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Inhumanities: Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture by David B. Dennis

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Dennis, David B. *Inhumanities: Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xvi + 541 pages. Hardcover, \$35.00.

In 1938, Richard Wagner's opera *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* opened the Salzburg Festival. On that occasion, the Nazi Party's official newspaper and propaganda organ, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, reported the opera to be not only a theatrical production, but also "a program, a promise, and a symbol all in one" (p. 382). The same could be said of the Nazi understanding of artistic works in general, as historian David B. Dennis demonstrates in his exhaustive examination of culture writing published in the *Völkischer Beobachter* during its 25-year press run.

Dennis carefully traces how the paper interpreted and employed an esteemed cast of historical cultural figures, including Goethe, Schiller, Beethoven, and Nietzsche—but with Wagner always the most referenced and revered of them all—in order to support and inspire Nazi political goals. In thematically organized chapters, Dennis guides the reader through the paper's use, or as is more often the case, abuse, of the artistic contributions of these figures during major stages in the party's history: from raging against the doomed Weimar Republic to seizing power and enacting anti-Semitic policies to finally plunging the world into war.

By Dennis's calculations, over ninety percent of authors writing on cultural topics in the paper were "occasional contributors" (p. 459). The output from these writers could range from only a single piece to dozens during the paper's run. But the writers, nearly forty percent of who were academics, belonged to a group of individuals striving to work toward the opinions of the Führer. As a result, their interpretations of key cultural figures were protean and contradictory. This very conflict demonstrates how Nazi cultural policy was built piecemeal, responding to shifting political imperatives, but rarely coordinated from the top down.

As the largest daily in Nazi Germany and the first German newspaper to reach a circulation of over 1 million, the *Völkischer Beobachter* makes for an important site of inquiry. Previous works in the historiography of cultural reception have looked at Nazi publications targeted at specific audiences, but rarely at how the party communicated to a broad public. Dennis decisively illustrates that cultural criticism was used not merely to validate the anti-Semitic and anti-modern agendas of Nazism, but also to provide an essential rationale for those beliefs.

While the paper was successful as an organ for trumpeting outrages, it was much less confident in articulating a coherent cultural policy for the Reich. Even so, race was always inextricably intertwined with culture. An excellent example is the paper's championing of racial and *völkisch* theorists such as the British-born Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927), who asserted that the "elemental force of all art lies in race, that art must announce an idea, that true German art requires a German philosophy of life" (p. 266). A race's worth could be determined by its cultural production and, by extension, either could be marked for elimination if perceived as failing to meet the Führer's espoused ideals.

The book's frequent use of direct quotations has the benefit of never shielding the reader from the turgid prose and endless repetition that marked the paper's style. In contrast, Dennis's writing is always clear and often engaging. But what is frequently lacking is active, repeated interpretative intervention from the author. As a result, readers without a firm command of German cultural history may at times be left to wonder how much the *Völkischer Beobachter's* interpretations distorted contemporaneous or currently accepted historical understanding. Dennis acknowledges his debt to the interdisciplinary work of pioneering historians George L. Mosse and Fritz Stern, but his work largely complements their insights rather than providing new

interpretive analysis. For this reason, those works remain essential companion pieces to properly contextualize Dennis's research.

Dennis attempts a synthesis of thematic analysis and chronological coverage with mixed success. The final chapters, grouped under the heading "Nazi 'Solutions'," form one of the strongest portions of the book. In this section, the clearly delineated chronological focus lets the reader easily understand how Germany's annexations and conquests before and during the Second World War transformed the party's deployment of cultural figures, notably expanding to include such additional figures from Western culture as Rembrandt, Leonardo da Vinci, and Goya. In earlier chapters, however, a primarily thematic organization tends to obscure connections between contemporary events and the paper's content. For instance, the very popular exhibition of "degenerate art" in 1937 and the subsequent auction of pieces purged from national museums in 1939 would surely have influenced the paper's writing and understanding of accepted style. But explicit connections with such key events are often lacking or so quickly noted as to be easily missed.

Nonetheless, the book rewards careful reading. It is a near compendium of Nazi cultural-historical writing and a confirmation of scholarly participation in the politicization and nationalization of the arts that will be of significant benefit to historians. In addition, its contribution to the study of propaganda will be of interest to a range of disciplines, including political science, sociology, and psychology. *Inhumanities* is an essential demonstration of the pivotal role culture played in Nazi conceptions of national and racial identity and an important addition to any campus library.

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