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## Their Meister's Voice: Nazi Reception of Richard Wagner and His Works in the *Völkischer Beobachter*

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## 8 Their Meister's Voice

### Nazi Reception of Richard Wagner and His Works in the *Völkischer Beobachter*

*David B. Dennis*

Recently the producers of the public television program *History Detectives* obtained a collection of films an American G.I. had liberated from a pile of rubble in 1945. Among the canisters, one was labeled “The Führer in Bayreuth” and this attracted the filmmakers’ attention. Inside was a reel of footage showing Hitler arriving at the Festival in his Mercedes-Benz, passing by crowds in the swastika-decorated streets of the town, and going in and out of the SS-guarded Festspielhaus along with Winifred Wagner (the composer’s daughter-in-law). The “history detectives” contacted scholars in Film and German History—myself included—to determine whether these images were worthy of further examination. The consensus was that while the record of Hitler’s visits to the annual festival is well known, this was rare motion picture evidence of the pomp and circumstance surrounding performances of Wagner’s music during the Third Reich. So the producers decided to develop an episode exploring connections between Hitler, National Socialism, Wagner, and his music. But the investigation took a surprising twist. In the end, the case focused not on the Wagner-Hitler trail, but on who it was that had carried a camera to Bayreuth and filmed the activities of the Führer. Indeed, the outcome of this whodunit would not surprise mystery buffs: the cook did it. Apparently Hitler’s long time chef, Arthur Kannenberg, was also an amateur filmmaker who shot the Nazi leader in several formal and informal settings. So instead of examining the controversial issues of Wagnerism and National Socialism, the program remained—like the camera wielding cook himself—outside the Festival Hall and relatively indifferent to the mysterious drama of Nazi aesthetics and politics unfolding within (*Hitler Films* 2007).

To a degree, a similar tendency has marked scholarship about connections between Wagner and Nazi culture. The subject has generated a small industry for music scholars, cultural historians, and even philosophers: intense work has concentrated on how Wagner’s writings and operas may have influenced Hitler’s self-identity and political outlook, as well as some of his followers. However, when it comes to the specific matter of how the Nazi Party linked the life and music of Wagner with the main principles of its ideology, rather than to the global, modernist significances that some Wagnerians attribute to them, investigators have remained somewhat

outside the actual scene of the 'crime'. Numerous hypotheses have been posited, but no one has yet produced a smoking gun establishing precisely how Nazi propagandists used Wagner and his music dramas to symbolize and validate the movement's ideals. A weakness in the case so far is that work on Nazi music policy has paid little attention to publications for the general public, including the main party newspaper: the *Völkischer Beobachter*. Most studies concentrate on sources targeted at expert audiences, in this case music journals. But to think our histories of Nazi music politics are complete without comprehensive analysis of the party daily is premature. This newspaper had a circulation of well over one million by 1940 and sales of 1.7 million per day in 1944; no other publication compares in the history of Nazi propaganda. One learns from this resource precisely what propagandists and their accomplices wanted average party members and Germans in general, not just top-level officials and scholars, to think—even about music. Every day the *Völkischer Beobachter* included a cultural section with concert, book, and exhibition reviews; general essays about cultural topics; and commemorative articles on major anniversaries in the history of Western art and ideas. Therein, we see how the main media tool of the party placed a Nazi spin on music history and composers' biographies. In order to add evidence to the investigation of Nazi Wagner reception this chapter will detail the specific terms by which party supporters incorporated the composer's life and works into its cultural politics by surveying articles the *Völkischer Beobachter* published about them. These heretofore untranslated and underutilized materials confirm the enormous extent of Wagner's importance in National Socialist culture: few major themes were addressed in the paper without accompanying reference to his views on the matter. Indeed, it is remarkable how intensively the *Völkischer Beobachter* emphasized Wagner's political polemics. As musicologist Erich Valentin put it for the newspaper: in their opinion his writings were "essential, not marginal," to understanding Wagner (Valentin 1937). However, this chapter will also reveal how references to Wagner's music dramas factored into Nazi propaganda—especially in support of its anti-Semitic views.

