IT begins innocently enough. A scythe-wielding farmer mows through stalks of wheat, piling his uprooted harvest into a horse drawn cart. The wheat is transported to an ancient windmill, yet inside of this mill the wheat is threshed by anachronistic, ultra-modern German machinery. The pressed flour is given to a very rural baker, a true medieval artisan, who painstakingly bakes it into loafs of bread for young, blond children and their mothers to eat.

The above description is the opening scene of 1933 film, Blut und Boden (Blood and Soil). The film was one of the first in a pantheon of Nazi sponsored cinema. From the beginning, medievalism was a central trope of Nazi propaganda. Blut und Boden, with its combination of premodern imagery blended with Nazi led modernity, had a much more sinister intention then the opening scene announced.

Behind all of the reimagined premodern symbols, or medievalisms, in Nazi propaganda, was a systematic attempt to guise the ultra-radical Nazi agenda under a masquerade of traditional and conservative ideology. The Nazi Party’s policy was always a racial policy. The creation of a racially pure German nation required an education campaign of the general German public. For the Nazis, the core threat to the racial state was always the presence of Jews. As Nazi policy shifted from Jewish expulsion to genocide, each change in policy was marked by an altering of the messages within Nazi propaganda. The medium of film, as Joseph Goebbels (Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda), pointed out, “is one of the most modern and far-reaching ways of
influencing the masses.” Goebbels was quick to see cinema as a means that could “educate public taste according to the dictates of the Party.” When the Party’s instructions became genocidal, Nazi cinematic propaganda had already made racial enmity more acceptable to the German public.

In searching for the proximate origins of the Holocaust in the 1930s and 1940s, the questions of how, and to what extent, “ordinary” Germans became complicit in a campaign of systematic mass murder remains contested. It is clear that the Nazi Party waged a powerful—and ultimately successful—propaganda campaign, which manipulated Germanic culture and history for nationalistic and later, genocidal purposes. Certainly it is not sufficient to maintain that the public was simply deceived by Nazi rhetoric, as the extent to which Nazi propaganda had on influencing popular opinion will always be debatable.

While this article will not assess the level of compliancy the German public played in creating or allowing the Holocaust, it does argue that the Nazis shrewdly and skillfully manipulated and re-imagined a past filled with medievalisms, which they combined with long standing Völkisch ideology within propaganda and therefore contributed to broader acceptance of the Holocaust. The Völkisch movement, which is discussed in some detail below, was a response to the Industrial Revolution and a large component of nineteenth century German nationalism, ripe with organic metaphors and anti-Semitism. By defining Jews as the longstanding, bourgeois and industrialized “other” and contrasting this image with an idealized “pure” and medievalized Aryan Volk, Nazi propaganda used medievalism to create ethnic unity and justify imperial expansion, while slowly shifting toward a campaign of genocide.

Four documentary-style propaganda films, released between the genesis of Nazi rule in 1933 and the beginning of the Holocaust in 1940, demonstrate how the Nazi Party used a re-imagination of German history to gain public support for a radical agenda of racial purity. The films Blut und Boden (Blood and Soil) [1933], Ewiger Wald (Eternal Forest) [1936], and Der ewige Jude (The Eternal Jew) [1940] each exemplified unique themes of Nazi nationalism. The films began with nationalistic calls for unity and a redefinition towards classifying the German people in terms of heredity and birthplace. They then moved toward militaristic

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2 See the arguments between Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Random House, 1997), and Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HaperCollins, 1992). Both are drawn from the same primary source material, yet each posits dramatically different conclusions.
expansion and an obsession of ethnic purity by means of Jewish elimination. This article also examines the film *Olympia* [1938], as a further example of the flexibility of medievalism in propaganda and how the Nazis absorbed antiquity into their national narrative.

This article focuses on a relatively understudied aspect during the Nazi period, the capture of medievalism, and with it the loaded notion of medieval and modern anti-Semitism, all within the newest propaganda medium—cinema and film. Yet, the terms "anti-Semitism," "medievalism," and "propaganda" are vague and loaded semiotic snares, often concealing more than they reveal. Before moving into a deconstruction and contextualization of specific films, we must first unpack and redefine certain core terms.

The definition of "anti-Semitism" used in this paper is the one concluded by Gavin Langmuir in his collection, *Towards a Definition of Antisemitism*. In many ways the definition itself is a medievalism, as it includes "not only [the] racist manifestation but all instances in which people, because they are labeled Jews, are feared as symbols of subhumanity and hated for threatening characteristics they do not in fact possess." Interestingly, Langmuir argued that anti-Semitism under this definition began in the Middle Ages. The use of the term "anti-Semitism" in this paper refers to both the legacy of Jewish discrimination and to the Jews as a symbol of corruption.

