Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche: Appropriation and Reception in the Third Reich
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Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche are two prominent German cultural icons. Wagner’s compositional and Nietzsche’s philosophical influence extends over time and space impacting musicians, thinkers and others all around the globe up until today. However, Wagner and Nietzsche have become important and controversial figures for much more than only their artistic and cultural contributions. During the Third Reich, the writings and images of these two figures were appropriated by the Nazi regime. The association of Wagner and Nietzsche with National Socialism taints their images and currently scholars continue to argue the extent of Wagner’s and Nietzsche’s role in the Third Reich. In this paper I explore the reasons for Wagner’s and Nietzsche’s association with the Third Reich. Wagner and Nietzsche were both dead before the advent of National Socialism; however, their influence is apparent in Nazi ideologies, policies and propaganda. What was it about Wagner’s and Nietzsche’s images that made these two figures conducive to Nazi appropriation? In this paper I examine Wagner’s and Nietzsche’s images to consider why they specifically were employed as visionaries by the National Socialist party. I also examine the methods through which the National Socialist party, in their policies and propaganda techniques, appropriated Wagner and Nietzsche as part of Nazism and how that appropriation was received by the German public.

The reason I chose both Wagner and Nietzsche as the subject of my paper runs deeper than only their shared status as administered icons of the Third Reich’s regime. Wagner and Nietzsche both lived in the same time period and for a time maintained close contact as colleagues and contemporaries. Ultimately, however, the two split. During the Nazi regime, these two cultural icons were reunited under the Nazi banner as sharing similar views that linked
them to National Socialism. Although for the most part in my analysis I separate Wagner and Nietzsche as two entirely distinct cultural icons with different impacts on National Socialism, as they are in fact two entirely contrasting entities, it is important to note that these two figures share a historical connection both in their lifetimes as contemporaries and with the synthesis of their images that was created through their common appropriation into National Socialism.

I find the synthesis of Wagner and Nietzsche wholly fascinating and entirely absurd. Wagner’s and Nietzsche’s connection as colleagues and friends, with Wagner acting as Nietzsche mentor, only serves to further emphasize the differences between the two both personally and ideologically. Wagner was self-absorbed and egotistical and exploited his relationship with Nietzsche to his personal benefit; Nietzsche, respectful and loyal to his mentor worked tirelessly on Wagner behalf. When Nietzsche realized that his envisioned mentor-student relationship was only one sided, he reevaluated his connection with Wagner and ultimately split with him. Part of this separation was ideological. Nietzsche was disgusted by Wagner’s treatment and judgment of others including his anti-Semitic views.¹ How absurd, that Nietzsche, who split with his once revered mentor over ideological differences, should be lumped together with Wagner as sharing similar opinions with him by the National Socialist and specifically on the shared topic of the Jewish question. Further on, at the end of the second section of my paper, I will briefly discuss a concrete example where Wagner and Nietzsche are both used simultaneously to represent the same notions in Nazi propaganda.² Another prominent example

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² See page 35 discussing Leni Riefenstahl’s film *Triumph of the Will.*
of the shared Wagner-Nietzsche connection to National Socialism that I do not discuss in this paper but that is a valuable reference is Thomas Mann’s book, Doctor Faustus.³

However, returning to the principal focus of my paper, which is the way in which the Third Reich appropriated Wagner and Nietzsche, I arranged my paper as follows. In the first section of my paper I explain Wagner and Nietzsche personas, and how their personalities and/or ideas corresponded (or how they were altered to correspond) with National Socialism. In the second section I analyze how Wagner and Nietzsche were incorporated into Third Reich policies and propaganda measures. In the third section I look at how the Nazi appropriation of these two cultural and artistic figures swayed public opinion in favor of the Third Reich. By representing these two important figures as constituents of their regime, the National Socialists gained respectability and validity that influenced the German public to favorably receive the National Socialist cause.

I: Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche as German personalities

Germany celebrates Richard Wagner as its most eminent opera composer to date. In a country that equates its music with national identity, composers are extremely significant. Robert Schumann described music’s importance to Germany as, “Italy has its Naples, France its Revolution, England its Navy, etc., so the Germans have their Beethoven symphonies.”⁴ With

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³ The book, a fictional novel, tells the story of a genius German composer, Adrian Leverkühn, who sells his soul to the devil. The book is written against the backdrop of the 1939-1945 war, linking the devil to German politics. The composer, Leverkühn, can be viewed as a reference to Wagner and how his compositions took on demonic proportions under the Nazi regime. (See Alex Ross, The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 4, 36-38.) Leverkühn can also be viewed as a reference to Nietzsche as “the thinker whose ideas set the fateful movement (National Socialism) going.” Mann actually revealed in discussions regarding the book that Nietzsche is an underling theme, however later on Mann reversed his opinion on Nietzsche as being a causal effect of fascism. Mann’s re-evaluation of Nietzsche points to the contrasting positions of Nietzsche and Wagner, where Nietzsche was in fact a far cry from being a Nazi prophet but rather a Nazi puppet. For further discussion see Steven Aschheim, The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990, (California: University of California Press, 1992), 299-300.

composers ranging from Bach, Handel and Beethoven, Germany prides itself as the musical center of Western Europe and with Wagner Germany finally gained credibility in the operatic field, producing a talent that could rival even Italy’s Verdi and Puccini. During Wagner’s life span (1813-1883), Wagner stretched the musical language of the Romantic era to its very limits and set in motion the modern musical language of the future. His innovative approach to composition, redefinition of harmony, and emphasis on total artwork⁵ established him as a revolutionary hero of the arts. His compositional style influenced both contemporary and future composers up until today.

But Wagner tapped into the inner German psyche on a much deeper level than the national pride in musical excellence and innovation. Wagner used the ancient Nordic myths of the German people as the context for many of his operas. Wagner’s famous opera, Ring of the Nibelung, mythologizes ancient Nordic myths, and its main character, Siegfried, emblematized the Aryan god. The German people identified with these myths as their heritage. It was these stories of their past that rooted them to the present. For the German people, Wagner’s music became synonymous with roots and tradition, national pride in their past and lessons for the future.

Frederic Spotts, in his book on the Bayreuth festival, explains the passionate connection that the German people felt with Wagnerian opera.

“Although these sagas aroused in the non-German a purely aesthetic reaction, in the German they struck a tremendously resonant chord deep inside the communal psyche. Their myths and romanticism, their gods and heroes, their social outcasts and self-

⁵ Wagner proposed the notion of Gesamtkunstwerk (“total artwork”) that an opera should contain all forms of visual and aural arts at once. This notion is overtly evident in his operas that are a synthesis of poetic, visual, musical and dramatic arts.
immolating heroines coincided with the vague but powerful yearning, the sense of struggle and the longing for redemption that was embedded in the national character.”

Wagnerian opera, as a medium of both culture and heritage, epitomized the quintessence of the German people, and thus Wagner became a German icon.

Because of his high-profile image, Wagner’s outspoken political opinions also garnered a great deal of attention. His tract, “Das Judentum in der Musik” (Judaism in Music), describes how the Jewish people defile and debase German art. In this article, Wagner contends that Jews in their small mindedness cannot comprehend German music. Wagner writes that, “The Jew speaks the modern European languages merely as learned, and not as mother tongues. This must necessarily prevent him from any capability of therein expressing himself idiomatically, independently and comfortably to his nature. Our entire European art and civilization have remained a foreign tongue to the Jew.”

Because of his status as a cultural icon, Wagner’s anti-Semitic writings had a profound influence on Germany. The Germans, as aforementioned are fiercely nationalistic about their musical culture, so vilifying the Jews as destructive to German culture by an icon as respected as Wagner was bound to have a tremendous influence on the national opinion of Jewry.

Some scholars argue that by comparing Wagner’s prose works to his operas, the operas themselves can be viewed as allegories of Wagner’s political opinions. Thus, Wagner’s musical treatment of Germanic folklore can be interpreted as a presentation of the Aryan hero pitted against the manipulating, avaricious Jew. The purpose of this type of presentation being an

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operatic manifestation demonstrating the urgent need of the Aryan race to redeem itself from the poisoning of the Jewish people by reaching back to its ancient, historical roots. The *Ring of the Nibelung* most specifically demonstrates anti-Semitic ideals. Meyer writes of the characters in the *Ring* that, “It was evident to contemporaries, as to the Nazis, that the money-hungry and lustful Alberich, treacherous Mime and the impotent critic Hanslick Beckmesser, were all caricatures of Jews, intended to recall traditional German anti-Semitism.”⁹ On the other hand, the *Ring*’s main character, Siegfried, is mythological of the German god, representing the Aryan hero. Siegfried’s character embodies the qualities of pre-Judaic strength, oneness of nature, and the restoration of true art from its Jewish defilement. In this way, Wagner used Nordic mythology in his opera *Ring of the Nibelung* to create the vision of the powerful German man, Siegfried, triumphing over the spineless Jew, Wotan. From this point of view, Wagner actually created a powerful esoteric dimension to his anti-Semitism. It wasn’t only contained within his writings but it poured out of the musical notes and themes of his compositions in order to inspire German hearts and spirits towards associating German heritage with anti-Semitism.