## WAGNER'S GERMAN ORIGINS

The first order of business for Nazi interpreters was to certify once and for all that Richard Wagner was of pure German origins. The leading cultural critic of the newspaper, Josef Stolzing, took this issue on directly: "from time to time the old swindle arises again, that one of the greatest German geniuses of all, Richard Wagner, had Jewish blood in his veins" (Stolzing 1929, December 12). These claims were based on rumors that Wagner's mother had been the lover of Ludwig Geyer (whom she married after her first husband, Carl Friedrich Wagner, died) at the time when the composer was conceived. Given that Nazi propaganda featured Wagner, it was of

particular importance for the *Völkischer Beobachter* to put aside doubts about his pedigree. Stolzing strove to “overcome this filth and break through these lies once and for all” with a two-pronged argument: first by insisting that “relations between Ludwig Geyer and Wagner’s mother were innocent until they married—and that Richard was born before this happened”; then by contending that, in any case, Geyer was not Jewish. As Stolzing put it, “according to the portraits that we have, it is absolutely certain that Ludwig Geyer had a completely German head without the slightest indication of alien blood” (Stolzing 1929).

Hugo Rasch, a composer, music critic, and member of the SA who served fiercely in the Nazi assault on Jazz, seconded Stolzing’s points. As concerns the possible paternity of Geyer, Rasch was adamant that “the letters between Ludwig Geyer and the wife of his deceased friend—the father of Richard Wagner—were of such a respectful and eloquent tone that this fairytale should finally disappear from the table-talk of Puritan philistines and from the coffee clutches of uptight old spinsters” (Rasch 1933). It would “suit Jewry just fine if they could conjure away one of our greatest geniuses of all with such a trick,” Stolzing maintained, so “we must put an end to this typical Jewish tall tale” (Stolzing 1929, December 12). Thus, the newspaper placed the blame for this issue squarely on National Socialism’s primary targets: “like the whole house of lies built up by Jewish wives, this mendacious construction falls apart—to the shame and disgrace of Judah” (Leoprechting 1920).

## WAGNER AS POLITICAL ARTIST

Having staunchly defended their cultural superman’s racial purity, the next step in Nazi Wagner reception was to confirm his credentials as a political artist. Given Wagner’s engagement with nineteenth-century German political culture, this was not a difficult measure. However, it is remarkable how intensively the *Völkischer Beobachter* emphasized Wagner’s political writings—as much or even more than it concentrated on his creative works. In the view of musicologist Erich Valentin, we “err,” if we consider Wagner’s artwork as “isolated and inner oriented” (Valentin 1937). Emma von Sichart, a regular contributor to the *Völkischer Beobachter*, put it more directly: “if we familiarize ourselves with the prose writings, it seems as though they were written expressly to address our”—by which she clearly meant National Socialist—“struggle” (Sichart 1928).

What persons like von Sichart found resonant with the National Socialist outlook were the *volkish* components of Wagner’s politics. The newspaper reported extensively on a lecture to this effect that Darmstadt Professor Werner Kulz gave for the *Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur*. Kulz argued that Wagner was “the pathfinder of the German resurrection, since he led us back to the roots of our nature that we find in Germanic mythology.” His

friendship with Count Gobineau as well as his own "thoughtful observations," Kulz asserted, led him to recognize "the meaning of the Germanic Volk and the Nordic race very early on." Moreover, as a "conscientious German," Wagner had to turn against the "evil Asiatic breed" (Richard-Wagner-Abend Im Kampfbund für Deutsche Kultur, 1931).

