

FREDERIC RAPHAEL

Culture Vultures

Inhumanities: Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture

By David B Dennis

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Francis Ford Coppola poured Wagner's 'Ride of the Valkyries' over the scene in *Apocalypse Now* in which a swarm of US helicopters bracket a Vietnamese village and drench it in flames. He could not have implied a clearer analogy between the policies of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson and those of Adolf Hitler. History too has a soundtrack. Hitler's ascent was based on homage to Richard Wagner, the only other *Führer* to whom the master race was expected to bend the knee in conformity, with his slogan, 'Germans, honour your German Masters!' It is sometimes regarded as a conundrum how concentration camp officials could return from their bestial activities and then admire, and play, Beethoven, Mozart or Bach. In fact, we are told here, Bach's art was held (however absurdly) to prophesy 'the fate of the Fatherland in its present, most severe volkish struggle'. German music was re-orchestrated to provide a tonic for racial superiority.

David B Dennis is a professor of history at Loyola University Chicago. Before composing *Inhumanities*, he 'examined every page of the [Nazi newspaper] *Völkischer Beobachter* from January 1920 through April 1945' and anatomised every 'major article' on the arts and philosophy in order to furnish this 'thematic and chronological tapestry of Nazi cultural interpretations'. Poor guy! There is something heroic, if not masochistic, about volunteering to submerge oneself for so long in the mid-den of German self-delusion.

This is not, of course, to say that all Germans, or only Germans, shared the sado-masochistic ideology that crystallised around Wagner's anti-Semitic rant, but it is impossible to ignore the nationwide orgiastic intoxication generated by the genius of Bayreuth and merchandised by the Nazi propaganda machine. It is nice to suppose that the Nazis were the only bad

guys in Hitler's military; in truth, the SS and *Wehrmacht* marched to the same tunes.

German nationalism did not begin with Nazism. As George L Mosse observed, its appeal evolved during the 19th century. Pan-Germanism was to 'provide furnished rooms' in which the disconcerted citizens of an eventually unified German Reich could feel at home. The 'disorienting facets of modernisation' found a single explanation in the malign practices of the Jews. The panacea for all Teutonic fears was *Völkisch* unity in opposition both to Jews and, beyond them, to the French and to all 'internationalist' sentiments of which the cult of Reason was the most deplored. As Tacitus was deemed to have proved, the Germans were unique among Europeans in being a pure-blooded heroic race, rooted in their own soil, and thus the envy of the world, if only the world would realise it.

The farmer remained the quintessential honest man of Nazi mythology, even though German industrial power was essential to the mechanisation of the *Wehrmacht*. There was a good deal of church furniture in every truly German home. As Thomas Mann had the courage to say, once he was beyond the clutch of the Gestapo, no one did more to legitimise German resentment and self-importance than Martin Luther. His translation of the Bible, and commentary on it, consecrated the evangelical vanity that, in due time, sanctified a crusade of militant murderers. The Aryanisation of Jesus of Nazareth was only one of the ways in which the Bible itself became an instrument of anti-Semitism. German enlightenment philosophy, and especially its crackpot offshoots in Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Alfred Rosenberg, recycled Christianity in pseudo-logical drag.

When it came to the British, before the war at least, the *Völkischer Beobachter* sometimes displayed a measure of emu-

lous affinity. It was expressed, culturally, in the appropriation of Shakespeare, on whom German Romantics were said to hold a 'second copyright', thanks to Schlegel's translations. It took some time to repatriate Handel from his long, happy residence in London, but he was eventually redressed as 100 per cent *Völkisch*. After the British turned critical of Nazism, Byron was hailed as a consistent exposé of his countrymen's perfidy and of Jewish influence on them. What did it matter that the 'Jews' to whom Byron sometimes referred disparagingly was a generic title for moneylenders, by no means all of them Semites, or that Byron's favourite living writer was Isaac D'Israeli, in whose honour he wrote *Hebrew Melodies*?

The contributors to the long cultural rant of *Völkischer Beobachter* were by no means semi-illiterate hacks: 41 per cent were 'notable professors'. Their re-upholstery of many great figures of European culture was undertaken with evident relish. Beethoven was said to have had blue eyes (despite the evidence of the composer's secretary Anton Schindler) and his 'genetic purity' certified, which made him the 'spiritual possession of all Aryan mankind'. Dante was of the same genesis and so was Machiavelli, who said that 'whoever shows himself an enemy of the Fatherland, in thought or deed ... should be treated as a patricide'. Leonardo da Vinci is later applauded for applying his genius to the invention of weapons (the U-boat among them) to further the ambitions of Cesare Borgia.

The paper's enrolment of Machiavelli, Dennis tells us, 'marked the beginning of an ignominious phase, free from theology and jurisprudence ... justifying the use of hooks, wires, and guillotines in places like



the prison at Plötzensee ... where, to be sure, neither mercy nor appeal had any influence'. Is 'ignominious' not a rather lame term to apply to the justification of a programme of torture and murder? No doubt, Dennis is on the side of the angels, but his 'to be sure' indicates the trite facility with which academics can rise a little too high above the material they are handling.

Many of Germany's cultural treasures lacked the required narrow-mindedness and demanded a great deal of over-painting. Goethe – whose manifest cosmopolitanism (and philo-Semitism) might have been embarrassing – was too central to German vanities to be left without a Nazi uniform. He was said, by Ernst Schrupf, to have 'deeply regretted not belonging to a great, strong, respected and feared Volk'. Hölderlin – 'arguably the dreamiest of all German romantics' – was conscripted to conjure up 'an imagined storm of steel capable of holding out against the inevitable'.

The writer Hanns Johst coined the slogan, later pocketed by Herman Göring, 'when I hear the word culture, I release the safety catch of my revolver'. Göring's literal appropriation of European art treasures was the fattest proof of the cultural envy to which the *Völkischer Beobachter's* pages never ceased to testify. As the twilight of the gods darkened over Hitler's Reich, even Francisco Goya's *Disasters of War* were declared to testify to the 'nightmares that today haunt every human being ... with the thought of the victory of Bolshevism'.

There are not many laughs in these

more than 500 pages. The only one I could manage greeted the revelation that Hellmut Ludwig, who made a quasi-equivalence between Wagner and Verdi as national soundtrack providers, survived the war to produce 'works on folk song (with an emphasis on yodeling)'.

The facility with which both intellectuals, such as Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, and artists, such as Richard Strauss and Arno Breker, came to align themselves with the prevailing power structure is not, of course, an exclusively German characteristic. 'Sint Maecenas, non deerunt, Flacce, Marones,' said the Roman poet Martial, in the first century AD: provide enough patrons like Maecenas, and you'll never lack Virgils. In modern parlance, 'Show me the money!'. David B Dennis omits to tell us how much the professorial or other contributors to the Nazi newspaper got paid. It would be nice to believe that they were more venal than sincere, but it is likelier that byline ambition was enough to generate the hirelings' allegiance.

The sad truth about the 20th century is that it proved that, given the right incentives in the form of kudos and emoluments, intellectuals will become fluent in any rewarding ideology, whether religious, political or aesthetic. To procure the treason of the clerks rarely makes undue call on the funds available to the current Maecenas.

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