In fact, Wagner’s compositional ability as well as his interpretation of Nordic myth inspired Hitler personally. Hitler relates his first encounter with Wagnerian opera as follows: "At the age of twelve, I saw ... the first opera of my life, *Lohengrin*. In one instant I was addicted. My youthful enthusiasm for the Bayreuth Master knew no bounds."¹⁰ Hitler’s passionate involvement in specifically Wagner’s music reveals a deep connection between Hitler and Wagnerian opera. In fact, Hitler insisted on holding on to many of Wagner’s original manuscripts throughout war and as a result a large portion was destroyed. ¹¹ As we will discuss later in the paper, Hitler envisioned himself as the practical realization of Wagner’s operatic

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⁹ Meyer, 662.
¹¹ Spotts, 198.
fantasy. Hitler saw himself as the Aryan god, Siegfried, coming as the messiah of Wagner’s prophecy in the *Ring of the Nibelung*. Later in this paper we will discuss how this was evident in Nazi propaganda and how this influenced Hitler’s actions as a political leader. For now, let us turn to Nietzsche and his prominence at the turn of the twentieth century.

The German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, was a radical and revolutionary thinker of the nineteenth century. Nietzsche was a nihilist; he believed that life has no intrinsic purpose or meaning. Especially after the 1890s, Nietzsche’s works started to become exceedingly popular because many Germans felt that they could apply Nietzsche’s writings to their personal or political convictions. In the words of Count Harry Kessler: \(^{12}\) “There grew within us a secret Messianism…and suddenly, like a meteor, Nietzsche appeared…The way in which Nietzsche influenced, or more precisely possessed, us cannot be compared with the effect of any other contemporary thinker or poet. He did not merely speak to reason and fantasy. His impact was more encompassing, deeper, and more mysterious.” Nietzsche’s persona, in other words, magnetized the German people. Nietzsche represented the exemplary revolutionary philosopher; he denied all authority and traditional beliefs. At the turn of the twentieth century, when Germany was undergoing constant political, social and economic upheaval, the German people identified with Nietzsche’s revolutionary thinking.

Part of Nietzsche’s appeal was his emphasis on creativity. In his book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes: “What is good and evil, no one knows yet, unless it be he who creates.” \(^{13}\) As can be observed from this quote, Nietzsche did not define things clearly in his works. He demanded of his readers their own creative responses to open ended philosophical questions. For Nietzsche, it was the creative process rather than defining and explaining that was

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important. Nietzsche’s emphasis on creativity rather than explanation was often interpreted by his appropriators as irrationality. As described by the Nietzschean thinker, Gottfried Benn, “Irrational means close to creation, and capable of creation.”14 This idea of irrationality really coincided well with the mind frame of many early twentieth century Germans. The German people were tired of knowledge and progress because they felt that modernization was causing more harm than good. Many Germans wanted to go back to a traditional, simple way of life. The idea of being creative rather than being forward minded resonated well with many German people.

Moreover, Nietzsche wrote many contradictory ideas in his philosophy. Oftentimes his earlier and later works contained opposing ideas. Additionally, his writings are open ended, lending themselves to individual interpretation. Many political factions incorporated Nietzschean ideas into their party ideology precisely because Nietzsche’s writings were so open ended and contradictory. Rather than incorporating Nietzsche’s entire philosophy, each political faction would appropriate only the ideas relevant to their cause. As Steven Aschheim explains, “Nietzsche’s appropriators wore selective blinders; they did not have to buy the whole Nietzsche or nothing. Readers could and did pick critically from the extraordinarily rich variety of positions and perspectives contained in his work.”15 Many different political groups focused on the aspects of Nietzscheanism that met their ends and projected their particular view. These factions often choose Nietzschean ‘one liner’s’, a slogan or phrase in his works that out of context related to their parties specific needs. Kurt Tucholsky, in 1929, wrote an article in the German periodical, Weltbühne, describing Nietzsche’s national appeal as follows: “Who cannot claim him (Nietzsche) for their own? Tell me what you need and I will supply you with a Nietzsche

14 Aschheim, 16.
15 Aschheim, 9.
Tucholsky’s assessment demonstrates how an assortment of political facets rearranged and appropriated selective aspects of Nietzsche’s work to meet their needs. Nietzsche’s appropriators formed a splintered image of the philosopher. Instead of the holistic focus of Nietzsche as a philosophical system of thought, Nietzsche’s writing became characterized by the specific terms and slogans that were popularized in his name.

Two popular Nietzschean terms that were later appropriated by the Nazis were the concepts of übermensch and will to power. The Nietzschean concept of übermensch was a goal for humanity. The übermensch was a person that became a better person than the current state of man. Will to power was that people should strive towards the highest possible station in life. Nietzsche’s explanation of these terms is ambiguous. The übermensch postulated that an individual could possibly elevate his status above the current position of humankind. However, the definition of this elevated status is never succinctly delineated. The will to power urges mankind to endeavor. However, what this endeavor entails of, Nietzsche does not explain. Nietzsche’s terms only convey the importance of motivations and they value passion and ambition, however they does not direct the reader towards any specific passions or ambitions. Thus, Nietzsche’s appropriators could then redefine will to power to mean the passion of their choice and the ultimate station of the übermensch as the station of their choice. By outlining these concepts without any clear demarcations Nietzsche exposed his ideas to any and all meanings and interpretations. In Germany, various political factions, including the Volk Movement, which I shall briefly discuss, interpreted übermensch and will to power as racially and nationally charged notions. These individuals redefined übermensch as a type of superman that was inherently better and racially superior and they redefined will to power as a heroic will

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to aggression and violence for the purpose of a higher national cause. Because Nietzsche was ambiguous in the definitions of his ideas, these different interpretations of Nietzsche’s writings were readily accepted as plausible explanations for Nietzsche’s works.

Different German scholars and writers contributed to this redefinition of Nietzschean terms. One such German writer was Hans Günther in his book *Ritter, Tod und Teufel: Der heldische Gedanke* (*The Knight, Death and the Devil: A Heroic Thought*). In this book Günther redefines Nietzsche specifically in terms of his ideas of *will to power* and *übermensch*. Günther, who later became one of the racial experts under the Nazi regime, describes the perfect Germanic dogma as one fused with Nietzschean ideals. The perfect German knight was a modern superhero that had qualities similar to the ancient Nordic man of heroism, loyalty, honesty and racial purity. This *übermensch*, according to Günther, was a superman, superior by birthright because of his inborn intrinsically Germanic qualities. In addition, his display of heroism in service of the German cause was an extension of his power of will.\(^\text{17}\) Thus, Nietzsche’s philosophical concepts of the *übermensch* and *will to power* were reduced by racial philosophers such as Günther and other *volk* writers (see below for discussion)\(^\text{18}\) as the concept of a modern German leader and of the aggressive and irrational heroism that inspires the blind herd to follow their superman.\(^\text{19}\) We will discuss later how these ideas, exploited in the name of Nietzsche, were groundwork used to influence German youth to be heroes in the name of their Führer.

As the above discussion of Nietzsche’s ambivalent writing demonstrates, an important aspect of understanding Nietzsche’s impact on German public thinking, is to realize that Nietzsche’s public persona was shaped by his followers and advocates that reinterpreted many of his notions. The ‘real’ Nietzsche as a person was in many ways very different than the persona of Nietzsche.

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\(^\text{18}\) *Volk* Movement will be discussed on the following page.
\(^\text{19}\) Mosse, 207.
presented to the world through his sister and as aforementioned, other interpreters of his works. Nonetheless, this perceived image of Nietzsche had a tremendous impact on German thought regardless of the actual person Nietzsche’s original intentions.

The following section of my paper analyzes how these two influential figures, Wagner and Nietzsche, were incorporated into the policies and propaganda of the Third Reich. But before I do so, I will briefly discuss the Volk Movement as it frames many concepts within my analysis.