Nazi propaganda was never based on truth or accuracy, but rather on projecting a re-imagination of what was never there. In this sense, the term "propaganda" is also expanded to a broader definition, referring to not only the standard State sponsored pieces of literature, posters, and film, but also includes how the Nazi Party chose to portray itself. For the purpose of this paper, unless specifically stated, "propaganda" and "cinematic propaganda pieces" will be used interchangeably. I use the term "propaganda" for any film that, at its core, is an attempt to directly influence the viewers' perceptions and opinions.

The "medievalism" in Nazi propaganda films follows the same general definition of "medievalism," the romantic recreation of the Middle Ages, with one major difference. It was not the Middle Ages that the Nazis were reimagining, but rather a nineteenth century romantic notion of the Middle Ages, and the Völkisch movement that followed. The Völkisch movement will be discussed momentarily, but the definition of "medievalism" used in this article includes both general medievalism as

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3 I have borrowed this phrase from Professor Trevor Getz.
5 Ibid., 192.
outlined above, and the transformation of Romantic medievalism and Völkisch medievalism during the National Socialist period. In this way Nazi medievalism takes Jean Baudrillard’s simulacrum one step further, creating a copy of a “copy of an original that never existed.” Therefore, the term “medievalism” in this paper is synonymous with a reimagined premodern past.

Anti-Semitism in propaganda was neither particular to Nazi Germany, nor was the portrayal of medievalism for nationalistic aims exclusively used by the Nazis. In combining all three of these aspects within a uniquely Nazi racial ideology, however, Nazi propaganda paved the way for both public acceptance of a Judenrein Reich (an empire cleansed of Jews) and the militaristic expansion of Lebensraum (living space).

Before we explore specific Nazi propaganda, we must first examine the Völkisch movement in some detail. Volkism became the habitus out of which the Nazi Party established itself as a legitimate inheritor. The Party reached back to Volkism both to legitimize itself and to further its nationalistic aims. Volkism rejected the rationalism of the Enlightenment following the rapid urbanization caused by industrialization. While not unique to Germany, it was there that a romantic reaction morphed into the very Germanic Völkisch notion, which formed the core of all Nazi cinematic propaganda.

Much like the milieu preceding Adolf Hitler’s rise to power, the Völkisch movement began at a time of crisis and chaos in Germany. Following the formation of the German nation-state, in 1871, and the rapid growth of industrialization in the decades that followed, many Germans experienced widespread feelings of alienation. Workers became dislocated, moving from the rural countryside to growing cities in search of economic opportunities. This increased the overall feeling of disenfranchisement, as hundreds of thousands of Germans abandoned the rural countryside and traditional craftsmanship for industrialized urban jobs as manufacturers. The move left many feeling both inwardly isolated and outwardly alienated from society. Historian George L. Mosse, an expert on the German Völkisch movement, has argued that the movement began as a desire for unity, as individuals wanted “to feel like they

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7 I use a broad meaning of the term “habitus,” referring to a type of cradle and framework; See Bruce Holsinger, The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 96.


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belong to something greater than oneself." Romantics praised the notion of the Volk, the original people of Germany, with heroic statues, creating a mystical understanding of the Volk that was outside the realm of the scientific rationale. By linking the Volk to the transcendent qualities of the cosmos, the Volk became a symbol "lifted out of the actual conditions in Europe onto a level where both individuality and the larger unity of belonging" coincided with a connection "between man and the 'higher reality.'" This reaction to scientific rationalism is important for two reasons. By turning away from industrialization and urbanization, the Völkisch movement glamorized the opposing elements of modernity. Nature and its landscape therefore, became representations of the transcendent divine in an overt rejection of urban industrialization. More importantly, in returning to the natural landscape, a new type of nationalism developed that was directly connected to geographical and ethnic belonging. The shift from romanticism to the Völkisch movement is underscored by this use of organic metaphors and a new nationalism based on literal sense of rootedness to the specifically German soil. The Völkisch movement also laid the bedrock for the Nazi's sense of ethnic belonging being rooted in bloodlines.