A section inserted into the *Völkischer Beobachter* specifically for Nazi storm troopers, entitled *Der S. A. Mann*, expressed similar ideas under the title, "Richard Wagner's Battle for the Volkish Idea." Wagner felt himself strengthened by his "German-Germanic (*Deutsche-Germanischen*) thoughts, and sought to realize this spirit more and more" (Sturm 1931). According to Walter Lange—who would trace Wagner's racial constitution in works like *Richard Wagner's Kin [Sippe]*—all of his writings were the "worthiest weapons for today's final battle." When listening to speeches of "today's young Germany" (that is, Nazi spokesmen), Lange went on, "it seems like we are hearing Richard Wagner speaking to the Volk in order to open its eyes to the sins that have been committed against the sacred spirit of the nation." In the "Third Reich of Richard Wagner, the Führer principle of the genius" would "prevail more than ever" (Lange 1934).

On Wagner's significance as a political thinker and writer, Stolzing provided a powerful summary. With the "clear eyed perspective of a genius," he saw into the future and recognized the "significance of the racial question" and the "terrible threat that Jewry was to our Volk." Almost half a century before its outbreak, he even sensed the First World War, "with Bolshevism and the end of Western culture that it threatened." In his writings, Stolzing concluded, "one always runs into National Socialist views: when we read them, it seems as though he divined our movement"—a "genuine German culture determined by blood: that was his ideal" (Stolzing 1939).

## WAGNER'S ANTI-SEMITISM

Undoubtedly, the aspect of Wagner's political writings that seemed most consistent with the Nazi perspective was their anti-Semitism. From its earliest cultural coverage on, the *Völkischer Beobachter* emphasized Wagner's treatment of what Nazis termed the "Jewish problem." As soon as November 14, 1920, the paper gathered extracts from Wagner's notorious article, "Das Judentum in der Musik" (Judaism in Music, published in 1850) and introduced its favorites by reporting that the composer had noticed the influence of Jews in music life when in Paris, and thereafter "forthrightly expressed the disgust that Germans feel toward Jews as a whole" (Leoprechting 1920). In 1922, Hans Buchner, who edited collections such as the *Horst-Wessel March Album: Songs of the NSDAP* and *Old and New Songs and Marches of the Fatherland and its Soldiers*, wrote that "Judaism in Music" was "more relevant today than ever before," seemingly "written yesterday, not a half-century ago" (Buchner 1922). Wagner's letters and publications on

Jews, the paper commented, “recognized the extent of the danger that Jewry, which was already at that time a prevalent power, posed to our *Volkstum*.” Whoever “has eyes to see and ears to hear” will recognize that the “terrible danger of Judaic influence on every field of art” is all the proof necessary to “demonstrate the accuracy of Wagnerian, i.e. German, views.” In its opinion, the “only hope for liberation” was the “application of brutal force” (Richard Wagner über *Das Judentum in Der Musik*, 1923). Thus, as early as 1923, the *Völkischer Beobachter* invoked Wagner’s anti-Semitic writings to validate notions of eliminationist anti-Semitic policy.

On the 50th anniversary of Wagner’s death, which came just a month after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, the *Völkischer Beobachter* underscored the composer’s racialized and anti-Semitic views. In Wagner’s time, wrote Hermann Seeliger, “no German historian or biologist had taken on the problem as energetically.” In fact, Seeliger asserted, “only very recently has the synthesis of eugenics and policy been the object of thoroughgoing investigation.” But Wagner found the “main cause of the decline of humanity in the deterioration of the blood—in the ‘decay of race’—that is, in the mixing of noble races with lower ones.” Above all, he related “the Jewish Problem to the racial question,” addressing Jewry, “the demon of decay, in close connection with racial degradation; that is, as it concerns the demoralizing influence of Jews on non-Jewish peoples.” (Seeliger 1933).