The Volk Movement was a cultural and intellectual backlash to modernism in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany that focused on returning back to the roots of pre-modern man. In the time leading up to the Third Reich the concept of volk became a national German force that laid the groundwork for many ideological concepts of the Third Reich. The idea of volk was to escape from the urbanization and alienation of modernity to nature and the common belonging in the shared heritage of the German people. Not all volkish ideologists were anti-Semitic. However, volkish ideology was by definition exclusive since it emphasized the importance of the shared heritage common to the German people that descended from the original Aryan inhabitants of the region. The racial concepts inherent in this type of ideology prepared the German public to tolerate the racial genocide advocated by the National Socialists. George Mosse explains that volkish ideologists commonly analogized ancient German heritage as the roots to the great tree of German life. Foreign infiltrators poisoned the pedigree of the purebred German people, like a snake destroying the roots of a massive oak, causing damage to the life source of the tree’s ecology. The viewpoint of many volkish ideologists was that the Jews specifically acted as a snake in the midst of the true German people, preventing German unification. During the Nazi era, National Socialism realized the ideology of the Volk Movement
by removing the snake from its destructive path, i.e. through the annihilation of the Jewish people.  

The importance of the Volk Movement as a precursor to the Third Reich is that it prepared the minds of the German public to consider the Jewish people as unwelcome and destructive intruders in a biologically Aryan region. Volkish thinkers, by comparing Jewry to a snake or destructive force, removed the human element. They created a paradigm that allowed German people to analyze Jews as a force rather than a people and thus “contributed to the shaping of a state of mind that either apathetically acquiesced in or actively supported the final verdict.”\(^\text{21}\) The dehumanization of the Jews by volkish ideologists was a potent potion of racial bigotry that was unleashed during the Nazi era.

Wagner and Nietzsche were both incorporated in different ways into the Volk Movement. The Volk Movement regarded Wagner’s production of ancient Nordic myth as a model illustration of how Germans should look back at their ancient heritage for current inspiration. They regarded Nietzsche’s emphasis on creativity as representing the passion of the German spirit and the ability of the German people to be creative and unique rather than consumed by the machinations of modern technology.

Wagner’s use of German folklore corresponded with volkish ideologies of a romanticized German nation returning to its preindustrial roots, to nature, and to the strength of primordial man. As mentioned previously, Wagner’s musical treatment of Germanic folklore romanticized Germany’s past heritage and folklore as well as presented the image of a powerful and all superior Aryan god. This musical presentation corresponded well with the volkish ideology of returning to national historic roots.

\(^{20}\) Ibid, 125.
\(^{21}\) Ibid, 140.
Volkish thinkers used Nietzsche’s stress on creativity to demonstrate that Nietzsche himself was a creative and passionate figure rather than an intellectual individual. Karl Joel’s book *Nietzsche und die Romantik* (Nietzsche and Romanticism) praised Nietzsche as the most Romantic soul of all times and as a man who had an unlimited passion for the *Geist* (German spirit).\(^{22}\) Thus, Nietzsche’s concept of creativity was interpreted as Nietzsche’s personal identification with his inner German spirit. Mosse describes that, “In the hands of volkish thinkers Nietzsche became a prophet of new Germanism.”\(^{23}\) Volkish thinkers characterized Nietzsche’s persona and philosophy as containing the spirit of the German nation. Additionally, the idea of a national belonging of *volk* contained within it an ugly type of nationalism, nationalism as an irrational blind faith in national identity. This component of irrationality in volkish thinking was ascribed to Nietzsche and his philosophy.

II Nietzsche’s and Wagner’s incorporation into the Third Reich

I will first discuss how Nietzsche and his philosophy became incorporated into National Socialism. As I mentioned before, Nietzsche’s philosophy was widespread and respected and his ideas were often manipulated towards political ends. As the twentieth century progressed, Nietzschean terminology becomes part of German vocabulary in both popular media and academic circles. Some of Nietzsche’s ideas became so popular that they gained a life of their own and were used without direct reference to Nietzsche. As the *Volk* Movement, and many other factions before them, the National Socialist party also refracted and appropriated Nietzsche’s philosophy into their ideology.

The first aspect to consider in Nietzsche’s incorporation into National Socialism is Elisabeth Förster -Nietzsche, Friedrich Nietzsche’s sister’s role in shaping Nietzsche’s image.

\(^{22}\) Ibid, 64-65.
\(^{23}\) Ibid, 157.
Elisabeth compiled and printed Nietzsche’s last book *Will to Power* after Nietzsche’s death from his notes, choosing the ideas and ordering them according to her own discretion. She also created the Nietzsche archives in 1894. Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche was an avid anti-Semite; her husband Bernard Förster was an anti-Semitic movement leader, and her role as caretaker and mediator of Nietzsche’s work created the illusion that Nietzsche shared similar anti-Semitic sentiments. Elisabeth’s presentation of her brother’s works could hardly be questioned since, “She was the guardian of yet unpublished material – and developed an increasingly precise memory for what her brother had said to her in conversation.”

Moreover, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche’s open support of the National Socialist party, which she joined in 1930, and her relationship with Hitler, who visited Elisabeth at the Nietzsche archives seven times, portrayed Nietzsche as a supporter of the National Socialist cause.

Even though Nietzsche declared that he was opposed to anti-Semitism, several factors including his relationship to his anti-Semitic sister and brother-in-law created an entirely different impression. In fact, in the following letter Nietzsche expresses concern to Elisabeth that his works are interpreted as anti-Semitic due to Elisabeth’s affiliations with (her husband) the anti-Semitic leader, Bernard Förster. In this letter to Elisabeth, Nietzsche writes:

“It is a matter of honor to me to be absolutely clean and unequivocal regarding anti-Semitism, namely opposed, as I am in my writings… I have been persecuted in recent times with letters and Anti-Semitic Correspondence sheets; my disgust with this party … is as outspoken as possible, but the relation to Förster, as well as the after-effect of my

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26 Kaufmann, 45.
former anti-Semitic publisher Schmeitzner, always bring the adherents of this disagreeable party back to the idea that I must after all belong to them…”

As this personal letter reveals, Nietzsche openly opposed anti-Semitism. However despite Nietzsche’s open opposition, anti-Semitic publications presented Nietzsche’s persona and writings otherwise. Nietzsche could not control this presentation of his image even during his very lifetime. This demonstrates how susceptible Nietzsche’s image was to distortion. How much more so after Nietzsche’s death was his image shaped by others. The association of Nietzsche’s image with anti-Semitism was furthered after his death by Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche amongst other Nietzschean supporters. And with the Nietzsche archive used as the symbolic connection between Hitler and Elisabeth, the illusion of Nietzsche’s persona as an anti-Semite broadened to forge the prospect that, had he been alive, Nietzsche would have been a National Socialist supporter as well.

Another aspect to Nietzsche’s incorporation into the Third Reich is the personal relationship Hitler cultivated with Nietzsche’s writings. Contrasting historical evidence creates two different perspectives regarding Hitler’s relationship with Nietzsche. One view directly links Hitler’s writing style with Nietzsche’s writings and the other view posits that Hitler and Nietzsche had little or no connection at all. However, in my perspective, these two perspectives actually complement rather than contradict one another. As this is only indirectly related to my analysis, I will only conduct a brief discussion on these differences.

An in-depth analysis of Hitler’s book, Mein Kampf, displays an affinity between Hitler’s writing and Nietzsche’s ideas. Hitler’s statements regarding racial superiority and his proposal to exterminate the worthless mirrors Nietzsche’s ideas of strengthening world decay through breeding and annihilation. In Mein Kampf Hitler writes, "those who want to live, let them fight,
and those who do not want to fight in this world of eternal struggle do not deserve to live.” This social Darwinist proposition of the dominion of the strong reflects Nietzsche’s aphorism 862 in his book *Will to Power*. Nietzsche writes, “A doctrine is needed powerful enough to work as a breeding agent: strengthening the strong, paralyzing and destructive for the world weary. The annihilation of the decaying races.” Both of these quotes exhibit similar characteristics, namely the supremacy of the strong and annihilation of the weak. This is just one example of many passages in *Mein Kampf* that suggests that Hitler was personally inspired by Nietzsche’s writings.

However, Tim Ryback in his research of Hitler’s private library uncovers little evidence to suggest any significant relationship with Hitler and Nietzsche at all. The remains of Hitler’s private library reveal only a few volumes of Nietzsche’s works that are in impeccable shape suggesting little use by the owner and Hitler’s private writings does not either indicate any personal connection to Nietzsche’s works.

