before the Nazis came to power, Adolph Hitler and his propagandists were able to create

\(^{8}\) Paul Mazgaj, \textit{Imagining Fascism} (Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 32.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 292.
\(^{21}\) Ibid, 304.
a message that would resonate across party lines. Griffin says of the Nazis "their solutions were presented, not as discrete policies to be debated, but as emanations from a single, coherent, 'total' world-view; ... not pragmatic measures formulated by professional party politicians but as the result of an irresistible national movement of rejuvenation."23

It seems then that to call the Nazi Weltanschauung a political religion, a religious politics, or a Religionersatz is not as theoretically or historically satisfying as to call it a mythos, or a myth-world. The way in which key concepts were fashioned from old political and cultural beliefs, the dichotomy of us versus them, the way in which these beliefs were made into unquestionable cornerstones of belonging to the group without recourse to God or supernatural powers (a key tenet of religion), all these things seem to point to mythos as a more satisfying category than either political religion or religious politics. The next section will explore some of the key tenets of this Nazi mythos and examine their functions in the light of the Nazis' propagandist aims and their historical outcomes during the Third Reich.

II. The Nazi Weltanschauung as a Nazi Mythos

Not least it [Mein Kampf] established the basis of the Fuhrer myth ... Hitler portrayed himself as uniquely able to lead Germany from its existing misery to greatness.24

—Ian Kershaw

... there can be no question that in locals positively sensitized to the mystical appeal of the Volksgemeinschaft ... the Nazis were able to present large amounts of the racial mythos with great effectiveness.25

—Robert H. Pois

Translating the ancient religious topos of death and redemption into a secular myth of national decadence and renewal, fascists were able to project an incredible dynamism, a sense that a new society would soon rise from the ashes of the dying one.26

—Paul Mazgaj

The term myth has been used to describe the key tenets of the Nazi Weltanschauung disseminated through the propaganda and polemics of

23 Griffin, The Nature of Fascism, 224.
the regime. Many scholars then see the Weltanschauung itself as a mythos. In this section we will examine four key myths or myth-clusters propagated by the Nazis, though often adopted (and adapted) from older political factions and traditional German prejudices. First, the myth of the leader, that is, Hitler’s official role as the hero and the savior of his people, a man who knew better than anyone else how to guide the Volk and to what end; second, the people themselves seen as the Volk and collectively as the Volksgemeinschaft (concepts tied together almost inextricably and related to the myth of Germany’s inevitable glorious future); third, the myth of culturally alien things, things characterized by, or arising out of, sources either unvolkisch and/or entartete (degenerated); and fourth, the myth of regeneration, renewal and resurrection, all summed up by Roger Griffin’s term palingenesis.

Before we survey these four myths and discuss how they functioned, it would be helpful to quickly explain the theories of how myth itself functions. In the next section we will discuss briefly the connection between ritual and myth, and the role of ritual in the sacralization of politics.

Joseph Campbell outlines four functions, which myths (or the narratives of belief) serve in a society: a mystical function (aiding the human in his experience of a higher or transcendent reality); a cosmological function (providing an order to the world and the hierarchical relationships between its components); a sociological function (giving order to the members of a group, especially laying down behavioral norms); and a psychological function (aiding the individual in personal growth and coming to grips with a personal reality). Karen Armstrong has outlined a similar set of functions: myths are often related to death or extinction; they are connected to concepts of sacrifice, liturgy and ritual; they provide a bridge into mysterious realms the average person cannot grasp; and they are pedagogical and teach people what they are supposed to believe in regard to socially appropriate reality. Alexander Eliot has outlined three distinct types of myth that appear to be universal: the origin myth, the hero myth, and the myth-of-right-living.

As to the dubiousness of the truth-nature of myth, Christopher Flood cites the work of Cassirer, an expatriate from the Nazi regime. Cassirer believed that mythic thinking was in direct opposition to rational thinking. Under the Nazis, rational thought in politics vanished and was replaced by mythical thought and myth cannot be repudiated.

"It is beyond the powers of philosophy to destroy the political myths. A myth is in a sense invulnerable. It is impervious to rational arguments; it cannot be refuted by syllogisms."