## RECEPTION OF WAGNER’S MUSIC DRAMAS

Therefore it is clear that the *Völkischer Beobachter* drew from the biography and especially selected writings of Wagner myriad indications that his politics, volkish outlook, and especially anti-Semitism coordinated with Hitler’s personal outlook and party program. However, it was not his writings alone that Nazi propagandists worked to incorporate into the party’s liturgy: equally important were the music dramas themselves. Reviewing the negative reception that *Tannhäuser* had suffered in Paris, the paper stated that what made this scandal so significant to Nazis was the “sharp line of separation that it reveals between us” and the French: it is “at this line of separation that peaceful German efforts toward friendship with this neighboring nation must come to an end” (*Der Tannhäuser-Skandal* 1936). About *Lohengrin*, according to pianist and music critic, Alexander Dillman, “it was forgotten that the opera was an affirmation of German unity—of the union of German tribes against a common threat which the German land so often faces in the East—in short, an affirmation of Germany.” With “courage unheard of at that time,” Wagner “bound the music and images of *Lohengrin* fast with fundamental German thoughts: portraits of Germans and German towns, religious processions, recognition of the necessity of unity, confidence that Germany would survive difficult days—all these are things emerge directly from the music” (Dillmann 1934).

The *Völkischer Beobachter* paid particular attention to *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. In 1933 came the first Bayreuth Festival of the Third Reich, and it opened with a production of this opera. The performance was broadcast throughout Germany and Goebbels took advantage of the occasion to make an extended radio address that verified the prominence of *Die Meistersinger* in Nazi culture. The paper printed his radio address on the front page: "There is certainly no work in all the music literature of the German *Volk* that so closely relates to our times and our spiritual condition," Goebbels opened. "How often in recent years," he asked, had the *Wach auf* chorus been heard by "faithful Germans" as a "tangible symbol of the reawakening of the German Volk out of the deep political and spiritual narcosis that it entered in November of 1918?" Towering over all Wagner's other music dramas as "the most German of all," *Die Meistersinger* was the "incarnation of our *Volkstum*," representing "everything that marks and fills the German soul." He concluded with an extended reference to the opera's finale as a manifesto of National Socialist cultural policy: "[M]ay the German people never lose this spirit of respect for the great men of the nation!" Only then would the new Reich "do justice" to the demand that Richard Wagner made via Hans Sachs: "Honor your German masters!" (Richard Wagner und das Kunstempfinden unserer Zeit: Rundfunkrede Von Reichsminister Dr. Goebbels 1933)

Hans Joachim Moser, a musicologist whose views earned him a position in a music section of the Propaganda Ministry, expressed complete agreement with Goebbels' assessment of *Die Meistersinger*. He contributed an article stating that "what the *Deutschlandlied* of Haydn and Hofmann von Fallersleben is to German Lieder," *Die Meistersinger* "is in an even greater sense vis-à-vis German musical drama: they are both representative of our national being, as a Volk and a Reich." This, Moser held, was not just because of the patriotic closing speech of Hans Sachs, but because "from the first to last note the opera is full of Düreresque guildmaster figures, Hans Sachs-isch naïveté, reflective humor of genuine German demeanor and devilment, and Wagnerian life and artistic wisdom: all in inexhaustible abundance and eternal validity" (Moser 1938).

## NAZI VIEWS OF THE RING CYCLE

However, the most explicit *Völkischer Beobachter* associations of Wagner's operas with contemporary German affairs pertained to the Ring Cycle. Adolf Vogl, author of what the *Völkischer Beobachter* called "deep looks" into *Parsifal* and *Tristan und Isolde*, initiated a racist interpretation of the Ring in 1923, emphasizing the "Teutonic" side of its message. In the mind of Wotan, Vogl argued, the "Aryan soul conceived and constructed a form of architecture that nature herself had never achieved: the spirit of Wotan presides over the Walhalla motives—that is the Aryan spirit." Thus did the