However these two different perspectives of Hitler’s relationship to Nietzsche can be resolved by understanding the function of Nietzsche’s image for Nazi propaganda. Hitler’s visits to the Nietzsche archives presented the impression that Nietzsche was a Nazi ally, thereby creating a National Socialist emblem out of Nietzsche. Ben Macintyre attributes Hitler’s visits to the archives as "the propaganda value of Nietzsche as a Nazi prophet." Nietzsche’s image as an important German scholar afforded National Socialism a high level of validation so that Hitler’s interest in maintaining a connection with Elisabeth and the archives was a sound political decision. Hitler declared the Nietzsche Archive in Weimar to be a center for ‘the dissemination

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30 Macintyre, 184.
of the ideology of National Socialism,\textsuperscript{31} and as a National Socialist monument the archives received federal funding from the Third Reich government. However, since Hitler’s relationship with the administrators of the Nietzsche archives as well as Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche was strained and maintained mostly for public spectacle, it seems most plausible that the Hitler-Nietzsche connection was mostly a means of propaganda. The parallels between Nietzsche’s writings and \textit{Mein Kampf} can arguably be attributed to second hand sources and the immense popularity of Nietzsche’s notions in German literature.

As I mentioned previously, there were certain ideas of Nietzsche, or rather by association with Nietzsche that were popularized by thinkers, writers, and/or political factions. Raoul Richter commented in 1906 that Nietzschean philosophy was, unbeknownst to many people, establishing an entire system of thinking and life manners in Germany. Richter maintained that Nietzsche’s influence was able to penetrate every aspect of German life specifically because the association of Nietzsche’s ideas to the philosopher was so vague. Meaning that Nietzsche’s ideas were so widespread and common that people did not even think to search for the source of these concepts that were so widespread and part of their daily life. It is specifically the nature of a force, such as these Nietzschean concepts, that lies beneath the surface to reverberate most effectively.\textsuperscript{32} The Nazis capitalize on this vague and blurry image of Nietzsche by incorporating Nietzschean terms into their ideology but defining them relative to their cause. Because Nietzsche’s ideas were so widespread, yet often divorced from their source, the Nazis were capable of manipulating those ideas to their ends. Martin Schwab explains that, “The Nazis merely used

\textsuperscript{32} Aschheim, 31.
Nietzsche’s name and myth but did not let genuinely Nietzschean ideas penetrate their ideology and culture.”

Another aspect of Nietzsche’s writings that contributed well to National Socialist ideology was the violent quality of many of Nietzsche’s ideas. As evident from the comparison of Hitler’s Mein Kampf to Nietzsche’s Will to Power, Nietzsche’s ideas were often manifest as violent and aggressive calls to action. One of the specific reasons that Nietzsche’s works were employed in National Socialist ideology is because they acted as justification for Nazi violence. Nietzsche’s writings demanded action rather than compassion and creativity rather than rationalism. Nietzsche embraced the rejection of current values in order to accept a new order of social structure. Nietzsche advocated that individuals should act in their own self interest rather than conform to the principles of society. The Nazis called these notions of Nietzsche into play as justification for their brutality. Based on Nietzsche’s ideas, the ends justified the means in order for the National Socialists to promote the self interests of their nation and create the ‘best’ and ‘purest’ racial form. Regardless of the values that would be required to achieve their goals, the Nazis rationalized their actions that “the creation of the higher men of the future animated by the will to power”\textsuperscript{34} was the solution for Germany’s future based on the teachings of Nietzsche that advocated “holy cruelty”\textsuperscript{35} such as the following quote from Nietzsche’s work Will to Power that states; “Sympathy for decadents, equal rights for the ill constituted- that would be the profoundest immorality.”\textsuperscript{36}

Several of Nietzsche’s ideas that were already prominently appropriated by many other German scholars were actually incorporated into the National Socialist ideology. Most

\textsuperscript{34} Richard Öhler, Nietzsche und die deutsche Zukunft, 18 quoted in Aschheim, 238.
\textsuperscript{35} Nietzsche, Gay Science, 129, quoted in Aschheim, 243.
\textsuperscript{36} Aschheim, 243.
specifically, Nietzsche’s idea of an *übermensch* and his idea of the *will to power* were appropriated into Nazi ideology as Hitler encapsulating the qualities of Nietzsche’s *übermensch* and the German public as the perpetrators of the “heroic will” in the name of their ‘superman.’

The Nazis used the term *übermensch* with a very specific definition in mind. The Nazi *übermensch* was a type of superman that was powerful, courageous and racially superior. Mosse describes that, “His (Nietzsche) rejection of things as they are, his statement of Germany’s plight, were taken as a projection of a power of will which facilitated his transcendence of historical limitations... This combination of the extraordinary will power of the philosopher with the endurance and courage of the knight produced the idealized version of the German leader.”

Mosse explains how Nietzsche’s notion of an *übermensch* as the ultimate attainment of mankind, was concretely defined in German literature as a knight that was powerful and courageous, and at the same time passionate and devoted to his particular cause. Hitler specifically was glorified as the perfect German leader as per this Nietzschean ideal of an *übermensch*. Hitler was exalted as possessing the attributes of the ‘ultimate’ man. There are many examples of Hitler’s second in command, Joseph Goebbels, praising Hitler as the ultimate Nietzschean. One such case is in a speech Goebbels delivered for the occasion of Hitler’s birthday in 1933, Goebbels describes Hitler as follows; “Hitler is one of those persons who rises from his defeats. Friedrich Nietzsche's phrase fits him well: “That which does not destroy me only makes me stronger.”

Nietzsche’s concept of *will to power*, which was defined by volkish thinkers as heroism, under National Socialism took on the shape of violent heroism. For example, Hitler capitalized on this idea of heroism by encouraging German youth to be essentially ‘violent heroes’ to inflict

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37 Mosse, 207.
pain and murder in the name of the ‘superman’ i.e. of the state and the Führer. Expanding on the notion of a herd irrationally following their leader, the National Socialists capitalized on Nietzsche’s notion of *will to power* interpreting it as a heroic will to serve one’s nation. The concept of a Nietzschean heroism, then, was propagandized by the Nazi party as a violent and aggressive call to action. One such example can be found in a propaganda speech by Eugene Hadamovsky’s, a Nazi propaganda official. He proclaimed, “The party possesses a school of political propaganda and the practical *will to power*. The motto of the Fascists, "live dangerously," is taken from Nietzsche.”³⁹ Thus, the propaganda of the Nazis to incite their party supporters to endorse violent action was attributed to Nietzsche’s philosophy. Indeed George Mosse explains that, “The Nietzsche of National Socialism was the great battler for whom life was senseless without the good fight …Hitler was to call this urge an expression of the “heroic will” in the service of the volk.”⁴⁰ This quote indicates that Nietzsche’s *will to power* was propagandized by the Nazis as the heroism in violence and submission to a greater cause. This emphasis on heroism was evidently a personal motto of Joseph Goebbels as well. In a commentary on courage and strength in his private diary, he writes; “In times of crisis there is but one sin, as Nietzsche put it; namely, that of cowardice.”⁴¹

While the Nietzschean connection to National Socialism was based on misconceptions or misinterpretations of his ideas, Wagner’s prose and compositions reflected similar political views to National Socialism. Nonetheless, Wagner’s incorporation into National Socialism was also influenced by the presentation of his persona by his closest family and supporters. Much like the effect of Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche on re-interpreting her brother’s works in an anti-Semitic

³⁹ German propaganda archive, http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/unser33.htm
⁴⁰ Mosse, 65.
fashion, Wagner’s ideas were also subject to censorship and manipulated to specifically portray his nationalistic and anti-Semitic ideas. Wagner’s wife, Cosima, as well as the Wagner Circle, his son-in-law Houston Steward Chamberlain and his grand-daughter-in-law, Winifred Wagner, all helped amplify Wagner’s anti-Semitic views, and align his image with National Socialism.

For example, Wagner’s wife, Cosima, who is considered the more anti-Semitic of the two, took over the Bayreuth Festival and produced Wagner’s operas according to her own taste and discretion after Wagner’s death. In regards to Cosima running the Bayreuth festival, Frederic Spotts states. “All this she did in the name of Wagner, but at times the Wagner was more Cosima than Richard.” For instance, when Cosima produced Wagner’s opera Lohengrin she reinterpreted the work by emphasizing the Christian religious, mystical aspect. Although Cosima, like Wagner, chose art over politics and therefore hired Jewish skill for her productions, such as the Jewish conductor Hermann Levi. Cosima only hired Jewish talents out of artistic necessity when she could not find a German or foreign talent of similar expertise. When Cosima decided to open her own vocal training school she allowed all nationals to join except for Jews. Cosima allowed foreigners to attend her personally coaching school despite fierce opposition from many xenophobic Wagnerian supporters. Cosima preferred talent to nationality in almost all cases. However the one exception was Jews. If Cosima was forced to occasionally accept Jewish talent, she certainly was not going to train any. Cosima’s decision to bar Jews from her vocal training school demonstrates that her negotiations with Jewish performers were indeed a result of necessity, and certainly not penchant.

