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Nietzsche Reception as “Philosopher of Führermenschen” in the Main Nazi Newspaper

Originally presented in Paris, this paper is dedicated to memory of the great historian of France and Frenchman, Eugen Weber.

In recent years, excellent work has been done to trace connections between the arts and politics in modern Germany. Particularly in the area of “Nazi culture,” historians and musicologists have investigated how cultural leaders and organizations were associated with party and state propaganda. To great effect, scholars have concentrated on the biographies of contemporary German creators and the administrative histories of cultural institutions. But work on the biographical and institutional background of National Socialist cultural politics should be understood as a first step toward answering the central question of this field: how were specific works of art, literature, and music interpreted and then employed as tools of Nazi political propaganda? We must press our investigation beyond determining who was responsible for politicizing culture, to learn how individual creators and their masterworks were incorporated into Nazi ideology.1

In my book on Beethoven in German politics, I traced the history of the reception given that composer by political activists from 1870 to 1989.2 There I examined how Germans across the political spectrum interpreted Beethoven’s music to justify their ideologies and actions, thereby transforming composer and compositions into symbols for every major party. To describe the ways Beethoven was “nazified,” I paid particular attention to how the Völkischer Beobachter promoted him. The principal daily newspaper published by the Nazi party from the early 1920s through April of 1945, the Völkischer Beobachter had a circulation of well over a million by 1940 and sales of 1.7 million per day in 1944. No other publication compares in significance in the history of Nazi propaganda.

Surveying recent literature on Nazi cultural policy, however, I notice few references to the Völkischer Beobachter or other Nazi publications for the general public. Most work concentrates on materials targeted at expert audiences. But it is premature to think our histories of National Socialism are complete without comprehensive analysis of the party daily. Besides what we can learn about how the Nazis presented events and policies to the general public, it is possible to draw from the newspaper important details about their treatment of cultural matters. Each day, the Völkischer Beobachter included a cultural section with concert, book, and exhibition reviews, general articles about cultural topics, and commemorative articles on major anniversaries in the history of Western art and ideas—particularly birth- and deathdays of important creators and thinkers. The primary goal of the Völkischer Beobachter’s cultural section was to establish intellectual respectability for the party and its ideology. All of these articles offer valuable information about how the Nazi paper presented the main stream of Western intellectual and cultural history to its readers.

A case of particular interest is the Nazi reception of Friedrich W. Nietzsche. As George Mosse first indicated, “perhaps the most important academic philosopher of the Third Reich,” Alfred Bäumler, formulated “a myth which put the famous philosopher at the service of the Nazi world view by stressing Nietzsche’s heroism, his emphasis upon the power of the will, and his advocacy of an aristocratic community.”3 Later, Steven Aschheim showed in his excellent book on the legacy of Nietzsche in German culture that it is “a matter of empirical record” that Nietzsche “was incorporated into the Nazi pantheon of Germanic giants and that he became an integral part of National Socialist self-definition.” Here, Aschheim continued, “was a German thinker with what appeared to be genuinely thematic and tonal links, who was able to provide the Nazis with a higher philosophical pedigree and a rationale for central tenets of their world view [Weltanschauung].”4

However, Aschheim also recognized that “the demonstrable thickness and ubiquity of the Nietzschean presence should not blind us to the complexities of Nietzsche’s image and functions within Nazi discourse: besides unadulterated veneration, mindless blending, and ideological matchmaking, there were those who maintained distinctions, voiced qualifications, and demurred from claiming total identity.”5 In short, Aschheim’s detailed assessment of the reception that led to Bäumler’s nazified Nietzsche showed that what Mosse initially described resulted from a complicated process involving a multitude of interpretations and controversies. Fitting Nietzsche’s ideas into any single world view was not a simple matter. However, this was precisely the mission of the Völkischer Beobachter’s editors and writers: to make even complex ideas such as Niet-
Nietzsche’s appear to coordinate smoothly with the main tenets of Nazism. Concentrating on detailed analysis of Nietzsche’s reception in critical and scholarly discourse, moreover, Aschheim felt that “there is no way to accurately assess the degree to which his integration affected everyday popular attitudes.” While this may ultimately be true, looking into the terms with which the daily newspaper presented Nietzsche is a way to move one step closer toward understanding how the Party attempted to affect everyday popular attitudes by putting his writings in the service of the Nazi outlook.