“soul of Aryan humanity appear in the world” (Vogl 1923; cited in Stolzing 1928). Paralleling Vogl’s observations about Wotan’s “Aryan spirit,” Josef Stolzing made the strongest assertions that ever appeared in the Nazi daily about anti-Semitic stereotypes in Wagner’s music dramas when he published “The World War in the *Ring of the Nibelungen*” over multiple issues of the paper. Already in 1851, Stolzing felt, Wagner perceived the “horror of the storm of war to come” with “uncannily clairvoyant foresight.” His prophecies found “amazingly precise fulfillment,” including the notion that “in the end, the war machine would fall apart from within, as happened with the mutiny of our fleet,” and the “prediction of world-wide famine,” realized in 1918 and 1919. Moreover, Stolzing feared, “if the signs do not deceive,” Europe faced “a worse horror breaking out in Russia and beginning to spew out on us in the form of Bolshevism: our enemies will not stop if we don’t succeed in chasing them off; in that case we will go through a world revolution that will lead not just to the never-never land of communism, but rather into the most naked barbarism—the downfall of the Western World.” All this “the Master also addressed,” in imagery of a twilight of the gods, “four decades before Spengler!” (Stolzing 1923)

Dramatically and musically, according to Stolzing, Wagner “anticipated the tragedies of the World War by depicting the fight for power symbolized in the ring.” In *Alberich*, moreover, Wagner embodied the “dark spirit of Jewish Mammonism, whose ghastliest form confronts us in the capitalism of the industrial age,”—the epitome of “loveless and coldhearted business interests.” It was in this form that “Mammonism came to rule the whole world,” Stolzing held, “clearly marked by the characteristics of the atrocious mixed-bloods whom the Master gave voice through Hagen.” The racial mixing implied here was of particular concern to Stolzing: “What caused the fall of the Roman empire? The racial mush brought about by its global politics.” And, he wrote, “Aryan-Germanic humanity” was “threatened with the same end—because the World War not only cost the German race more than three million of its strongest men,” but also “introduced many thousand colored soldiers into Europe, resulting in the infection and deterioration of the blood of European humanity to a shocking, unprecedented extent.” With “infallible certainty,” then, Wagner prefigured in Hagen the “dreadful catastrophe that would haunt European humanity in general and the German Volk in particular” (Stolzing 1923).

Furthermore, Stolzing considered the giants Fasolt and Fafner in *Das Rheingold* to be personifications of agriculture and modern industry, respectively. Fafner’s subsequent murder of Fasolt meant that “industry was gaining the upper hand and destroying farming and cattle raising.” Thus, *Alberich*’s curse is immediately fulfilled since trade and capital have “transformed the products of agriculture and industry into gold.” It is upon his realization that finance capital—“uninspired and uncreative”—was undermining traditional social arrangements, Stolzing believed, that “Wotan first becomes aware of the error in his power politics.” Here Stolzing drew more

explicit connections between the storyline of the drama and the history of the war, asking, "Do our thoughts not wander involuntarily from the tragedy of Wotan to Schloss Doorn, where Wilhelm II meets his fate in dull resignation?" Neither Wotan nor Wilhelm II, Stolzing lamented, were able to master the powers they conjured up, for "the last Hohenzollern emperor entangled himself in the same fate as Wotan's." Indeed, Alberich's Curse immediately "attached itself to his heel when he ascended to his throne" because his reign commenced with the treasonous betrayal of Bismarck—just as Wotan committed against Siegmund when he left him to the Hunding. Albeit "not for the same Mammonistic reasons as the loveless enemy, who forges an inexhaustible source of power out of the Nibelungen hoards," the Kaiser also coveted gold. Similar to the way Wotan pays the Walhalla debt, Wilhelm spent extravagantly to "flaunt the superficial glory of the German Reich in a way that triggered the envy and greed of England." Thus, he "betrayed his own Volk, because he led it down the slippery slope of pursuing gold for its own sake." Meanwhile, those who "gladly went to battle, spilled their blood, and lay dead, sick, or wounded on the field really knew what they were fighting against." Out of Nibelheim, "the breeding ground of gold production in the factories and the mines," was arising "the dark army of the Nibelungen—the racial enemies of the German Volk who, owing to their mixed blood, always hated the fair sons of Germany" (Stolzing 1923).