The shift from romanticism to Volkism began with the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte's Addresses to the German Nation, published during the wars of liberation against Napoleonic rule in the early 1800s. In these essays, Fichte directly linked the notions of geographical rootedness with nationalistic causes. In his eighth address, subtitled, What is a People in the Higher Meaning of the Word and What is Love of the Fatherland? Fichte built upon the romantic notion of glorifying nature as a link to the transcendent cosmos. Fichte wrote, "The natural impulse of man . . . is to find heaven on this earth, and to endow his daily work on earth with permanence and eternity; to plant and to cultivate the eternal in the temporal." Fichte then answered his eponymous query, stating "[a] people in the higher meaning of the word [is] the totality of men continuing to live in society with each other and continually creating themselves naturally and spiritually out of themselves." The notion of a German people (Volk) as an original homogeneous ethnic group, began to combine with what would later become the Nazi obsession defining the Volk through the Blutsgemeinschaft, or

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10 Ibid., 14.
11 Ibid., 15.
13 Ibid.
Blood Community. This also mixed together the preceding metaphor of rootedness being found in the home soil. After Fichte established his definition of the Volk, implying at least a vague notion of ethnicity in his definition, he then connected the Volk to nationalism. He wrote that love of the Fatherland is manifested in the individual’s willingness to “sacrifice himself for his [Volk].” The rootedness to the land is the only “source of what is permanent. But this permanence is promised to him only by the continuous and independent existence of his nation. In order to save his nation he must be ready even to die that it may live . . . Freedom . . . is the soil in which higher culture germinates.”

Fichte’s organic metaphors permeated the Völkisch movement, underscoring what created a shared sense of belonging while at the same time contrasting the Volk with the “foreign others” residing on German soil who were supposedly unable to connect themselves to it. This notion of “rootedness” stood in for the opposing “uprootedness” of urbanization, but also created a new way of excluding foreigners. If being “rooted” to the soil connected the Volk to the divine, it therefore marked the “rootless” as people deprived of the sacred life force, “and thus lacking a properly functioning soul.” While those “rooted” in Germany’s primordial nature could become “uprooted” by urbanization, the signifier still carried the implication of at one time being “rooted” to the same soil, and therefore the same history and culture of the Volk. Here one could become “re-rooted” by simply returning to the rural and glamorized landscape. The “rootlessness” of foreigners, however, was a condemnation of their very humanity. If Völkisch ideology maintained that one could reconnect with one’s own people by returning to one’s own soil, then it also marked the nationless and unassimilated Jews as permanently lacking roots, and “thus the soul of the Jew was an insensitive, materialistic thing.”

Fichte’s successor in the Völkisch movement, the author and academic Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, continued to fuse the Volk to the rural landscape, yet moved one step further by arguing that nature tended to create social structures organically. His observance of the landscape, where fields are separate from forests, led Riehl to conclude that society should also be hierarchically structured. In this way the Völkisch movement reimagined the Middle Ages, creating an estate system of peasantry and nobility, while simultaneously glorifying the middle-class workers, transforming them from alienated modern proletariats into rooted

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14 Browning, Ordinary Men, 180.
15 Ibid., 135–139. Emphasis added.
16 Mosse, The Crisis of German Ideology, 16.
17 Ibid., 127.

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medieval artisans. For Riehl and other leaders of Völkisch ideology, the constant threat to the Volk was the unassimilated Jew. As the city represented the antithesis of nature-centered Volksism, the imagined figure of the Jew came to embody all the dangers of modernity: industrialization, urbanization, internationalism, and most of all rootlessness. This notion of Jewish connections to the negative was coupled with the notion that Jewish emancipation, that is formal and equal citizenship, occurred concurrently with late eighteenth and nineteenth century movements of modernity challenging the status quo. Coincidentally or directly, emancipation immediately followed the French Revolution, the March Revolution of 1848 in the German states, and the Russian Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. For traditionalists rooted in Völkisch ideology, this only underscored the menace of Jews, who they equated with modernity as revolutionaries overthrew ruling monarchies. Many Völkisch followers believed that “the Jews” had forced modernity upon the German Volk.

The Völkisch movement had always incorporated anti-Semitism, but under Adolf Hitler, the movement incorporated a blatantly anti-Jewish platform. According to Mosse, “[t]he basic ingredient of the Volkish ideology had ripened to a point where it could be plucked by the Nazis to be successfully assimilated into their own political maneuverings and used to increase their popular appeal.” Volkism, with its longstanding connection to the soil and its anti-Semitic overtones, was the perfect tool for Nazi propaganda.

