

# Reading Death and Sacrifice in the Berlin *Völkischer Beobachter*, February 1942 – March 1943

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History

## Introduction

On October 9, 1942 the front page of the Berlin *Völkischer Beobachter*, the official paper of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), featured an article about the memory of Horst Wessel.<sup>1</sup> In the twelve years since his death in 1930 Wessel's legacy, including his song *Die Fahne Hoch*, served as a reminder of the struggles and sacrifices of National Socialism and the German nation. In the article Joachim Schieferdecker, a spokesman for the propaganda ministry, criticized frequent and mindless singing of the Horst Wessel song. He argued that such practices diluted the notions of heroism and sacrifice which the song embodied. Wessel's death and sacrifice, Schieferdecker argued, should not constitute trivial or tenuous routine but should serve as a concrete example of the proper conduct of a German.<sup>2</sup> From Wessel's death in 1930 until the destruction of the Third Reich, propagandists such as Schieferdecker consistently reformulated the rhetoric and imagery of Wessel's life and death to preserve the ideological function of his legacy.<sup>3</sup> By (re)assigning meaning to his life and death, such propagandists constructed an image that in many ways diverged from reality for the sake of a political agenda. This split between image and reality represents the "fundamental work of Nazism," of aestheticizing an existence in which "myth [takes] the place of

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<sup>1</sup> Horst Wessel, to be blunt, was a rather insignificant figure in life: a somewhat obscure activist for the NSDAP in the Weimar Republic. In death, however, he became a central pillar of the propaganda campaigns. For more, see f.n. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Joachim Schieferdecker, "Zu Horst Wessels Geburtstag, Im Vorfeld gefallen," *Völkischer Beobachter*, October 9, 1942, Berlin edition, 282, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Jay Baird, *To Die for Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 73-107.

objectively conceived history.”<sup>4</sup> The labor of propagandists to produce subjective meanings to historical realities blurred the lines between the real and the myth.

This essay probes the work of propagandists in the Berlin *Völkischer Beobachter* (VB) as they constructed and reconstructed subjective meanings of war, death and sacrifice. The chronology spans from Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, to *Heldengedenkttag*, or Heroes Memorial Day in March 1943. Within this period the Wehrmacht initially won a long line of victories leading to Moscow and subsequently suffered their first major defeats in Moscow and Stalingrad. In Berlin and Germany in general, bombings were rare, the material standard of life remained relatively high, and daily life was surprisingly stable.<sup>5</sup> Still, Germans had to make sense of newspaper reports, radio broadcasts and personal stories about the enormous death tolls in the East. For readers, the VB represented an episteme: a body of knowledge or information, and a resource for rationalizing or making sense of the world around them. Reading the VB however, meant consuming and interpreting the iconography and aestheticized reality constructed by propagandists. Although examining this iconography cannot address the extent to which Berliners “bought” the propagandized image, it can show the ways that propagandists attempted to control subjective values by attaching specific subjective meanings to historical realities.<sup>6</sup>

Historian Michael Geyer argues that by 1942 many Nazi leaders and ideologues including Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, and Alfred Jodl intentionally pushed the military toward mass death as a means of protecting and preserving Nazi ideology. In their romanticized and aestheticized view, to die on the rubble of one’s dreams immortalized the dream itself. Men die but ideas live on. Furthermore, acts of sacrifice and sacrificial death became a marker of German identity under National Socialism.<sup>7</sup> Sacrifice, as Geoffrey Cocks writes, was “proof of loyalty

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<sup>4</sup> Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2000), 300-331, here 313.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Götz Aly, *Hitler’s Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Gellately employs a similar methodology in Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), especially 6.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Geyer, “‘There is a Land Where Everything is Pure: Its Name is Land of Death’ Some Observations on Catastrophic Nationalism” in Greg Eghigian and

and racial worth.”<sup>8</sup> In the Berlin *VB*, the penchant for death as a means of victory or immortality extended beyond military and political officials. From Barbarossa to *Heldengedenktage* 1943, the *VB* increasingly advocated the act of sacrificial death and promoted it as a means to achieve victory and immortality. But along with shifting meanings of death, sacrifice, and victory, propagandists also began to restructure the “cause” or aim of the war. By March 1943, *VB* propagandists encouraged readers to imagine themselves as bearers of – and potential sacrifices for – a war not only about National Socialism or Germany, but in fact about all of European hegemony.

### **Dying for the Reich**

In April of 1942 the party chancellery ruled that the words “wounded” and “fallen” could only be used in military obituaries. In addition, obituaries for air raid victims were deemed unworthy of the Iron Cross which previously accompanied them. In her recent dissertation, Monica Black argued that this ruling suggests that the death of a soldier – a much more “active death” than the relatively “passive death” of a civilian – denoted a much higher level of commitment to the cause.<sup>9</sup> To be sure, the ruling demonstrates the way the state inserted itself into the realm of subjective values. Though it dealt with air raid victims, the ruling came a few months after the *Ostheer*, or Eastern Army, suffered its first major defeat in Moscow – a relative climax in the growing death tolls of Operation Barbarossa. Across Germany, the repercussions of the invasion had inspired the colloquialism “we are beating ourselves to death” – and indeed, by the end of the first year of Barbarossa, over 1,300,000 *Ostheer* soldiers were wounded or dead;

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Matthew Paul Berg, eds., *Sacrifice and National Belonging in Twentieth-Century Germany* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 118-147, especially 131-141.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Cocks, “Modern Pain and Nazi Panic” in Paul Betts and Greg Eghigian eds., *Pain and Prosperity: Reconsidering Twentieth-Century German History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 88-109, here 103.