42 The Wagner Circle is a term used to describe the group of Wagner devotees that supported Wagner during his lifetime and then continued to disseminate Wagner’s image after his death.
43 Spotts, 97.
44 Ibid, chp 3.
The Wagner Circle, a group whose members supported and advocated Wagner’s persona and music, also influenced the presentation of Wagner’s image. The Wagner Circle formed the *Bayreuther Blätter*, a paper intended to disseminate the ideas of Richard Wagner. Instead the paper and the Circle developed into political propaganda dedicated to nationalism and racism. For instance, the *Bayreuther Blätter* described the Bayreuth opera house as “a temple of art for the renewal of Aryan blood, for the awakening of the general consciousness of the Indo-German nation and specifically for the strengthening of a healthy Germanness.”

Perhaps the largest influence on Wagner’s image was Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who was married to Wagner’s daughter, Eva. Chamberlain, a modern racial theorist, wrote *Foundations of Truth*, a rabidly anti-Semitic social Darwinist book on the racial superiority of the Aryan people. The book, which became a German national bestseller, gave Wagnerian anti-Semitism a veneer of rational scientific support. Under Chamberlain’s influence, the smoldering embers of nationalism and racism in Bayreuth were transformed into an aggressive and militant campaign. Frederic Spotts explains that Chamberlain and his wife Eva censored “the publication of Wagner’s writings and built up a Wagner archive which was manipulated to suit his (Chamberlain’s) ideological purposes.”

When Chamberlain endorsed Hitler, his minor celebrity status as author and member of the Wagner clan provided Hitler with his first prominent endorsement. Indeed, Hitler’s biographer, Joachim Fest, describes Hitler’s reaction to Chamberlain’s endorsement “as a benediction from the Bayreuth Master himself.”

Under the approval of Chamberlain and inspired by his racial creed Hitler set to work on *Mein Kampf*.

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46 Ibid, 136.
47 Ibid, 140.
48 Köhler, 113.
Lastly, Winifred Wagner, Wagner’s granddaughter-in-law, provided Wahnfried, the Wagner family’s personal property, as a place that Hitler could call home. More important than her political endorsement of Hitler, Winifred Wagner maintained a personal connection to the dictator. Hitler was always welcome at the Wahnfried home and developed a familial connection with Winifred’s children. In his diaries of 1932, Goebbels describes his visit with Hitler to Wahnfried and their encounter with Winifred:

“They talk to Frau Winifred Wagner about the Bayreuth Festival. Next year they are going to produce the Meistersinger. I hope we shall be in Office by then. We can run Bayreuth then according to our own taste.”

Goebbels desire foreboded the imminent future of the Bayreuth festival. When the National Socialists came to power, Bayreuth indeed became Hitler’s “court theater.”

When Hitler came into Office in 1933, and with the advent of the Third Reich, Wagner’s political ideas were practically realized. Wagner’s opinion of Jews, contained in his tract “Das Judentum in der Musik,” that Jews pollute and taint the purity of German art, was put into practice by the Nazi regime almost at its inception by the creation of the Reichkulterkammer, the Reich Chamber of Culture. The official objective of the Reichkulterkammer was to be a protectorate of the art. It saved many musical institutions from financial ruin (such as Bayreuth) and raised the social, economic and professional status of musicians. However the highlight of its agenda, as instituted by Goebbels, was to remove undesirables (most specifically Jews) and their influences from the arts. In the beginning, the Reichkulterkammer did not advertise these goals so that many Jewish people joined as members. Once the Reichkulterkammer had a census of its Jewish members they expelled them and revoked their licenses to practice. The

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49 Spotts, 140-143  
50 Joseph Goebbels, My Part in Germany’s Fight, trans, Kurt Fiedler (London: Hurst & Blackett, Ltd. 1935), 86.  
51 Spotts, 171.
Reichkulterkammer craftily achieved a strong base of support for their mission. By financially supporting and advocating German music and musicians, the Reichkulterkammer garnered support from many music supporters that constituted elite portions of society. With the financial and political backing of the German elite, the main task of the culture chamber, which was to rid Germany of all Jewish musical influences, was all the more feasible. It is important to note that of the arts it was specifically music that the Reichkulterkammer concentrated on while the other arts were in comparison only minimally affected by its policies. The fact that music was the field primarily impacted by the Reichkulterkammer demonstrates that the agenda of the chamber was based on the ideals of the composer Wagner.52

The agenda of the Reichkulterkammer reveals the enormous impact of Wagner on Third Reich policies. Hitler’s and the Third Reich’s notion of achieving their vision of a ‘pure’ Germany were first and foremost to purge the arts, and most specifically music, of any foreign elements, feeding off of Wagner’s racial ideas of almost a century earlier that a culturally superior Germany must cleanse German art of foreign pollutants. It was as if the Third Reich was orchestrating politics using Wagner’s operas as their score. National Socialist policy envisioned a real life performance of the Ring that would be achieved through active political policy that followed Wagner’s ideals for culture and art, particularly the ideal that advancing a culture that was exclusively German would translate into a unique reality of a utopian Aryan world.

The National Socialists used Wagner’s image as a major propaganda device in the campaign to promote their cause. Wagner’s music was used as a rallying device at political rallies and his operas and specifically those with anti-Semitic undertones such as Die

Meistersinger were nationally sponsored. The Nazis capitalized on Wagner’s idol status and publicly sponsored his operas in order to fashion Wagner as the official composer of the Nazi regime. German opera houses were only allowed to perform compositions approved by the Reichkulterkammer, mainly the works of German composers such as Beethoven, Pfizner and of course Hitler’s all time favorite, Wagner.

Hitler directly linked National Socialist party loyalty to Wagner and German cultural supremacy. The Nuremberg rallies, an annual rally of the Nazi party from 1923-1938, included a private performance of Richard Wagner’s Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg performed by the Berlin opera house, for party members at Hitler’s behest. One of the Nazi party songs, sung at important party and state occasions (including the Nuremberg rallies) was the third chorale from Wagner’s Die Meistersinger, titled “Awake! Soon will Dawn the Day.” The inclusion of Wagner in the Nuremberg rallies and state occasions was also used as a major propaganda device to incite and excite the multitude of German people at these events towards the National Socialist cause by displaying Wagner’s music as a symbol of Germany’s exclusive and superior culture.

Because music is part of German national identity, using Wagner’s music as a propaganda device at rallies and state occasions furnished the affair with an almost mystical spell that related to the spirit and identity of the German people. Michael Meyer describes Wagner’s presence at Nazi rallies as “the spell” of the Nazi party that “afforded Nazism a strength they would not have without Wagner.” For the Nazis playing Wagner’s music was a strategy to gain public support. Using music as a tool of power, “the Third Reich music culture reflected, therefore, a synthesis of native popular values with the great tradition of classical music… to offer legitimacy to the epiphany of Adolf Hitler and to the musical representation of his realm.”

53 Meyer, 650.
54 Ibid, 653.
By using Wagner’s music as an element in their campaign, the Nazis were able to market themselves to the Germans as the realization of German’s cultural excellence and thus a familiar and respected ideology established on a strong foundation of previous movements, including Wagner’s prose and the writings of the Volk Movement that postulated of German’s cultural superiority and greatness.

According to some scholars, Hitler was inspired to use Wagner’s operas as propaganda in this fashion, specifically because he viewed the operas as containing the precise message advocated by the Nazi party. In this view, Wagner’s musical treatment of Germanic folklore was actually a model for Nazism by creating the image of the caricature Jew versus the German hero. And just as in Wagnerian opera where the caricatured Jew succumbs and dies in face of the Aryan hero, Nazism was going to create the same scenario, only for real. Margaret Brearely contends that just as, “The audiences at Wagner’s operas feel no remorse or compassion when witnessing the deaths of Mime and Hagen, Kundry and Klingsor. In 1922, Hitler believed that he could count on such a reaction in Germany to any eventual wholesale persecution of Jews.” In this way, National Socialist used Wagner as propaganda for more than just excitement and hype in German nationality and culture but, moreover, as context and reference for their anti-Semitic actions. Wagner’s operas actually represented the ideological foundations of the Nazi party. According to Brearely, the actual performances of Wagner’s operas “fanned the flames of racism in Germany and contributed to the success of the Nazi movement.”

The discussion of Wagner’s influence on National Socialism would be gapingly amiss without indication of his personal influence on Hitler and how Wagner’s influence affected the way Hitler ran his political regime. The entire aforementioned discourse about Wagner’s

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56 Brearley, 211.
incorporation into the Third Reich is founded in large part on Hitler’s personal interest in the composer. Hitler decided to be personally involved with the Wagner family and he specifically chose Wagner’s music as the propaganda tool for party rallies and state occasions. The reason for Hitler’s personal association with Wagner is because, as I mentioned in my introduction of Wagner, Richard Wagner was actually Hitler’s personal inspiration to become the leader of the Nazi party.