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was sworn in as Chancellor of Germany. Ravaged by worldwide depression, the heroes of the Völkisch movement, the German farmers, were in a desperate position. Agricultural income hit its nadir at the very same time Hitler took power. William Shirer, an American correspondent in Berlin, estimated that by 1933 “farmers were in debt to the amount of twelve billions [sic] … interest on these debts [alone] took some 14 per cent of all farm income.” In response, Hitler declared that, “[t]he ruin of the German

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18 Ibid., 19–22.
19 Ibid., 36, 58; Ben Martin, “Holocaust and Genocide” (lecture, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA, February 9, 2008); Albert S. Lindemann, Anti-Semitism before the Holocaust (Essex, UK: Pearson Education, 2000) esp. chs. 2–4; Simon Dubnow, History of the Jews: From the Congress of Vienna to the Emergence of Hitler (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1973).
20 Mosse, The Crisis of German Ideology, 294.
peasant will be the ruin of the German people."22 With this, the Nazi’s began a sweeping reform of the agricultural system, coupled with their first cinematic propaganda campaign. Medievalism would be a central trope from the beginning.

In November 1933, the Nazi Party produced the short documentary Blut und Boden. Shortly before making the film, Hitler appointed Richard Walther Darré as Minister of Food and Agriculture. Darré was also the author of a 1929 book with a very Völkisch title, Das Bauern­tum als Lebensquell der nordischen Rasse [The Peasantry as the Life Source of the Nordic Race]. Beyond defining the peasantry as a core racial group with Nordic heritage, Darré’s book argued for a more natural approach to land management, including the conservation of forests and the creation of more open spaces for animal husbandry.23 Darré simultaneously sought to protect the farmer against the ravages of the modern economy by reinstating a type of feudalism, while at the same time using peasant unrest to gain more rural converts to the nascent Nazi Party. The 1933 Hereditary Farm Law protected any family estate, provided the family could prove “Aryan” purity of blood back to the year 1800. The farm could not be foreclosed, but the family was also bound to the land, passing it down to the oldest male heir and likened by Shirer to “the serfs of feudal times.”24 In short, this reform created a direct linkage to the Nazi concept of race as blood (Blut), and the Völkisch rootedness of soil (Boden).

The beginning of Blut und Boden glorifies small town life with beautiful, romantic images. The main characters are a family of farmers who playfully argue about how long their family has lived on this particular parcel of land; “Has it been for three hundred years,” the children muse, “or three hundred and fifty?” 25 Beyond underscoring that the new Hereditary Farm Law would protect this ethnic German family, this playful bantering also elucidates that the family’s roots, or rootedness, can be traced back into the late Middle Ages. Yet the threat of modernity looms large.

The family receives a mailed notice by a very modernly dressed postman, informing them that they must vacate the family farm they can

22 Quoted in Ibid., 257.
24 Ibid., 258.
no longer afford. In this way, modernity is depicted as an invader, forcing the Volk to uproot. A montage scene follows, showing the same sacks of wheat originally carried by the farmer in his horse drawn cart, which were joyfully threshed by a communal gathering of rural workers, now offloaded from a tanker ship by an industrial crane and transported by train to the market. The market is filled with foreign products: drums of Danish butter, vegetables from Holland, and even exotic fruits from across the British Empire. The message is clear; these foreign products are not grown in German soil, and therefore they cannot nourish the Volk. The prices of food rises, and money flows out of the hands of the hard working Volk and into the pockets of a bourgeois middleman.

The presence of the middleman in the film is particularly striking. Dressed in a modern business suit, with a dense beard and round eyeglasses, he conforms to all the Nazi stereotypes of male Jews. He is shown smiling and whispering to others, underscoring the perceived secretive and conspiratorial nature of Jews so abundant in standard Nazi propaganda. Just three months after Blut und Boden’s release, the Nazi Party organized a large boycott of Jewish owned businesses. While the April 1933 boycott was not economically effective, it did demonstrate that Hitler’s first move after seizing power was to limit Jewish economic participation and racially segregate the emancipated Jewish population. These early acts were the first in what would become a malevolent cascade. Holocaust historian Marion Kaplan has interpreted the 1933 boycott as the first step towards public approval of the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, which stripped Jews of “the foundations upon which Jewish life had existed in Germany . . . since unification in 1871.” This law reclassified the German Volk along bloodlines, and thus further “othered” Jews as impure, Unvölkisch, and unclean.26