To insert into our coverage of National Socialist cultural history more of the materials by which party propagandists tried to appropriate Nietzsche as a “spiritual comrade,” I have examined every page of the Völkischer Beobachter from January 1920 through April 1945 in search of the major pieces it published on the philosopher and his ideas. Drawing from a collection of 32 articles, this essay will trace how the paper attempted to transform Nietzsche and his works into propaganda tools, often by trying to smooth over elements in his biography and works that rendered this nazification process problematic.

A first difficulty for the Völkischer Beobachter was the fact that the philosopher had broken with “the most German of all Germans” himself—Richard Wagner. A 1930 article surveyed the relationships within the triumvirate of Richard, Cosima, and Nietzsche without suppressing a general sense of disappointment that the philosopher ultimately turned against the Prinzenpaar of the Bayreuth festival. Wagner had excited Nietzsche with Siegfried and Tristan—but each year, the paper acknowledged, Nietzsche separated more and more from the master. In 1876 he did celebrate Wagner with the essay, “Wagner in Bayreuth,” so that Frau Cosima could write: “Nietzsche’s words were refreshing and uplifting.” However, the paper recognized, that was the last flash of a friendship that had long before gone bad: when he most wanted to follow him, Wagner’s Parsifal bowed in devout prayer and renunciation; moreover, in Wagner’s late style, Nietzsche saw only concessions to leading powers—to Cosima—to anyone. “Disappointment intensified into blazing hatred—as can only arise where there once was love: a real transvaluation of all values took place; everything fell apart.”

Here the newspaper implemented its usual method for dealing with troubling issues: when there is a problem, look for the Jew. At the time of his break from the composer, the Völkischer Beobachter reported, Nietzsche was “trafficking” with a private Jewish scholar, Paul Rée, who welcomed the “rootless fugitive from Wagner” with open arms. “Further from Wagner, Nietzsche could not have gone,” the paper exclaimed. It was at this point, the Völkischer Beobachter contended, that Cosima gave up on him: she called him impoverished and suffering and imposed the “great excommunication” on him—no one in Bayreuth “knew him” any more.

To a certain degree, it is apparent that contributors to the Völkischer Beobachter felt this punishment was justified.

Another issue that the Völkischer Beobachter had to deal with was Nietzsche’s attitude toward nationalism. The newspaper did not check into Nietzsche’s racial origins—as it did for many other Western creators—despite the fact that he occasionally claimed to be of Polish heritage. But it did have to confront indications that the philosopher rejected the 19th-century trend of nationalistic identity, including his own Germanness.

As K. Kanetsberger wrote, “there is one important point in Nietzsche’s mental attitude on which even Nietzsche’s friends have remained silent, from which they try to distance themselves as much as possible: this is the matter of Nietzsche’s attitude toward Germanness and the state.” Nietzsche’s nature was not asocial, Kanetsberger went on to explain: he longed his whole life for a circle of like-minded people but never found it. It is from this, Kanetsberger hypothesized, that one can understand all that followed: his bitterness, his injured scorn for Germany, even his rejection of the state. The Reich had been formed, but it remained a shell without content. Nietzsche had sharp eyes: to him nationalism seemed the illness of the century because it attempted to hide its emptiness. In his words: “Nationalism as it is understood today is a dogma that requires limitation” [Letters]. But the point to keep in mind, for Kanetsberger, was the phrase: “as it is understood today.” Many of his other, harsher opinions can only be understood with reference to this phrase—as critiques of his own time.