When Hitler watched Wagner’s opera, *Rienzi*, about a Roman tribune who fights for the common people and tries to restore the empire, he was inspired to become a future leader. He commented to a boyhood friend in 1939, “that was the hour when it all began.” Rather than only view Wagner’s operas as legend and encouragement, Hitler literally applied the message to himself. Hitler envisioned himself personally, as a hero of Wagner’s opera, perhaps a Rienzi, perhaps a Siegfried, the messiah of Wagner’s prophecy in the *Ring of the Nibelung*. Hitler identified with the heroes in these Wagnerian operas as men like himself who were struggling against corruption and opposition to fight for their aspirations and convictions. The passage at the end of Wagner’s opera *Lohengrin*, “Zum Führer sei er euch ernannt!” (Accept him as your leader), is thought to have inspired Hitler to call himself by the title of Führer. Even the title of Hitler’s famous autobiography and political exposition, titled *Mein Kampf* (“My Struggle”) resonates of Wagner’s autobiography, *Mein Leben* (“My Life”).

Hitler’s personal vision as being the fulfillment of Wagner’s prophecy shaped Wagner’s impact on the regime as a whole. Wagner transformed Hitler’s view of politics towards the conviction that an artist is the true political leader and that politics re-enact the stage. Hitler viewed himself as the artist and German politics as the stage for his opera. This is evident in

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58 Spotts, 141.
Hitler’s obsession with Wagner, exemplified in his insistence on carrying around the manuscripts of Wagner’s opera’s with him, his constant attendance at Wagnerian opera performances, and his urging and/or requiring the attendance of his party members and troops at Wagnerian opera performances. Hitler’s personal involvement in the minute details of the Bayreuth Festival, as we will discuss later on, and his association with Wagner as a symbol of party loyalty and emblem of national culture all contribute to this image that Wagner’s operas were more than just fantasy to Hitler; they were the reality of Germany’s potential future.\textsuperscript{59} Even as the Germans were succumbing to the Allies in the final throes of war, Hitler insisted on holding on to his cache of original Wagner scores, rather than return them to Wieland Wagner for safekeeping lending this almost obscure aura, as if Wagner’s scores were assisting in Hitler’s war strategy.\textsuperscript{60}

In the following segment, I will look at two prominent examples of how Wagner’s and Nietzsche’s images were projected as propaganda by the Third Reich in order to influence the German public. These two examples will demonstrate that Wagner’s and Nietzsche’s images were used as key components in Nazi propaganda. Additionally, the fact that the National Socialists specifically used these two figures as major propaganda tools illustrates that Wagner and Nietzsche were considered a compelling influence on the German public and thus were used as propaganda in order to attract the German people towards positively receiving National Socialism.

My first example is the Bayreuth Festival, a music festival instituted by Wagner in 1876 and still world renowned until today. The Bayreuth festival was used as a major propaganda tool by the Third Reich. Previously in this paper, I discussed Winifred Wagner’s personal connection to Hitler and quoted Joseph Goebbels comment regarding the Bayreuth festival that when Hitler

\textsuperscript{60} Spotts, 198, Spotts discussed the whereabouts of these manuscripts. It is assumed that these manuscripts were destroyed in the final days of fighting during WWII.
was in office, “We can run Bayreuth then according to our own taste.” This is what in fact occurred. Winifred Wagner, who ran the Bayreuth festival during the Third Reich, consulted Hitler personally regarding minute performance details of the Bayreuth productions and under Winifred’s authority the festival became a breeding ground for National Socialism.

In fact, Bayreuth had already become enmeshed in right-wing, National Socialist politics even before Hitler actually came to power. In 1928, the art critic, Bernhard Diebold, wrote in the Frankfurter Zeitung, “Since the war the right wing has elevated Richard Wagner to its special artistic culture-god.” In 1924, after the conclusion of the opera, Die Meistersinger, the audience rose in excitement and sang Deutschland über Alles in glorification of Germany. In that moment, the Bayreuth Theater developed into a political arena.

During the Nazi regime, Bayreuth became, in the words of Thomas Mann, ‘Hitler’s court theatre.’ Nazi leaflets, books, and propaganda were advertised all over the town of Bayreuth during the Festival. The festival handbook itself became a propaganda publication; there were issues of the handbook that contained a photo of Hitler rather than Wagner as its frontispiece. The handbook functioned as a form of ideological manipulation. The publications, rather than discussing art and culture, described the enemies of German culture ranging from the Jews, Bolsheviks, to the decadent West. In the 1934 issue of the Bayreuth Festival Handbook, the Nazi mayor of Bayreuth aptly encapsulated the connection between Hitler and Bayreuth by concluding his article with the words: “Heil Germany! Heil Hitler! Heil Bayreuth art!”

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61 Spotts, 188.
62 Ibid, 163.
63 Ibid, 171.
64 Ibid, 174.
65 Ibid, 193.
The *Bayreuther Blätter*, produced by the Wagner circle was yet another source for disseminating pro National Socialist ideas. The *Bayreuther Blätter* supported the National Socialist movement and used their cultural and Wagnerian prestige as a political platform. An example of how the *Bayreuther Blätter* intertwined National Socialist politics with Wagnerian culture is the following quote from the publication: “now there is a Chancellor who loves Wagner, understands German culture, and who will not be afraid to deal with the Jewish question.” The *Bayreuther Blätter* asserted that the National Socialist party enabled true German culture to bloom forth and allowed Bayreuth to be a source of “German culture in a German-regenerated Germany.”

Most importantly, to me, was Bayreuth’s influence during the war as a source of inspiration for Nazi troops. Hitler sent troops and forces from the battlefront to Bayreuth to watch Wagner’s operas while they rested from battle. The implied significance is that the mission of the war and the reason for these bloody battles was for the sake of Wagnerian art. These soldiers were being inspired to “Kill for Wagner and the Fatherland.” Many of these soldiers came to Bayreuth emotionally and/or physically scarred. When they watched Wagner’s operas it was meant to re-inspire them that the reason for fighting was for Wagner and their wounds were a sacrifice for German culture. The soldiers were being entrusted with a sacred mission at Bayreuth; their battle assignment was to uphold the great German artistic tradition.

Another prominent propaganda scheme by the Third Reich was the production of Leni Riefenstahl’s film, *Triumph of the Will*. *Triumph*, a Nazi propaganda film released in 1935, documented a Nazi Party congress. The film in both subliminal and explicit ways references both Wagner and Nietzsche.

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67 Ibid, 165.
The film, through it title, is obliquely referencing Nietzsche’s famous term *will to power* and the subliminal message is that by subscribing to the message in the film the German people can achieve Nietzsche’s *will to power*. Nietzsche promoted ambition and striving and through National Socialism the fulfillment of that power of passion would be actualized and the people would triumph. In the opening of the film, the camera pans across the darkened shrouded sky, and then suddenly the clouds part and light shines through revealing a plane with Hitler descending from the sky. As the plane descends, an aerial view sweeps across the city focusing in on the church towers below. The caption reads, “Adolf Hitler flew again to Nuremberg to review his faithful followers.”

This opening personifies Hitler in a mystic, godly and heroic fashion. The combination of churches and religious references with the glinting steel of a powerful airplane slicing through the sky intertwines the impression of Christ with the courageous warrior. Superman Hitler flying through the atmosphere references Nietzsche’s *übermensch*; he is above humanity, both figuratively and literally. Especially in context with the title of the film, the superman personification lends the interpretation that Hitler is this power that Nietzsche posited. Hitler as this Christ like and godly figure is also reminiscent of Siegfried, the Aryan god in Wagner’s *Ring*. Here comes the true savior of the German people, Hitler, to redeem his loyal followers. Once again, this ties right in to Hitler’s obsession with Wagnerian art and how he translated opera literally into politics. As the music of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* plays in the background, Hitler glides off his shimmering aircraft, conducting German politics to the tunes of Wagnerian opera.