The second half of Blut und Boden shows the original farm family packing up their belongings and migrating to the city. Their urban migration is juxtaposed with images of industrialized milk and bread factories. As the uprooted family moves into an empty tenement, the images of fast moving bottles of milk and mass produced bread are replaced by a sea of white crosses, representing tombstones. The film’s narrator tells the viewers that infant mortality rates are three times higher in the city than the countryside, the implicit message being that only rooted agriculture can feed the Volk’s vitality.27 The city of Berlin, at the time one of Germany’s most cosmopolitan and international cities, is used as an example to show what the growing infant mortality rate,

27 Blut und Boden.
caused by improper nutrition, will do to urban growth. "Today," says the narrator, "there are four million inhabitants in Berlin . . . by 1960 there will be three million." The graph continues to reduce the city of Berlin smaller and smaller until it shows it in the year 2050, and Berlin is reduced to 90,000 residents. As Germany is shown slowly dying off, a larger map shows that the only pockets of inhabitants left will be those who have stayed rooted in the countryside.

_Blut und Boden_ ends with a return to the agrarian landscape. Wheat stalks are again tilled and threshed, only now instead of showing images of freshly baked bread, the grain morphs into mortar, and the smiling Aryan Volk are building tall barns, complete with large Swastika flags. The original farm family, now protected by the Hereditary Act, returns in their horse drawn cart, which is now overflowing with wheat. As it passes under the Nazi flag, we see that it is not only filled with wheat, but also with children. The original family consisting of three children has now miraculously doubled in size, and the father unloads child after child, all young and blond. The film ends with these children marching and singing, as they slowly grow into a column of identical soldiers united behind the Swastika.

While a short film, intended largely for Party members and to precede cinematic features, _Blut und Boden_ is significant in many ways. By putting a human face on the Agricultural campaign; the film served as a reimagined Völkisch ideal now projected for mass consumption. Like the Völkisch tradition, the film glorified the rural worker as the savior of German lifeblood, nourishing the nation and remaining firmly rooted to the Boden. Historian and cinematic Nazi propaganda expert David Welch wrote that the film also sought to solidify the Nazi Party’s base among the peasantry by highlighting the importance of more than just the soil, but of the hard and necessary work of farmers. _Blut und Boden_ represents not only the earliest Nazi propaganda film, but also the most overt connection to Völkisch ideology. The film, existing as a propaganda front to the entire “blood and soil” campaign, created a pantheon of subsequent films expounding upon the theme; establishing what Welch calls the “_Blut und Boden_” genre. With its defense of the rural Volk and its call for unity, this film is a perfect example of medievalism’s usefulness in cinematic propaganda.

While _Blut und Boden_ used medievalism for nationalistic aims of unity and purity, _Ewiger Wald_ (Eternal Forest) used these same notions to

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38 Ibid.
3v Ibid.
promote militaristic expansion in 1936, one year after the passage of the Nuremberg Laws. As a full length, pseudo-documentary, the film reenacted historical events and built directly off of the themes present in Blut und Boden. Ewiger Wald was produced in 1936, three years after Blut und Boden. The signifier “Ewiger (Eternal)” showed that the film was attempting to move beyond history to reimagine historical events from a present Nazi/Völkisch prospective. The viewer journeys through German history while traversing the German landscape, as the low angle shots look up towards a deciduous canopy, creating the illusion that one is moving through a forest and moving through time.31

The first time period recreated is a primitive, pagan rural village. The inhabitants appear like the tribes described in Tacitus’ Germania: fierce, warlike, and pure. They are firmly rooted to the soil, as underscored by a scene of communal burial, where the deceased are placed inside of hollowed out logs serving as wooden caskets. The narration uses the plural form wir (“we”) to emphasize that the characters on screen exist not just in the past, but are ever-present within the blood of the Aryan Volk. “We originated in the forest,” says the narrator, “from the forest we build our living space [Lebensraum].”32 By invoking “Lebensraum,” the film also added a significant weighted implication. Lebensraum was an obsession for Hitler, and a major justification for rearmament and geographic expansion. It is no surprise that shortly after the film was released, Hitler violated the Treaty of Versailles by invading the Rhineland, the area taken from Germany following its defeat in World War I. In part, Ewiger Wald attempted to justify this expansion with its biased retelling of German history. Ewiger Wald’s recreation of the past as constantly in violent conflict yet always maintaining the connection of Völkisch rootedness was an attempt to create public support for militaristic expansion, by justifying the notion of Lebensraum as an ancient and German historical tradition.