"Ruler of both Mammon and its producers, the Nibelungen-Judocracy and Social Democracy," Alberich and his forces "threaten the gods," just as similar elements menaced the nation: never before was a larger part of the German Volk so "racially alien that it stood against the other part as an enemy." This was the result of "Mammonism having created the Nibelheim of advanced industry whereby a rich stream of proletarians from surrounding countries flowed in to mix with the domestic population." Under Wilhelm II, the industrialization of Germany "proceeded at the wildest tempo," allowing this "process of degeneration to lead to gruesome deterioration of the German blood." Later, the most "devastating turn in the tragic war resulted when our reserves of good German blood were exhausted and the industrial population had to serve as replacements: this was a stark *momento mori* of the natural laws of racial purity." Indeed, this was the background to "the heart-breaking tragedy" of the last offensive in 1918, after which Wilhelm II "gave himself over to his fate in dumb, despairing resignation, as the *Götterdämmerung* exploded over him" (Stolzing 1923).

Besides "Wotan-Wilhelm," Stolzing contended, the German peoples were symbolized in various Ring characters, "since there is no single German type." Alberich, "the real instigator and the only winner of the war, is of a completely foreign race," but the Nibelung "insinuates himself into relations with us by mixing his blood with the German woman, Kriemheld" whereby he "lays a cuckoo's egg in the noble family line of the Gibichungs with his son Hagen, signifying infection of German blood with Jewish blood." So, the "black-haired bastard, Hunding, slays Siegmund" and the "half-breed

Hagen assassinates the pure-blooded Siegfried." These internecine conflicts correlated, in Stolzing's view, with the fact that "our merciless enemies, the English, are in the end just as German as we are ourselves: we must not overlook the fact that this battle for world control was a struggle between peoples of common [albeit mixed] blood, exactly as in the tetralogy" (Stolzing 1923).

In the character of Siegfried, on the other hand, Stolzing perceived "the real German." In his heroic course, "genuine *Deutschtum* is symbolized" because, Stolzing inferred, "utilitarian reasons are completely alien to his deeds—just as alien as they were to those wonderful young German academic regiments who charged and died at Dixmuidé [in 1914] while singing *Deutschland über alles*." But Stolzing recognized that even the part of the German Volk that rejected utilitarianism and "carried itself with such incomparable heroism" was "ultimately guilty of the same things that led to Siegfried's death." Directly or indirectly, "we were all involved in the battle for the Ring," he acknowledged: "we were all more or less responsible for breaking the pact with our ideals; we were all subject to the sensual magic of the potion that Guttrune gave to the unsuspecting Siegfried." Germans were paying for their own sins, as Wagner had predicted they would: "Was Siegfried as chaste as Parsifal? Did he not betray Brünnhilde with Guttrune? At base doesn't the forgetfulness potion symbolize Siegfried's contact with the temptations of this sinful world which draw the mother of the noble Gibichungs into adultery with Alberich?" This decadence, Stolzing concluded, triggered by insidious enemies taking advantage of the Volk's own moral weakness, had to be overcome: "[W]e Germans of the twentieth-century will find the way to the shiny Grail and a better future even if—as it seems in the sad present—like Parsifal we still have to wander paths of error and suffering for a long time." But "we can only discover the right path if we dedicate ourselves to a regeneration of our Volk in the spirit of the master's admonition—that is, by remaining true to our original [racial] essence" (Stolzing 1923).

The Austrian composer Julius Bittner extended Stolzing's linkage of Wagner's Ring Cycle beyond the First World War and into the Weimar period. Referring to Ernst Krenek's *Jonny strikes up* (*Jonny spielt auf*, 1927), Bittner made apocalyptic associations between contemporary issues and "modern operas" (Zeitopern): "Western civilization is going down while striking up Jonny [*sic*]." The master had provided an antidote, but it was not sufficiently administered as modernism prevailed: "Siegfried does not sing out of the dark depths of nighttime decadence and Wotan does not wallow in filth with jazz accompaniment," as Krenek's characters did. An affirmation of Wagner's idealism, Bittner insisted, was more urgent than ever and that meant "making a clear distinction between a dark blue tones of the Walhalla motif and the cacophonous howling of the saxophone that would be more appropriate for accompanying exhibitionist dances around the golden calf." The "barbarization process that we are experiencing—the campaign that

the impure has launched against culture under the mantle of a clinking and clanking pseudo-civilization—is all Alberich's work." Therefore, those who are "choking on a disgusting taste in their throats must band together under Wagner's sign in a new brotherhood of the Grail: we are not of this world" (Richard Wagner und Wir 1928).