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69 On a different note, this opening is accompanied with music from Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, suggesting to the viewer that Hitler is the master artist. This film reveals, once again, Hitler’s personal connection with Wagner and how he was inspired by Wagner to view politics as an artistic stage, in which he was the master composer, directing Germany to the tunes of his political opera.
Another reference to both Wagner and Nietzsche simultaneously is the film’s portrayal of the troops in the Nazi regiment as individuals who sacrifice and struggle for the sake of the German people. This resembles the warriors in Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkries*\(^{70}\) who sacrifice themselves for the greater good. Subliminally contained within this representation is the powerful, underlying message that passionate submission of sacrifice in the name of the Führer will be rewarded in the same fashion as Wagner’s warriors who are swept off to paradise by beautiful warrior maidens. Once again, the background music is playing a Wagnerian opera related to the message at hand; this time it is *Götterdämmerung*, an episode of the *Ring Cycle* that plays in the background of the film as Hitler walks down the path framed by SA and SS troops, inspecting his ranks. As before, however, the image is multi-faceted; at the same time as Wagner’s image is invoked, so is Nietzsche’s. The portrayal of the strength, ardor and passion of the National Socialist adherents is reminiscent of the ‘heroic will’ associated with Nietzsche’s writings. In the film, Hitler extols the virtues of sacrifice and struggle exclaiming that it is the struggle and sacrifice of the German people, leaders and youth that will proclaim a victorious Germany. Hitler commences his speech in the film by saying “the strongest people can’t just say ‘I believe’ they need to say ‘I fight.’”\(^{71}\) Here the creative *will to power* associated with Nietzsche of blind acquiescence and irrational aggression is used as a mobilizing force beckoning the German masses to battle.

This film simultaneously represents both Nietzschean and Wagnerian symbols to promote the National Socialist cause. In the film Wagner and Nietzsche are synthesized to proclaim one and the same message. How ironic that the Nazis precisely selected Nietzsche\(^{72}\) and his one-time

\(^{70}\) The *Ride of the Valkries* is the prelude to Act III of *Die Walküre*, the second opera of Wagner’s *Ring Cycle*.

\(^{71}\) *Triumph of the Will*, 1:40:47.

\(^{72}\) In Joachim Köhler, *Nietzsche and Wagner: A Lesson in Subjugation*, Köhler analyzes a passage where Nietzsche prophesizes the future appropriation of Wagner’s work for an evil cause. Köhler writes; “Then in a moment of
friend but then nemesis Wagner and presented the two of them under the same spotlight as two cultural icons with one vision: National Socialism. This film demonstrates the extent and power of appropriation that can take two completely opposing viewpoints and fuse them as one.

III German public response to the appropriation of Wagner and Nietzsche

This last section of the paper focuses on perhaps the most crucial dimension of this analysis. The abundant literature during, before and after the Third Reich’s regime plainly exposes a deep relationship with National Socialism and the images of Nietzsche and Wagner. However, how did the Third Reich’s appropriation of Wagner and Nietzsche influence the German public? Were the German people swayed by the propagandized images of Nietzsche and Wagner as National Socialist emblems? I argue that they were. In order to do so I look at several specific examples based on my previous analysis as case studies.

The first case is the Reichkulterkammer (Reich Chamber of Culture) which was responsible for purging German culture of Jewish influence. The Reichkulterkammer was established in 1933, and by 1937 membership included close to two hundred thousand German, musicians and artists, of which musicians comprised more than half that total sum. Originally, the Reichkulterkammer garnered support from many artists because it posed as a protectorate of the arts, both economically and creatively. In the beginning the Reichkulterkammer seemed tolerant of both avant-garde art and Jews. This pretense lured many art associations to join in cooperation with the National Socialist regime. However, once the Chamber’s anti-Semitic

ominous political prophecy, Nietzsche proceeds to describe the mankind of the future invoked by Wagner, new generations whose characteristics can be seen in the secret runes of his art. The time will come when these generations will shake the world to its core their arrival accompanied by ‘the voice of some mysterious evil spirit hitherto unheard’. And this voice, shrill and frightening, will proclaim that ‘even an evil passion is preferable to abandoning oneself to the morality of convention.’ (Köhler, 124) How ironic that Nietzsche himself was used for the exact same evil cause as he prophesized regarding Wagner.
agenda was spelled out, membership remained strong and German artists either passively complied or actively collaborated with the ‘de-Jewification’ goal.

Since the Third Reich was a totalitarian regime, the Reichkulterkammer’s agenda was imposed upon its members. However, Alan Steinweis argues that despite the regime’s coercion, an in-depth analysis of the Reichkulterkammer reveals that artists accepted the Chamber’s enforcement without protest. The German artists went along with the Reich’s cultural purge. In the words of Steinweis:

“Silence in the face of “purification” represents the greatest failure of German artists in the Third Reich. Aryan artists like Wilhelm Furtwangler who actually spoke up on behalf of their Jewish colleagues were far out-numbered by those who passively accepted what was taking place, whether out of indifference, professional opportunism, fear, or sympathy for the regime’s anti-Semitic goals.”

An example of this ‘silence’ emanating from the professional artistic realm is Peter Raabe. When Richard Strauss resigned as the Music Chamber’s president because he refused to cooperate with the agenda of the National Socialist, Raabe was instituted in his stead. Goebbels chose Raabe because he exuded an outward veneer of professional autonomy that would create the illusion that the arts were free of political interference. However, in reality Raabe was a puppet to National Socialist demands, rather than insist on musical autonomy, in the words of Goebbels he proved to be “easily won over.”

Why were these German artists so “easily won over?” Music is part of German national identity, and before the Third Reich Jewish musicians played an extremely prominent role in Germany. All five major conductors of German state opera houses were Jewish, some of

73 Steinweis, 176.
74 Ibid, 54.
Germany’s most famous composers, such as Felix Mendelssohn, were Jewish. One would imagine that the German art patron would be appalled to see Mendelssohn banned in his opera house or his favorite conductor dismissed. However, despite the large number of Jewish artists in the German arena, the German public acquiesced quickly and without protest to Reichkulterkammer demands. In my analysis, I attribute this acquiescence to the precedent set by Wagner in “Das Judentum in der Musik” that Jews debase art, and the interpretation of Wagner’s prose by the National Socialist party that Wagner’s ideal was to be achieved in reality through a national purge of Jewish influences from German art.

Wagner was worshipped by the German people, and they were willing to give up the Jewish elements in their music, because they perceived that to be Wagner’s ideal. Hoeckner argues that, “If Wagner called for the destruction of the Jews... we cannot know, nor is it relevant. (However,) it is enough for such an influential genius to have said it repeatedly, as the immense homage given him by anti-Semites shows.”75 The presentation of Wagner’s ideas in “Das Judentum in der Musik” as a Wagnerian vision through anti-Semitic and National Socialist propaganda influenced German artists that purging Jews from German art was an intrinsically Wagnerian and thus German vision.

This leads us to our next case, Bayreuth. Bayreuth acted as the most prominent and effective aesthetic cover to National Socialism. Thomas Mann, an anti-fascist German writer who fled Germany during Hitler’s regime, commented the following regarding the Bayreuth festival:

“It was impossible to go on producing culture in Germany while all the things we know of were taking place. To do so meant palliating depravity, extenuating crime. Among the torments we suffered was the sight of German literature and art constantly serving as

75 Hoeckner, 175.
window dressing for absolute monstrousness. Strangely, no one seems to have felt that there were more honourable occupations than designing Wagner sets for Hitler’s Bayreuth.”

This quote demonstrates the success of Nazi propaganda in influencing the German people. During the Third Reich, the Bayreuth festival was essentially produced by the government. However, the German people continued to view the festival as a Wagnerian affair. So while participation in the festival, in fact, indicated participation in National Socialist politics, the German people felt justified in participating in Bayreuth art, since the festival, so to speak, contained the signature of Wagner’s presence.

Richard Strauss is another good example of a prominent German musician, who disagreed with the National Socialist party. However, when it came to Bayreuth art, he was willing to collaborate with the Nazi regime. When the Jewish conductor, Bruno Walter, was fired from his conducting position at Bayreuth, Richard Strauss offered to fill in the position. Although Strauss constantly clashed with Goebbels over the Jewish question and refused to end his collaboration with his Jewish librettist, Stephen Zweig, when it came to Bayreuth the anti-Semitism wasn’t a problem any more. Of course, there are many aspects to consider here including personal benefit. Nonetheless, the case of Strauss reveals that the prospect of Wagnerian art took precedence over personal convictions. Thus, Bayreuth propaganda achieved its aim: in the name of Wagner the German people were willing to conform to the National Socialist view of the ‘Jewish question.’

An important note to me is that after World War II the Wagner family never apologized for the Bayreuth Festival’s role in the Nazi regime. They drew a veil over the chapter of the festival from 1933-1945, and never again discussed Bayreuth association with the Nazi regime.

76 Letters of Thomas Mann 1889-1955, 2 vols (1970), 481, quoted in Spotts, 188.
To me, this implied that Bayreuth was a Pandora’s Box; the enormity of its responsibility in the War and as an influence on the German people is so large that the Wagner family and their supporters could not conceive of how to shoulder that type of responsibility.