Nazi Myth of the Hero-Leader

Beyond contention, Hitler saw himself as the only human being who could carry out the triumph of his party. In his enormous two-part biography of Hitler, Ian Kershaw offers mountains of evidence as to Hitler's unshakeable self-belief. Wolfgang Benz relates the following adulations by party faithful. The first was spoken by Goering: "A whole people, a whole nation feels itself joyful and strong today, because in you . . . the savior of the people is also coming into being."31 The second, by Goebbels: "The Fuhrer speaks deep into the hearts of the people. The consecration of the new standards is clothed in boundless mystical magic. As the Fuhrer speaks, the sun breaks out for several minutes."32 Kershaw speaks of the importance of Hitler's hero status as a symbol of national unity. "The levels of hero-worship had never been witnessed before in Germany."33 In 1933, the celebrations held to honor Hitler's birthday created a national sensation that surpassed the adulation and worship that Bismarck had enjoyed in the previous century. According to Kershaw, the public's worship of Hitler, which surged after his ascendency to power, merged with his own warped, uncritical sense of self to create "the theoretician who did not concern himself with practical realities but with eternal truth."34 Hitler was thus the mythic, all-knowing father, all-wise statesman, the embodiment of the will of the Volk, and to whom, according to Goebbels, even the weather paid homage by lifting clouds away from the light of the sun.

The Nazi Myth of the Volk, the Volksgemeinschaft, and the Destiny of the Reich

The creation of a national community of the people that would transcend social class and economic influence remained a primary goal of the Nazis. As David Welch has stated in his article on the construction and social implementation of this concept, "the gap between social myth and

32 Ibid.
33 Kershaw, Hitler, 484.
34 Ibid, 251.
social reality grew wider [as time passed]."\textsuperscript{35} The re-education of the German people was the key to spreading the idea that the \textit{Machtergreifung} (seizure of power) by the Nazis was not just a revolution but heralded a complete reordering of society. "The desire for unity which the Nazis exploited in Germany drew its strength from an idealized past rather than from the present."\textsuperscript{36} Welch states that this can be traced back to "the \textit{Burgfrieden}, or the myth of the spirit of 1914 when the Kaiser declared: 'I recognize no parties, but only German.'"\textsuperscript{37} This unification function of the myth of \textit{Volksgemeinschaft} is built on the more fundamental myth of the \textit{Volk}. According to Griffin, \textit{Volk} came to encompass not simply the idea of a people, but of \textit{the people}. There was a mystical, nebulous and inexplicable power around the word. Many Germans felt that they were different than all other peoples of the earth, destined for greatness and connected to the very soil through their ancestry.\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Blut und Boden} (blood and soil) and \textit{Volk ohne Raum} (a people without space) being two common mythically inflected political slogans of the period.\textsuperscript{39} "Closely linked to the idea of \textit{Volksgemeinschaft} was the regime's desire to maintain social conformity."\textsuperscript{40} These two myths, the Hero-Leader and the Community of the People would be conjoined and reflected in one another through the great spectacle-ritual at the Nuremberg Rally, giving palpable, charismatic form to the belief that the triumphant destiny of Germany was an inevitable fact. "Hitler and his followers were confident that the Thousand-Year Reich was looking forward to another thousand rallies."\textsuperscript{41}

\textbf{The Nazi Myth of Things \textit{Unvolkisch} and of Things \textit{Entartete}}

If the \textit{Volk} and the Hero-Leader were the positive myths of the Nazi mythos then what were its negative myths? The Nazi \textit{Weltanschauung} was what several scholars have labeled "Manichean"\textsuperscript{42} after the ancient