On this basis, then, the Völkischer Beobachter set aside statements the philosopher made which did not coordinate with Nazi ideology, merely by insisting that his opinions were time-bound and would have changed in light of the National Socialist movement and the Third Reich. Regarding the matter of nationalism, this opened the way for the newspaper to present him as a fervent patriot and representative of Germanness. For
instance, Ernst Nickell traveled to Sils-Maria, wandered the region, and ruminated on passages Nietzsche had written there. “The landscape,” Nickell reflected, “is consecrated by German fate and German tragedy. Nietzsche needed this landscape, he had to stand near the highest things and the firmament”—he was “German despite everything.”[10]

In fact, Kanetsberger reminded, Nietzsche did say of himself that “I am perhaps more German than the Germans of today” [Ecce Homo]. He knew the German essence better than the “hurray patriots that Adolf Hitler also warned about.” He valued the “earnest, manly, stern, and daring German spirit” [On the Future of our Educational Institutions]. He knew that “there was still bravery, particularly German bravery” that is “inwardly something different than the élan of our deplorable neighbors.” Compared to the French essence in particular, he was consistently, strongly, and happily conscious of the virtues of the German character. About those “elegant ones” he said specifically that they “have every reason to beware of German fire, or one day it may consume them together with all their dolls and idols of wax” [Schopenhauer as Educator]. Above all, Nietzsche held that “it is German unity in the highest sense which we are striving for more passionately than for political reunification—the unity of the German spirit and life” [On the Use and Abuse of History for Life]. “Very few others saw things so clearly in those days,” commented Kanetsberger.[11]

Regarding Nietzsche’s attitude toward the state, Kanetsberger had exactly the same arguments. He admitted once more that “we find here at first view a sharp contrast with today’s [National Socialist] thinking.” But again, this was only a reaction against his own times. What Nietzsche understood by the term, was completely different from “our idea of the state today.” Nietzsche was the “last anti-political German of them all,” as he called himself, because for him, politicization meant democratization, and for him the state embodied the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number. This Nietzsche hated because he believed general prosperity would make mankind too lazy to generate powerful energy in a great individual—in a genius. That is why Nietzsche wanted as little state as possible.[12]

So, Nietzsche used irate words, such as “Culture…and the State…are antagonists” [Twilight of the Gods]. Obviously, Kanetsberger allowed, “such words are, the complete opposite of our views today: we know that that state is the defender of a Volk’s culture, as long as it is a Volk state.” But from Nietzsche’s perspective, conditioned by his times, there was nothing bad about that utterance.

The German Reich had had the misfortune to achieve its external form when there was no longer any inner content. The classical heights of German education had sunk, the song of German Romanticism sounded only from afar. On the other hand, Realism was on the rise, leading more and more toward materialism. Money and business had become the gods of the age. A state as the guardian and defender of culture; a state as the means of achieving the true goal of existence, not as a goal in itself; a state that is built on the Volk—that, Nietzsche would have accepted. Therefore, “he would have agreed with today’s [National Socialist] German idea of the state with all of his heart,” Kanetsberger concluded.[13]

Arthur Rathje, an author of treatises on nationalism and occasional novelist, also felt that though he problematized the issue, Nietzsche and his ideas were Germanic despite everything. But, in his conception of Germanness the notion of “becoming” always appears in the foreground: “The German himself is not, he is becoming, he is ‘developing’—‘development’ is thus the truly German discovery and lucky shot in the great domain of philosophical formulas” [Beyond Good and Evil]. With Goethe, then, Nietzsche understood this process of Bildung to be the foundation of German fate.[14] Therefore, not “despite” but because of his position that no personality is set, no type is stable, Rathje was able to conclude for the Völkischer Beobachter that Nietzsche promoted “Germanness”—as a lifestyle of continual becoming in pursuit of cultural cultivation.