The next historical re-imagination is an invasion by mounted Roman legions. By placing the soldiers on horses, and thus above the grounded defending Germans, the contrast is drawn between rootedness and foreigners. The triumphant Volk, with both feet planted firmly in the ground, are themselves stand-ins for an eternal and undefeated rooted nation. They repel the Romans, and the narrator exhorts the audience to

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32 Quoted in Lee and Wilke, “Forest as ’Volk’,” 28.
“have no fear of war” and to “fight for the soil for all your existence.”

This, arguably, is a direct allusion to the early Völkisch philosopher Fichte’s statement that soil is the only permanence of the Volk. That they must be willing to die so that the land may live is echoed within the narration of Ewiger Wald, proving that Nazi propaganda directly pulled ideology from the Völkisch movement for modern purposes, a clear example of medievalism at play.

Following the Roman invasion, a large funeral pyre consumes the heroic dead. As the bodies burn, a superimposed ancient rune becomes the insignia of the SS, connecting the Nazis’ elite fighting force with the heroic defenders of the rooted past. The film then moves into explicitly recreated medievalisms, as Viking ships sail across the screen, harbingers of the invented Middle Ages. The strength of the Vikings is linked to the eternal power of the forest, as the narrator tells us, “they owe their power and glory to the wood that made their ships.”

This suggests that the Volk could also become powerful, like the Vikings, by embracing the forest and utilizing the Germanic natural resources. The very next scene makes this apparent, as the Viking ships give way to a medieval village, with artisans building on skeletal wooden frames to show that “German cities,” like Viking longships, “are built with the glory and the power of the forest.”

The camera follows the spire of a gothic cathedral, as it dissolves into the image of a majestic tree top, a common motif that underscores the rooted power existing in the small, rural villages.

A tour of the Middle Ages would be incomplete without an allusion to the Crusades. The phalanxes of armored knights are doubly ominous when the narrator commands, “[t]o the East you can hear the words; ‘German knights take up your swords! Expand the soil, expand the forest! Create room for the nation and its inheritors!’”

Here we are shown the rallying call for Lebensraum, and presented with the notion that the Volk need to expand in order to survive, a sentiment which Hitler repeatedly echoed. In stating that the forest and soil need to spread, the film not only seeks to justify Germany’s expansion into the Rhineland, but also into the eastern borders of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and beyond to create Hitler’s Eastern European Empire, Großdeutschland. This is the Blut und Boden theme of unity coupled with the Ewiger Wald call for expansion, and it is best illustrated by the following example of medievalism. The

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33 Ibid., 29.
34 Fichte, Addresses to the German Nation, 135–139.
35 Lee and Wilke, “Forest as ‘Volk’,” 30.
36 Quoted in ibid.; Welch, Propaganda and the German Cinema, 88.
37 Welch, Propaganda and German Cinema, 88.
38 Ewiger Wald; Lee and Wilke, “Forest as ‘Volk’,” 32.

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forest is destroyed by a peasant rebellion, which was out of control without strong centralized leadership, such as could have been found under the Nazis. The forest, however, has been replanted and the camera focuses on a row of trees lined up in single file. Quickly the image is overlaid with rapid shots of young Aryan soldiers, blending the trees and the militant Volk into one.

The final element of Nazi ideology, an obsession with racial purity, begins in the latter half of the film. Surprisingly, *Ewiger Wald* breaks from the traditional transparent anti-Semitism, and instead depicts French-African soldiers as the classic "other." The use of the black Africans as a warning against racial mixing is quizzical. On one hand, pronounced racial differences mark the African soldiers as the extreme "other," cautioning the Aryan Volk to maintain racial purity. On the other hand, for National Socialism the corruption of blood came from inward threats, specifically Jews. Certainly the context of the occupying Africans in *Ewiger Wald* warns against blood mixing, as the narrative voice bemoans the "rotten decay" and the burden of the forest being overtaken by a non-native blood. While on the surface this scene is meant to recall the humiliation of having the Rheinland stripped by the French following the Great War, the underlying notions of ethnic cleansing are particularly striking. The final scenes of Swastika carrying lumberjacks cutting out "what is sick and of foreign race" follows the standard Nazi fixation of a pure Aryan Volk by violent means. While *Ewiger Wald* remains a remarkable example of medievalism as rationalization for expansion, its replacement of anti-Semitism with stark racial disparities and notions of ethnic cleansing do remove it slightly from the traditional collection of Nazi cinematic propaganda.