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 217.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Griffin, \textit{The Nature of Fascism}, 86.
\textsuperscript{39} Benz, "Ritual and Stage Management," 273.
\textsuperscript{40} Welch, "Nazi Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft," 228.
\textsuperscript{42} Texts using this term include Jay Gonen, \textit{The Roots of Nazi Psychology: Hitler's Utopian Barbarism} (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2000); Michael Mann, \textit{Fascists} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Robert Ellwood \textit{The Politics of Myth: A
dualistic religion of Mani. In this mythos the world and all the people in it are on either side of a dividing line; things fall into one of two categories, it is a black and white way of qualifying phenomenon as either, good or bad, right or wrong, of us or not of us. Thus things volksch stand against things unvolksch, things wholesome and healthy stand against things degenerated (entartete). The greatest of all things standing against the Nazis' world was the Jew; not the individual Jew himself, but the Jew as satanic archetype, as bacterium, as social disease. As Goebbels wrote, "The Jews will destroy us if we do not defend ourselves against them... This is a war of life or death between the Aryan race and the Jewish virus." In Germany, Socialists and Jews had been blamed since the 1920s for the defeat of the First World War and the Treaty of Versailles. This was to become a particularly potent political myth that Hitler would incorporate into the great myth of the "others"—traitorous elements who had sapped Germany's strength and sought her ultimate destruction. The permanency of Nazi anti-Semitic myths served a very important cohesive function. As David Welch explains, "It [anti-Semitism] proved increasingly significant for retaining the loyalty and the unity of the party that in the absence of positive features, the administration could still point to negative goals being fulfilled." Both Roger Griffin and Nicolas Goodrick-Clarke have shown that the deep-seated anti-Semitism of Nazi culture had its roots in both popular texts and the intellectual disciplines. The pitting of the Aryan against the Jew was also a common theme in the polemics and tracts of the Ariosophists and other occult secret societies, which preceded and fed into National Socialism.

Homosexuals, Marxists, leftist intellectuals, non-traditional artists, Gypsies, Poles, the crippled, retarded or mentally ill were also labeled degenerate. In the arts all music and art that did not meet the Reich's guidelines was labeled degenerate, confiscated and often destroyed. The Nazis criticized the Bauhaus style as both degenerate and unvolksch. The famous Entartete Kunst Exhibition in Munich in 1937 in which works of modern art hung alongside photographs of deformed and retarded people was mirrored in the burning of nearly six thousand works of art on canvas and paper in the courtyard of the Berlin firehouse on...
March 20, 1939. Nothing that was impure could be tolerated. The bright myths of triumphant Germany needed darkness against which to shine more brightly.

The Nazi Myth of Regeneration, Renewal, Resurrection

Hitler spoke constantly of the rising and the restoration of the nation. The deep-seated resentment of the German people surrounding the loss of World War I and the Treaty of Versailles was a collective reservoir from which the Nazis constantly drew.

Humanity had come to a turning point. It was imperative that the German people awaken to their inner strength and their historical Hegelian destiny. As Hitler is reported to have said “Those who see in National Socialism nothing more than a political movement know scarcely anything about it. It is even more than a religion: it is the will to create mankind anew.”

In Goebbels’ speeches Signs of the New Age, palingenetic motifs and themes of German renewal proliferate. Hitler’s obsession with both racial purity and the expansion of the Reich eastward to make “vital space” for the future empire reflect his anticipation of things to come. Despite the fact that the flowering of a Thousand Year Reich would require fuel for its fire, the Nazi concept of regeneration played into the darkness at the core of this fantasy. This is an old, old Nordic myth, the end of days or Ragnarok or as Wagner titled it Gotterdammerung. As Griffin states, “[The Third Reich’s] visionary goal was to regenerate every aspect of society, even if it inevitably only succeeded in partially destroying the old and producing horrendous travesties of a new one.”

Kershaw states that difficult as this concept of creation out of annihilation may be to grasp by subsequent generations it was indeed a very real aspect of Nazi myth and German consciousness during the Reich. “...a sense of war...as redemption and renewal, as a welling up of sublime national unity, to overcome discord and disharmony, as the creative force of a national community.” It is little wonder then to hear of Hitler gripping the hand of Winifred Wagner in the darkness of their private balcony at Bayreuth during a performance of the final scene of the Ring Cycle. “Betrayal, sacrifice, redemption and heroic death were Wagnerian themes that would preoccupy Hitler down to the Gotter-

49 Ibid, 111.
50 Kershaw, Hitler, 89.

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dammerung of his own regime in 1945."51 In March 1932, the Munich Observer printed this endorsement: "Hitler is the password of all who believe in Germany's resurrection. Hitler is the last hope... Hitler is the word of deliverance for millions..."52

These four key myths may be viewed as the four pillars of the Nazi mythos, the Nazi Weltanschauung. Working together they provide a coherent and internally workable apparatus for the German individual looking for a new paradigm to orient himself to Germany, the Fuhrer, and multiple culturally embedded prejudices. What is more, in their matter-of-factness as myths (narratives and stories, though lies they may be) they slip away from the dissenter's ability to call them out. In reviewing the various functions of a myth offered by Campbell, Armstrong and Eliot, we can see how all of the Nazi myths fall into such a framework. From orienting the individual to the community, to explaining the origins of current events and the state of the world, from giving the Volksgemeinschaft a bounded horizon over which one might pitch stones at "the others" to trumpeting the hope of palingenetic renewal, military victory and eventual world domination. This is the realm of myth's psychological power and also its political functions under the Third Reich.