While establishing that Nietzsche shared a common sense of Germanness Völkischer Beobachter articles also strove to clarify that he would have shared the anti-democratic principles of Nazism. This, according to the paper, required attention because democrats and leftists had tried to appropriate the philosopher for their own propagandistic ends. Josef Stolzing—a staff writer and the most prolific contributor to the Völkischer Beobachter cultural section—explained that since 1918, the victory of democracy in Germany, the loss of national independence, and the reduction of Germans into slaves working for international Jewish interests,
had marked the end of the Nietzsche cult in Germany—because Weimar era leaders worked to silence the herald of the Superman idea.[15] Under the Republic, the Völkischer Beobachter complained, Nietzsche was invoked far too frequently by international-democratic literati as a “star-witness” for their world view. Whoever considers his fundamental spiritual attitude “has to wonder at the boldness of those who would like to make him—the first and sharpest of all anti-democrats—a witness for democracy. Nietzsche hated and fought every form of democracy, both political and spiritual,” and he said so in the sharpest possible terms. That which he called an “unleashing of idleness, weariness, and weakness”—the notions that “all are the same” and that “at base we are all just selfish brutes and riffraff”—were symbolic of the democratic age that “believed in the equality of men and that established the weak, the fat and the cowardly as standards for this equality.”[16]

In Nietzsche’s opinion, this rule of the humble amounted to a blow against life itself: the herd instinct—mass mentality—considers peace to have higher value than war. “But this judgment is anti-biological—is itself the spawn of decadence,” he wrote in The Will to Power To be sure, the paper chided, ”such words sound rough and raw to ears in this age of Liberalism.” But Nietzsche addressed the “tough and strong ones alone.” The others—the “all too many”—didn’t concern him in the least. They and their weak dreams of humanity and eternal peace negate life itself, and threaten it with death. “Rejection of equality, deliberate inequality; joy in struggle and war, self-consciousness, assuming responsibility: those are the characteristics of the aristocratic man that he demands instead of the dull masses.”[17]

Friedrich Würzbach, a leading Nietzsche scholar of the period who edited a number of the philosopher’s works and founded the Munich-based Nietzsche Society that included members such as Thomas Mann and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, provided academic support for the Völkischer Beobachter’s view of Nietzsche’s anti-democratic politics and ammunition against “misuse” of the philosopher by Weimar democrats and leftists. Whoever reads the following words of Nietzsche—“To change people forcibly” [Late Notebooks]—Würzbach surmised, will gasp in moral indignation: Where does that leave private freedom, the sacred idol of Liberalism? Against this liberal outlook of today, Würzbach argued, Nietzsche set forth a “way of thinking that sets laws for the future”—an outlook which “handles everything contemporary harshly and tyrannically in the interest of the future” [Late Notebooks].[18]

By featuring these and similar citations, the Völkischer Beobachter profiled the anti-democratic thinking of Nietzsche. However, to a certain extent, this selective reading threatened to undermine another aspect of Nazi ideology. Presenting his philosophy as establishing an absolute position against political involvement of the common man, the newspaper risked contradicting volkish principles that celebrated the popular German mind and character. To counterbalance this potential contradiction, Eduard A. Mayr attempted to mediate between Nietzsche’s elitist attitudes toward “the mob” and right-wing perceptions of the Volk. Certainly, Mayr corrected, Nietzsche would have agreed that the Volk and mob are two different things, although “mad prophets of our days mix them up—or, rather spoil, degrade, degenerate the one into the other.” According to Nietzsche, Mayr argued, all truly great ones, forward thinkers, and creators who effectively work with mysteries of mankind, have their origins in the Volk: the actors who play heroic roles on the stage of the tremendous passion play, “world history” arise from below. But, not from the mob: no great man has ever emerged from the mob; all of the greatest have come from the Volk. “The mob is social illness; the Volk is national health!”[19]