Before moving on to the final example of purely anti-Semitic cinematic propaganda, we must briefly examine how Nazi propaganda absorbed the classical period into its *Völkisch* medievalism while using it to further strengthen the idea of a "pure" and healthy Aryan Volk. The Berlin Olympics occurred the same year audiences first viewed *Ewiger Wald*, and just a few months after Germany's bloodless invasion of the Rhineland. Hitler saw the Olympic Games as a chance to legitimize the Nazi Party to a global audience, as well as a chance to showcase the physical prowess of the rooted Volk. He recruited director Leni Riefenstahl, who was made famous by *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*), her 1934 propaganda masterwork about the Nuremberg rallies. In order to understand how the Nazi Party successfully incorporated

39 *Ewiger Wald*.
40 Lee and Wilke, "Forest as 'Volk'," 38.
Roman and Greek culture and history into Völkisch ideology, we need to only examine the twenty minute prologue of Riefenstahl's Olympia.

The film begins with a sweeping shot of smoke rising up through the ether. The shot suggests that the viewer is seeing the dawn of creation, a time before time existed. When images slowly come into focus, they are the ruins of the Acropolis, detailed more as a geographical reference point than anything else. The Acropolis quickly vanishes, as this is an imagined reality existing in pure and unspoiled nature. The stone statues transform into Aryan athletes, always framed against a blue sky background and with their feet bare in the grass. The athletes are situated in raw nature, tethered to the land and existing "free from [any image of] industry and modernity." Soon an image of the sun dissolves into the flame of the torch, a reference to Prometheus giving a tool of the gods to mortals. The torch is carried by a runner across distant shorelines, alluding to Herodotus' story about an Athenian running some 26 miles from Marathon to Sparta to ask for assistance. Yet here the runner is journeying to Germany, literally passing the torch from the ancients into the Berlin coliseum, under Hitler's watchful eye. The passing of the Olympic torch, today a popular tradition and pivotal part of the Olympic ceremony, was in fact invented in 1934 by the German Olympic organizer, Dr. Carl Diem.

The torch handoff presented in Olympia neatly connected the classical past to the Third Reich. By examining the physical aesthetics of the German Olympic athletes, Riefenstahl also connected the Volk as representatives of outward beauty, which according to nascent Nazi racial science, was the best indication of inner virtue. Following the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Hitler praised the physical appearance of Aryan athletes. "Never," he said, "was humanity in its external appearance and its frame of mind nearer to the ancient world than it is today." This statement emphasizes the connection of Aryan racial purity as the inheritors of Greco-Roman culture. The increasing obsession with outward appearances as signs of inner purity, and most importantly the corruption of this, came to dominate the medievalisms found in cinematic propaganda.

42 George L. Mosse, The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars Through the Third Reich (New York: Howard Fertig, 1975), 192.
45 Quoted in Welch, Propaganda and German Cinema, 95.

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Two years after Riefenstahl's *Olympia* received worldwide acclaim, the most overtly anti-Semitic films to date were released in Germany. Moving beyond the motifs of unity and rootedness in *Blut und Boden* [1933] and nationalistic expansion in *Ewiger Wald* [1936], *Der ewige Jude (The Eternal Jew)* [1940], another stylized faux-documentary, sought to prepare the German public for direct steps toward creating a nation without Jews.

*Der ewige Jude* debuted shortly after Hitler's infamous threat of genocide. "If the Jews should again plunge the world into war," he shouted in a Reichstag speech coinciding with the sixth anniversary of Nazi formal rule, "this act will result in annihilation of the entire Jewish race in Europe."46 By the time of the film's release, Hitler himself had already plunged the world into war, with the September 1, 1939 invasion of Poland. Since the 1933 boycotts, Nazi laws had moved the German Jews systematically closer to complete "social death."47 After the loss of citizenship in 1935, the exclusion from German culture and business, and the destruction of Jewish shops and homes caused by the 1938 pogrom, Kristallnacht, the social uprooting of German Jews was nearly complete. As the Nazi Germany expanded east, Party leaders began searching for a Final Solution to the Jewish question—how to physical and permanently remove the Jews from the growing Nazi Empire.

The Nazi occupation of Poland quickly resulted in forced ghettoization of Jews, who were clustered together in deplorable conditions. *Der ewige Jude* features actual documentary footage of the Jews in Polish ghettos, but the narrator blames these inhuman conditions not upon the Germans who enforced them, but upon the victims, in order to fabricate the illusion that Jews were inherently filthy and barbarous. Thus, the narrator tells the audience that the film depicts "Jews as they appear in reality, before they conceal themselves behind masks representing civilized Europeans."48 *Der ewige Jude* also recycles images from previous Nazi propaganda films. The film opens with a stream of rats emerging from the sewers before dissolving into images of Jews living in vermin-infested ghettos. The message is repeated again and again throughout the film, in an attempt to foster the notion that Jews are vermin, and must therefore be eradicated.