III. Rituals as Sacralized Political Actions

The ability to organize public rituals on a massive scale... is a compelling way used by modern governments (democratic or totalitarian) to reach out and extend their influence into the lives of ordinary citizens—the so called silent majority.53

—Marcel Cristi

He who has pledged, he who has taken the oath—whether in death he passes away—he continues to live in the earth. He who has recognized himself through struggle—he who burns within himself, whether death touches him—he continues to live in blood.54

—Choral Oath from Bohme's Cantata for the Ninth of November

51 Ibid, 43.
54 Herbert Bohme, Gesange unter der Fahne (Munich: Munchen, 1935), 49.
Mass rituals, mass organizations and a string of new drives and campaigns were needed to keep up the movement's dynamic thrust that was now directed onto the nation as a whole. These however, were capable only of generating manic and intoxicated moods for shorter and shorter periods...

—Detlev J. K. Peukert

The relationship between rituals and myths is hotly debated. Can you have one without the other? Do myths bring about rituals as their enactments or are myths made up to explain rituals whose origins have been lost to the group? Although these anthropological questions are beyond the purview of this paper, it is important to acknowledge them. Cultural historians and historians of ideas have been seeking to integrate ritual as tool of analysis into their works for over a century. The Nazi use of ritualized public events has been burned into the collective memory thanks to the propaganda films of Leni Reifenstahl and the copious visual documentations of the Third Reich. These images of Nazism have become a staple of post-war popular culture. Eerie torch-lit processions, tens of thousands of people bearing banners and standards in perfect unison and the sound of Nazi soldiers making one collective, thunderous footfall after the other—these are the fantastic ritualistic elements that are associated with the Third Reich in the contemporary mind.

David I. Kertzer defines ritual as behavior that is socially standardized and repetitive, that has a formal quality, and is enacted at times and places that have specific symbolic meaning. "Ritual action is repetitive and therefore often redundant, but these very factors serve as important means of channeling emotion, guiding cognition and organizing social groups." Rituals become an effective means using symbols and/or symbolic actions to communicate beliefs, myths (or narratives) about something important to the community.

He quotes Lance Bennet's observation: "Myths condition the public to the powerful symbols used by politicians. Myths underwrite the status quo . . . and chart the course of change in times of stress." Kertzer believes that ritual practices are "a major means for propagating these political myths." Sociologist Simon Taylor has written at length on the

56 An excellent text giving a complete sampling of the past two centuries efforts may be found in Robert A. Segal, ed., The Myth and Ritual Theory: an Anthology (Maiden, MA: Blackwell, 1998).
symbolism and ritual under Nationalist Socialism. He sees them as forms of ideological presentation and reinforcement through the public enactment of the rites. “Political ritual performed the function of mystifying the real social, economic, and political contradictions between the social strata which constituted German fascism’s mass basis.”59 An interesting correlation then may be posited between the essential falseness of the Nazi myths and the obfuscating nature of the rituals used to illustrate their importance. If there are holes in the veracity of the Weltanschauung, then a massive outpouring of public participation based on enthusiasm, emotion and feeling may work to delay the realization that the emperor is actually naked. In his essay “Ritual and Fuhrer Worship,” Richard Grunberger writes, “The central organizing principle of the pseudo-religion of Nazism was to obscure a total lack of transcendence by means of ever-larger infusions of ritual.”60 The acceleration of ritualizing holy days, party rallies and public events was propagandistic political action. The goal was to solidify feelings of belonging to one community and a single cause. As Hitler said of the Nuremberg rallies, “The man who had entered such a gathering doubtful and hesitant, leaves it strengthened inside himself; he has become a member of the new community.”61

IV. Nazi Rituals and the Enacting of the Nazi Mythos

A key device for inculcating this mood of reverence was the institution of a cycle of high holy days, which leavened the mundane routine of the year with uplifting occasions.62

—Richard Grunberger

Rally activities can be seen as an attempt to create an unreal environment. It is unreal relative to the functioning of ongoing social institutions and everyday life . . . this unreal environment creates a potential reality, and the stage design attempts to bring the desired future into the present.63

—James M. Mayo, Jr.