"Don't you see him," Bittner asked, "the Antichrist with his wild bedlam in the pandemonium of this big city's nightclubs? Don't you hear him in the agonizing sounds of this music of cannibals that debases sacred rhythms into mechanical beats." The "fat god Mammon with his hanging jowls and fleshy fingers, decorated with the gold of the Nibelungen hoard" is heralded with the "hooting and howling of thousands, no, hundreds of thousands of saxophones screaming out around the globe in his honor." The real threat was manifested in technological modernism: "[T]he dragon of materialism arises" through scientific innovation whereby "mankind has become impudent toward the gods." This too Wagner had represented, in Alberich's brother: "Professor Mime with his greasy kitchen and technology that only serve comfort; that pamper and coddle the world; that promote laziness and the pursuit of luxury" (Richard Wagner und Wir 1928).

Intensifying his moralizing tone, Bittner warned, "truly I say to you, if you don't take this seriously, you're going to go down in the fall with them: now is the time to recognize and fight the enemy; fight with word and deed against the fate that is approaching." According to Bittner's volkish millenarian view, "as this world falls apart" those who have renounced love for gold—the Alberichs, Mimes, and Hagens—will "disappear in the flood rolling in" and "only pure men and women, free of Alberich's Curse, will be able to rebuild it." So, fellow Germans must "purify themselves" and "band together in a new brotherhood of the Grail." This, Bittner preached, "is what Wagner tells us" in his Ring Cycle (Richard Wagner und Wir 1928).

Josef Stolzing later took up the charge again, to draw connections between Wagner's *Siegfried* and what he and fellow Nazi propagandists perceived as "the analogies between the Ring and the historical developments of the present." If one looks a little closer, Stolzing asserted, one finds in the relationship between Siegfried and Mime a "reflection of our times." The "ugly dwarf, an embodiment of the haggling Jew who wants to rise higher and higher like all the Eastern Jews crossing over the German borders, is Siegfried's foster parent." Significantly, though, he doesn't raise the hero out of love: he does so only to arrange that Siegfried kill the dragon Fafner to capture the Ring and the hoard for him. When this is done, Mime "will cut off his head." Here, in Stolzing's opinion, Wagner signified the fact that "the Jew must exploit the powerful labor forces of the Nordic race to his own advantages." But while Mime speculates thus, his "son" forges his own sword of victory with which he will slay the dragon, and since "the only one who can forge this sword of victory is he who knows no fear, Siegfried is the embodiment of National Socialism, which alone possesses the courage to break the chains of slavery around the German people." Like Siegfried,

National Socialism is “forging the army of liberation!” But the “parties of Alberich and Mime, Hunding and Hagen—that is, Jewry and Jew-bastard hangers on—are throwing themselves with everything they’ve got against the victory march of National Socialism” (Stolzing 1929, August 14).

Shifting to *Götterdämmerung*, Stolzing associated the fate of Siegfried and Brünnhilde with twentieth century German experience. Siegfried now stands on the “sunny heights of his life”: he has united with Brünnhilde—the “German Volk Soul”—and is enjoying too much the “serene times of good fortune on high mountain summits.” Like him, in their exuberance after unification, German idealists lost “all connection with hard reality.” Smarter politics could have “marked the world with, and made it subject to, German and Nordic spirit,” and thereby “blocked non-Nordic elements, hostile to Germany.” But none of this happened: the German Volk merely wasted its powers in “political adventures like the trips of the Kaiser to Palestine and Tangiers, and the military expedition to China [in response to the Boxer rebellion], that provided us with nothing but short-term pseudo-successes” (Stolzing 1929, August 17).