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47 Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair*, 150.

48 Ibid., 333.
While Der ewige Jude shares the same adjective as Ewiger Wald and is usually translated as The Eternal Jew, "ewige" has a double meaning in German. It also has the connotation of "wandering," and in this context is in fact meant as an allusion to the medieval Christian myth about a Jew who refused to help Christ while he carried the cross up to Golgotha. In the legend, the Jew is condemned to wander eternally, forever rootless. Here the myth is reinvented, stripped of Christian elements and imbued with Völkisch organic overtones. The first scene of the film is a large map, suggesting the emigration of the Jews, loosely originating, but certainly not "rooted," somewhere in foreign Eastern Europe. The narrator says that wherever the Jews roamed, rats followed, carrying with them "disease, plague, leprosy, typhoid fever, cholera, dysentery, and so on." The diseases, of course, stand in for all the wrongs of modernity. But the "disease" most threatening to Nazi-Völkisch ideology was Jewish contamination via blood. After claiming the Jews are responsible for all menaces found in the urban city, ranging from gambling and organized crime, to prostitution and international thievery, the film shows images of Jews and deconstructs each image based on the Nazi notion of physiognomy. The Völkisch glorification of rural production is also echoed here as the film claims that, because of their unrooted nature, the Jew must "buy and sell, but cannot produce." The following scene shows the heroic Aryan artisans farming, sculpting pottery, and digging in the soil. The narrator simultaneously praises the Volk while "othering" Jews with the statement, "the Jew is a race without farmers, without manual laborers... a race of parasites." The final scene of the film is a light and sunny Völkisch landscape, complete with the faces of pure blond and smiling children. The film's conclusion visually reminds the viewer why they must maintain pure blood and also how all of Germany, and its future imperial lands in the East, can become a Judenrein society, literally cleansed of Jews.

While the medievalism of this final film comes in the form of overt anti-Semitism, it nevertheless blends the concepts of racial purity with Völkisch rootedness, while showing the conditions in the Lebensraum territory that must be conquered and purged. In this way the film lingers ominously, as one year after its release Hitler ordered the invasion of

51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Sherland Jackson, "Creating the Third Reich," 337.

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Russia, which was closely followed by the *Einsatzgruppen* death squads and the subsequent mass murder of millions of Jews and Slavs beginning in 1941.

The four films examined in this paper are but small pieces of propaganda, and on their own did not significantly create a campaign of genocide. When deconstructed, however, the films do reveal a great deal of information regarding the ways Nazi ideology portrayed itself. The prevalence of *Völkisch* notions of belonging and “otherness” within these films underscores the important role these themes had in influencing the masses. The Holocaust did not come about at one decisive moment, but was rather carried out slowly. It began with a redefinition of identity, so crucial in films like *Blut und Boden*. German remilitarization and expansion following the humiliation of World War I were crucial steps toward establishing Nazi led dominance and legitimacy, and the messages of *Ewiger Wald* underscored the importance of a Volk rooted together in a shared and undiminished history. Finally, films like *Der ewige Jude* dramatically colored the Jews as the rootless and wandering “others,” a subhuman race of plague-carrying vermin, infected with modernity and threatening the entire, racially-defined, German Volk, inheritors of the Classic and Medieval Ages. The film attempted to persuade audiences to agree with the Nazis; that the logical conclusion to vermin infestation is extermination.

In order to reach such a conclusion, these films built upon one another. In the early years of Nazism, *Blut und Boden* and *Ewiger Wald* developed the notion of *Völkisch* connectedness through the home soil. Not only did this provide a platform for Nazi ideology to take root, but it also reinforced the nineteenth-century notions of German nationalism. The films argued that ethnic Germans had a shared and close relationship to natural landscape of Germany. *Olympia* helped transform these feelings of German unity into a physical glorification of the Aryan Volk. The film used poetic imagery and a reimagining of antiquity in order to root the newly created Aryan supremacy into ancient tradition. By 1940, *Der ewige Jude* overtly gave the Volksgemeinschaft a common enemy, drawing strongly off of anti-Semitic legacies. The dehumanized and threatening symbol of Jews, once identified, became marked for elimination. When taken together, the medievalisms presented in each of these films helped foster greater public acceptance of Nazi policies, including The Final Solution, and reveal the deep roots of the Holocaust.

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