61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
An outward sign of the unity invested in the person of the Leader was the German greeting “Heil Hitler”, with outstretched arm, the fascist style salute increasingly used since 1923 and compulsory within the movement since 1926. Strasser wrote in 1927... 'Friends raise your right arm and cry out with me proudly eager for the struggle and loyal to the death 'Heil Hitler.'

—Ian Kershaw

If rituals are the enactments of myths or at the very least examples of symbolic action undertaken by a group to give corporeality to sacred or political meanings, then it is certainly a fact that the Nazis use of public ritual was one of the main forms of Nazi propaganda. The “Hitler salute” which became compulsory after 1933 is perhaps the most obvious example of a repetitive public action carrying not only politically symbolic weight, but also the weight of an entire myth. As Tillman Allert has said in his book on the topic, “Swearing an oath moves the commitment to action into a sacred sphere in which the pledge taker never has to reevaluate his intentions and reconsider his oath, even if there is a change in the original circumstance which justified it.” Allert goes on to argue that since the salute was an oath and was to be repeated constantly (as outlined under the law) it was an attempt to eradicate any doubt in the saluting person’s mind in regard to allegiance. However, since an oath is a ritual that is normally taken just once (as in a court before witnessing or as at the church altar before marriage), its constant repetition in some way undermined its oath-nature. Here we see the Nazi use of a familiar ritual form for new ends. The salute became “an act of greeting in which individuals staged their public personas.”

This concept of staging is important if we are viewing these public rituals as arising from myths. Myth means plot line or story, and ritual is something that is staged by the community to communicate something specific to the group. Thus dramaturgy and liturgical formats are important ingredients in the following three public rituals that we will examine as the embodiments of Nazi myths.

The symbolic significance of the book burning which took place in Bonn in 1933 was clearly acknowledged by participants, academic members of the Nazi party who had Goebbels’ full endorsement. Ernst Krieck and Hans Naumann, two organizers, made the following statements: “[There is] great symbolic meaning in this ceremony,” and “We

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64 Kershaw, Hitler, 294.
66 Ibid, 51.
are performing a symbolic act."\textsuperscript{67} It was the works of Jews, certain intellectuals, Leftists and all those authors who were labeled either unvolkisch or entartete that were consigned to the fires. The ritual pattern was completed by parading the books in wagons through the streets surrounded by torchbearers who sang political songs. This was reminiscent of both the medieval book burnings of Talmudic and heretical texts as well as the Catholic ceremony of the auto-da-fe (or act of faith) in which people were burned. This quote by Heinrich Heine is now a part of the permanent monument to the "biblioclasm" instigated by the Nazis in Berlin: "Where they burn books they will ultimately also burn people."

The Nuremberg Rallies (held from 1923–1938) and the infamous Resurrection of the Dead (a memorial ceremony held in Munich's Königsplatz on November 9, 1935) both share innumerable ritualistic elements tying them to the myths of the Hero-Leader, the Volksgemeinschaft and the destiny of the nation. For the latter the men killed in the failed putsch of 1923 had been exhumed and placed in brass coffins. The crowd stood motionless in the flickering torchlight. They were instructed to repeat certain answers to the Nazi ceremonial leaders as if they were the voices of the dead putschists. Failed rebels were thus transformed into martyrs and given voice in an eerie, almost séance-like act of ventriloquism. As the Nazi newspaper the Volkischer Beobachter reported: "Each of the dead thus greets the assembled thousands, who are themselves the reflection and the carriers of their will to victory."\textsuperscript{68} Of the Nuremberg Rallies Thornton Chapman Sinclair (a 1930s academic) wrote:

\begin{quote}
... the Party Rally is not only the most important link between leader and follower and a place of accounting for leaders, but it is also intended to be a center of propaganda and political regeneration, a sounding board for announcements to Germany and to the world.\textsuperscript{69}
\end{quote}

The myths comprising the Nazi Weltanschauung were drawn from older German cultural and political sources; however, the Nazis used these in their public rituals to create consensus and the illusion of social cohesion. As the enactment of these stories, public rituals opened up new avenues within the society for propaganda and the manufacturing of consent.

\textsuperscript{67} Klaus Vondung, \textit{The Apocalypse in Germany} (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 172.
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