Moreover, “yet another genuinely German trait” appears in Siegfried when he leaves Brünnhilde behind and goes out in search of adventure. Siegfried’s tragic guilt was based on the fact that he left Brünnhilde and “entered a world of evil and corruption whose lies and deceit would ruin him, because—in all his purity—he could neither see through nor master them.” This, Stolzing argued, was “exactly like the naive German Michel stumbling into the World War that others—not he—wanted to fight.” And then, just as Hagen—“the Jewish-Nordic half-breed”—justified his crime when he drove the spear through Siegfried from behind, the very same forces “today claim that he is responsible for the bloodbath,” that is, insisting on German war guilt (Stolzing 1929, August 17).

Later, in the summer of 1941, just eight days after German forces invaded the Soviet Union, the *Völkischer Beobachter* shifted its association of the *Ring* from the First World War to the conflict its own leadership had unleashed upon the world. According to Heinrich Stahl, a regular contributor to the paper, *Götterdämmerung* could be read as presaging the positive outcome of the Barbarossa campaign: “[T]he stormy tempo and powerful events of these days and years bring the German Volk closer than ever to recognition of the deepest meanings of the Ring—of the connections between great art and the Volkish war of liberation.” In the Ring Cycle, Wagner shaped the “inevitable historical progression of an old, rotten world toward self-immolation into a gigantic cultural symbol: the fall of the Walhalla gods does not appear as a catastrophe, but as the purification of enormous world guilt, as the breaking of chains that entwined both mankind and supernatural beings” (Stahl 1941). Certainly the paper could not have been aware that it was inadvertently portending the *Nazidämmerung*—an act of self-immolation that would ultimately lead to the fall of the national gods, including Hitler and Wagner, and payment for enormous crimes against humanity.

## CONCLUSION

Some have argued that the Wagner obsession of National Socialism was primarily Hitler's own, pointing out that other Nazi leaders were uninterested in Wagner, that many were bored when required to sit through performances of his works, and that Hitler did not "make all Germans listen to Wagner" (Spotts 2003, 256–7 and Potter 2006, 87–88). This is true to a point, but there were fanatically Wagnerian Nazis other than Hitler. The main propaganda outlet of the party, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, consistently identified correspondences between Wagner and the public image of the Nazi movement, and this surely strengthened associations in the perceptions of its many readers. Staff writers like Josef Stolzing and other contributors were adamant about parallels between Wagner's polemics and storylines with the Nazi worldview. This did not just mean correlating opinions about general trends in European life through the late mid-nineteenth century that Wagner personally experienced, including capitalism, industrialization, nationalization, liberalism, socialism, and the supposed responsibility of European Jews for all and sundry. Beyond this, the newspaper insisted that Wagner divined specific historical events like Wilhelm II's dismissal of Bismarck, competition with Great Britain, the outbreak of World War I, the exhaustion of German forces, the involvement of African troops in the field, the conclusive defeat in 1918, the naval mutiny, the flight of the Kaiser, the rise of Soviet communism, the popularization of aesthetic modernism, the "decadence" of the Weimar era, and the "brutal" measures required to restore the German Volk. Along with Stolzing, significant German musicologists, historians, literary scholars, and composers contributed to this notion of Wagner as a prophet who communicated explicit warnings in his writings and music dramas. Close investigation, moreover, reveals that while not every one of his operas was appropriated in strong political terms, *Lohengrin* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* were, but as celebrations of Germanness, not attacks on Jews—however much Beckmesser may appear to be stereotyped. Thus the smoking gun proving incontrovertibly that Nazis brandished Wagner's work in its eliminationist anti-Semitic plot is found in *Völkischer Beobachter* reception of the *Ring of the Nibelungen*. For, it was in the tetralogy that National Socialist Wagnerians perceived the Meister's voice as harmonizing most perfectly with that of the Führer.

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