Confronting the leftist drive within European life by determined application of a single will to power originating in Germany was one of the principal aims targeted by Völkischer Beobachter propagandistic use of Nietzsche. The newspaper perceived itself as a herald of the message that the German Michel had to get up from his Stammtisch and prepare again for battle—and invocations of Nietzsche were common in these warnings. As Mayr put it: “In the name of all conscientious front soldiers, I send the words of Nietzsche for shirkers to read carefully on their deplorable way to Philistine paradise, from which they will one day be driven out with a flaming sword.”[20] Visiting Nietzsche’s grave, Eduard Grunertus, author of Zarathustra’s Son: A Book for Higher Men claimed that he heard exhortations coming from the site that German steel themselves for approaching conflict.

Don’t you hear anything? Is that not his voice, speaking to us: we who fight and create! “I want to say something to you, my brothers in spirit! Life means fighting and suffering. Sorrow
makes some weary and soft—but it strengthens the creator. Think of the fates of a Michelangelo, a Beethoven and a Friedrich the Great—then you will know how love and toughness can be strangely connected in man. Know love, but stay tough for me!”[21]

Beyond reports of ghostly commands, Josef Stolzing intensified the Nazi view of Nietzsche as militarist, “because one can not conceive of sharper opposites than Friedrich Nietzsche and pacifism, Marxism, and egalitarian b.s. in general! What would he say to a phrase like ‘No more war!’ We cannot attain peace through work, as the beneficiaries of the November Crimes blab about these days, but only through battle, and we will achieve true peace only through victory!”[22] Elsewhere, the Völkscher Beobachter stipulated that Nietzsche constantly repeated that battle rules throughout nature—that life itself is an outcome of war. Nietzsche valued battle as the basis for all life—so much that he cried, “Good old war sanctifies everything!”[23]

Paul Kuntze, who wrote military histories like Lost Blood: German Foreign Troops in 2000 Years of Germanic History and The History of Soldiering among the Germans for right-wing publishers, also saw Nietzsche’s “Will to Power” as the essential political concept to be drawn from his philosophy, while adding direct references to issues of race and leadership—including direct comparisons between Nietzsche’s “Nordic” ideas and German leaders such as Hindenburg and Hitler. Nietzsche recommended over and over, Kuntze held, that one not avoid the struggles in life, but constantly seek them out in order to develop secure optimism in the fight with them. This optimism attained via overcoming adversity, according to Kuntze, corresponds to the “Nordic essence.” The “Poet-Philosopher of the Leader-Types” [Führermenschen], Kuntze went on, demanded that a hard, difficult education begin early in youth [On the Future of our Educational Institutions]. And as a model, Kuntze was certain, Nietzsche had Prussians in mind: “men raised according to Kantian teachings and ... always finds that the toughness they so often exhibit as fighters is the external shield that they carry in battle.” [24]

Still, Friedrich Würzbach did not believe that all men were capable of attaining Nietzschean ends through the application of their inner powers alone. For Würzbach: “It is only in the blood of a nation that the will to power can live, the strength of a people. Thus, in order to understand Nietzsche, one must understand the blood of a people. The way toward now prevalent interdisciplinary approaches to German arts and politics was paved by works such as Fritz Stern’s The Politics of Cultural Despair (1961) and George L. Mosse’s The Crisis of German Ideology (1964), Nazi Culture (1966), The Nationalization of the Masses (1975), and Toward the Final Solution (1985), among others. The study of “Nazi culture” has expanded greatly since the 1980s, as represented by works such as Brandon Taylor and Wilfried van der Will, The Nazification of Art (1990); Alan Steinweis, Art, Ideology, and Economics in Nazi Germany: (1993); Erik Levi, Music in the Third Reich


[5] Ibid., 252.


[8] Ibid.


[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.


[17] Ibid.


[23] “Die Propheten.”


[30] Ibid.

[31] “Die Propheten.”


[33] Würzbach, “Um der Zukunft willen.”


[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