The popularity of Leni Riefenstahl’s film, *Triumph of the Will*, is yet another example of the effectiveness of the Nazi propaganda of Wagner and Nietzsche. Millions of Germans watched *Triumph*, and the film won a plethora of awards, both in Germany and abroad. An article in *The Independent* written in 2003 stated: "*Triumph of the Will* seduced many wise men and women, persuaded them to admire rather than to despise, and undoubtedly won the Nazis friends and allies all over the world.” Although it is difficult to measure the actual effectiveness of the propaganda message of the film, the positive response of the German public, in terms of the popularity of the film and its high rate of views indicate that the German people were intrigued by the presentation of the film. I watched the film and found it full of speeches and quite boring. But there was something about it that appealed to the German masses. And although, I have yet to locate a source for this type of speculation, the prominence of Nietzsche and Wagner, and the importance of their role in this media film suggest to me that the German positive response to the film was related to their esteem for Wagner and Nietzsche.

Last, Nietzsche’s incorporation into National Socialism stimulated a plethora of books and writings that suggest that his image inspired many thinkers to join the National Socialist ranks. During the Third Reich, National Socialism was discussed, delineated and critiqued in Nietzschean terms. Many writers argued whether or not Nietzschean ideas complemented or superseded National Socialism. However, the debate alone indicates the consensus that National Socialism had to be confronted on Nietzschean terms. Nietzsche was discussed in a multitude of settings and by many different segments of the population. Nietzsche was part of the school
curriculum; his ideas of war used as inspiration on the battlefield; the eminent psychologist Carl Jung conducted seminars using Nietzsche’s book *Zarathustra* as the underlying context to explain National Socialism and the list goes on and on. The point being that the German people were discussing and rationalizing National Socialism in Nietzschean terms. Many German scholars employed Nietzsche’s writings in defense to justify Nazi actions, such as the Nietzschean Gottfried Benn, who invoked Nietzsche’s writings as an excuse for violence.\(^{77}\)

Books were published extolling Nietzsche as the German prophet,\(^{78}\) war was exclaimed as the fulfillment of his ideas,\(^{79}\) and National Socialism as the true realization of his vision for Germany’s future. As Steven Aschheim describes, Nietzsche provided “National Socialism with an intellectual father.”\(^{80}\) The National Socialists propagandized Nietzsche as one of their own and the rationalization of National Socialist by academics and intellectuals in Nietzschean terms, such as the aforementioned by Gottfried Benn, indicate that they were successful.\(^{81}\)

Conclusion:

Wagner and Nietzsche were influential German figures before the advent of National Socialism and their ideas were redirected by the National Socialists to promote their agenda. In the above analysis, I begin with describing the reasons for Wagner’s and Nietzsche’s widespread appeal to the German people. They both connected to the German inner psyche and character; Wagner with his use of Nordic mythology and Nietzsche with his radical and revolutionizing philosophies. I then continue by discussing how their ideas developed into part of the National Socialist ideology. Both of their connections to anti-Semitic ideals that was enhanced by their

\(^{77}\) Aschheim, 247.
\(^{78}\) Aschheim, 250. Those books included titles such as *Friedrich Nietzsche as German Prophet* and *Nietzsche and German Destiny* etc.
\(^{79}\) Ibid, chp 8, 246, 248.
\(^{80}\) Ibid, 236.
\(^{81}\) Aschheim, chp 8.
supporters and their connection to the Volk Movement was channeled into National Socialist ideas. For Wagner, it was Hitler’s personal attachment to his operas and for Nietzsche it was the controversial, violent, and popular nature of his writings that lent them both to reinterpretation and incorporation by the Nazi party. Lastly, I analyze how Wagner’s and Nietzsche’s incorporation into National Socialism influenced thinkers to justify their participation in the Nazi regime, artists to produce art despite anti-Semitic measures, and the German people to respond positively to Nazi propaganda.

Wagner’s and Nietzsche’s incorporation into the Third Reich symbolizes a much larger shift in German thinking that occurred leading up to and during the early twentieth century in Germany. For instance, the Volk Movement and the anti-Semitic writings of German scholars such as Paul Anton de Lagarde laid the foundation for many National Socialist ideas.\(^{82}\) Similarly, many artistic movements, such as the plays of the German playwright, Berthold Brecht, featured themes of blind irrationalism and aggressive violence parallel to the notion advertised by the Nazis, “live dangerously.”\(^{83}\) However it was Nietzsche whose concept, “live dangerously” was quoted in Nazi propaganda, and Nietzsche who was heralded as the “prophet of new Germanism.”\(^{84}\) Likewise, it was Wagner whose music was played at state and party occasions, and it was his chorale that was instituted as a party anthem. There were a multitude of other thinkers, better known for their anti-Semitism and links to the Nazi party than Wagner or Nietzsche. Why then were Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche chosen as the emblems of National Socialism? The advantage of using these two figures, specifically, was their esteem.

Richard Wagner was the most eminent German opera composer and Friedrich Nietzsche was the

\(^{82}\) Mosse, chp 2.
\(^{83}\) Alex Ross, The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), chp 6, City of Nets.
\(^{84}\) Mosse, 157.
most controversial German philosopher. They were both extremely important German figures, and their shadow offered a justification and legitimization to National Socialism that other German figures could not supply.

One aspect of looking at why it was precisely Wagner and Nietzsche that were used as National Socialist emblems is a broader discussion on the nature of political appropriation. The main purpose of political appropriations is validation and sanction. In order for a government to function they need power. And in order to obtain power, governments often look towards high culture as a means of approbation. There are two reasons why politics tend to employ high culture. One reason is because the elite portions of society are often the patrons of high culture. Governments need the support of the elite because the elite have money and power that can back a regime financially and authoritatively. So in order to get support from the patrons of high culture, the government appropriates that exact high culture as symbolic of their cause. Another aspect is the esteem of high culture in a society; high culture is relegated to a position of status. It is represented as the best of what a specific civilization has to offer. Since high culture is viewed as the finest expression of a specific civilization it affords a government the maximum level of validation. This was precisely the case with Nietzsche and Wagner. Their appropriation provided the Third Reich with support from the elite echelons of society, as well as a source of prominent esteem and justification for their cause. The appropriation of Wagner and Nietzsche by the Third Reich illustrates how the personal opinions of these two figures become largely irrelevant in regards to their appropriation. The Nazis could and did choose the elements of each figure that best promoted their cause. In the words of Ernst Bertram regarding the Nazi appropriation of Nietzsche: “great men are inevitable our creation, just as we are their’s.”

85 Ernst Bertram, Nietzsche, 5, quoted in Aschheim, 314.
The following analysis demonstrates the dangers inherent in appropriating art for politics. When political organizations appropriate culture for politics the art form becomes redefined contextually. This is precisely what happened with Wagner and Nietzsche, by displaying them as projections of National Socialism, Wagner and Nietzsche became permanently redefined in relation to their political context. Up to the current day, Wagner’s and Nietzsche’s images are still associated with the Nazi era. Crane Brinton, in a 1940 case study regarding how ideas are mediated by political culture, writes the following:

“I did not then, and do not now maintain that Nietzsche was a “proto-Nazi,” that he was directly responsible for Nazi “ideology,” let alone that he helped the Nazis to power. How he would have hated the whole lot. But the use the Nazis made of much that Nietzsche wrote is an interesting and to some, one may hope, instructive case history of what can happen to the words of a subtle intellectual once they are common property. Nietzsche wrote in his final madness in Ecce Homo, “I am not a man: I am dynamite.” But dynamite explodes somewhat unselectively.”

I think Brinton captures the precise danger of appropriation. Ideas are dynamite. It sounds cliché, but it is true. In the case of Wagner and Nietzsche, their sanction or disapproval of the goals laid out by the Nazi regime does not alter the degree to which their images were used to promote the Nazi cause. The ideas transmitted by Wagner and Nietzsche a century before exploded during the Nazi era and they had no control over the presentation of their personas and viewpoints anymore. To me, what makes the topic of this paper, Wagner and Nietzsche appropriation and reception in the Third Reich, so important is because of the dangers of appropriation. As members of a society, it is our personal task, to critically analyze the way ideas and personalities are presented to us and to measure those presentations for accuracy and reliability. The Nazi era

86Brinton, Nietzsche, 222, quoted in Aschheim, 285.
may be an extreme example of appropriation, but the notion of using art for politics wasn’t invented by the National Socialist and did not disappear in 1945. Especially in our modern world, where media transmitted propaganda is part of our daily life, we as both the providers and recipients of appropriating data, must be aware of and combat the dangers of misusing ideas.
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