

One might consider trawling through twenty-five years' worth of every single article in every single copy of a bi-weekly newspaper a monumental chore, but this is exactly what the historian David Dennis has undertaken for his new book. As a result, *Inhumanities: Nazi interpretations of Western culture* is one of the most important, authoritative and meticulous studies of Nazi propaganda to date.

Dennis's sombre project was to examine the *Völkischer Beobachter* (the "Folkish Observer"), the leading newspaper of the Nazi Party, published until April 1945. This was the first paper in Germany at the time to reach a circulation of over 1 million copies and Dennis's aim is to assess exactly how the paper disseminated Nazi ideology. The *Völkischer Beobachter* went for the European cultural jugular. It did not simply invent its own propaganda or build on political slogans; Dennis shows how the paper targeted the Western tradition's greatest writers, composers, painters, sculptors and thinkers, usurping them to glorify Nazism. From German painters such as Dürer to other European giants such as Rembrandt, Leonardo and Michelangelo, the *Völkischer Beobachter* appropriated the greatest creative forces of European history. In music, Bach, Schubert, Beethoven, Brahms and Strauss among many others were enlisted as supposed forerunners of the Nazi ideal. Goethe, Kleist and other

Heroes and villains

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INHUMANITIES

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German Romantic writers, along with thinkers such as Nietzsche and Schopenhauer were also interpreted as proto-Nazi cultural icons. Dennis unpicks specific detail to reveal just how the paintings of Dürer were said to represent a mythic ideal of nationalism, how the German songs of Schubert were deemed to support the ideal of the Volk, and how the writings of Goethe and Nietzsche supposedly evinced a Nazi nationalism. Throughout all the major European cultural icons, a love of war and anti-Semitism were alleged to be integral: prejudice and barbarism were thereby made intellectually and culturally respectable.

With impressive determination Dennis tracks down how, in addition to co-opting "Nazi heroes", the paper also manufactured enemies, namely Jewish cultural figures such as Felix Mendelssohn, Albert Einstein,

Heinrich Heine, and the man they described as philo-Semitic, Thomas Mann. Dennis argues that the *Völkischer Beobachter* politicized artistic culture, creating the notion of German Romanticism as theirs, while realist and modernist traditions were deemed to be oppositional, Semitic and decadent: Schoenberg, like Mann, was dismissed as reflecting "asphalt" (namely, urban) culture.

Inhumanities is lucidly written, understated in tone and packed with fascinating detail: even the crossword puzzles in the newspaper were propaganda, presented in the shape of a swastika. Dennis is especially illuminating in his specialist field, the history of music, revealing the Nazis' claim that Brahms in his simple *Lieder* purportedly produced the pure form of folk songs that demonstrated an inner unity with the German Volk, while Strauss's waltzes allegedly expressed the Germanic soul. Schubert, interpreted as Southern German in his ancestry, was celebrated by the *Völkischer Beobachter* as making the German people famous as the "Volk richest in song".

Throughout *Inhumanities*, Dennis shows how the humanities, which represent the core values of Western civilization, were used as a weapon against themselves, the greatest

hearts and minds of European civilization manipulated to justify evil. Yet while the importance of his message is undisputed, some of his concluding comments leave cause for concern. He writes that "through the insistence on these prejudices over the course of a quarter of a century . . . it is utterly possible that many Germans would have become convinced that creative deeds of national genius . . . included . . . even the vicious special operations they carried out to the end". This is a dangerous claim, and at odds with the overall tenor of Dennis's work. One has to remember that the German people, especially in the early stages of the regime, had a choice. For instance, the *Völkischer Beobachter* was a known Nazi propaganda paper. To purchase it was to make a political decision: the paper was in fact already preaching to the converted.

Perhaps a more fitting conclusion to *Inhumanities* is Dennis's claim that "this book has shown how Nazi ideologues worked to demonstrate that their ideals were rooted in the western cultural past". In tracing one key aspect of Hitler's propaganda machine, the book is an impressively accurate and original piece of research. David Dennis raises as many questions as he answers, but ultimately he highlights the need for critical intelligence, to avoid being duped by manipulative institutions, whatever their alleged credentials.