<sup>9</sup> Monica Black, “The Meaning of Death and the Making of Three Berlins,” PhD dissertation, University of Virginia, 2006. 107. Black has recently published a monograph based on the dissertation, see Monica Black, *Death in Berlin: From Weimar to Divided Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); see also Ian Kershaw, “War and political violence in twentieth-century Europe”, *Journal of Contemporary European History*, 14 (2005), 107-123.

almost forty percent of the campaign's original manpower.<sup>10</sup> In this period, as shown in the ruling, the state became anxious about how Germans made sense of war and death. In Berlin, the *VB* faced the task of legitimizing unparalleled levels of soldierly death and sacrifice on the battlefield.

Failing to capture Moscow represented the first major strategic failure in the East. In the aftermath of the loss, the *VB* printed a letter from field correspondent Hannes Goditus to Joseph Goebbels. The letter, printed on February 4, 1942, only passively mentions the German dead as necessary sacrifices and suggests that the Soviet dead outnumber their German counterparts; suggesting perhaps, the death ratio legitimized the dead.<sup>11</sup> In the wake of the Battle of Moscow, as this letter shows, the *VB* portrayed the war in the Soviet Union in an optimistic light and death and the dead as a mere necessity of victory. Subsequently however, the *VB* iconography manifests a dramatic metamorphosis from perhaps passively dying for military objectives to actively dying for the *Volksgemeinschaft* and *Heimat*. The chancellery ruling on Black's "active and passive death" was a mere month away.

A brief interlude to unpack the above terms will help flesh out the sources and arguments throughout the rest of the essay. *Volksgemeinschaft* or People's Community or Racial Community should be read as the racialized interpretation of Ferdinand Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* or community. It represents a community which rests on organic development and a unity of human wills; something like the bond between a nuclear family of the early modern period, one linked to its work and its land through generations of toil and communalism. In its racialized form, members of the *Volksgemeinschaft* are those deemed racially pure.<sup>12</sup> *Heimat* refers not only to the homeland as it might be translated, but also to the specifically Nazi view of *Heimat* as being about "blood and soil" – a connection between the *Volk*, or people, and

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 185; Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 44-45

<sup>11</sup> Hannes Goditus, "Ein Brief von der Front" *Völkischer Beobachter*, February 4, 1942, Berlin edition, 35, 3. All translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

<sup>12</sup> Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society* edited by Jose Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), especially 3-51; Fritzsche, *Life and Death*, 19-142, especially 38-56; Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Ippermann, *The Racial State: Germany, 1933-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

the land of their ancestral lineage. Taken together and in conjunction with struggle and war, the words suggest the roots of German identity and the foundation of the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*, or world view.<sup>13</sup> As subsequent sources show, propagandists in the VB attached these highly ideological sentiments to the imagery and rhetoric of war, death, and sacrifice.

On March 15, 1942, the NSDAP *Heldengedenktage*, the VB published a letter from the Eastern Front informing a German woman of her husband's heroic death. More than anything, the letter made the case that the war dead constitute the necessary foundation of the living: both literally and figuratively. The deceased, Werner, died a painless and iconic death: two shots to the chest and throat, and burial under a tall Birch tree. Yet, "like all the other fallen, [he] remains amidst our company forever. And when the company is down to the last man, all the wounded and dead are with him and he shall secure victory." Without defining "victory," or exactly *how* the dead remain amongst the living, the letter continues to explain that dead soldiers construct a living reminder or memorial (*lebendige Mahner*) in the conscience of not only soldiers but also civilians, men, women, and children.<sup>14</sup>

As the letter continues, the memorial comes to represent that *for* which a soldier dies. The letter describes the war dead, Werner included, literally supporting German life, symbolically represented as a

...broad and massive tower. As you approach, you see that the mighty pillars of the tower are people – dead soldiers. And among them you see Werner, as he was, facing you, steadying it vigorously. Radiant face, he is exalted in his blessed transfiguration. You know what he carries: our German countryside, the quiet villages and the lonely lakes, the cities and the industrious factories. And you also see light-hearted and happy children playing in a blooming garden.<sup>15</sup>

The letter encourages the bereaved, not to wallow in the gloom of death, but to exalt the dead as bearers of the nation. The previously undefined

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<sup>13</sup> For an invaluable tool for deciphering these terms see Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich, LTI: Lingua Tertii Imperii* (New York: Continuum Books, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Friedrich W. Hymmen, "Gedanken über den Soldaten" *Völkischer Beobachter*, March 15, 1942, Berlin edition, 74, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

“victory” can thus be taken to mean a post-death service for the Germanic peoples, their communities, and their livelihood; perhaps described as the immortalization of service to the *Volksgemeinschaft*. The reminder or memorial of the dead becomes the foundation for building the future and sustaining German existence. Hymmen conjures the physical landscapes of the *Heimat* and portrays the dead as its foundational or structural supports. The letter encourages Berliners to find comfort rather than pain in death – the comfort that death facilitates life. He writes that “what the dead require of you is that you not tell of the empty abyss of death.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed for Hymmen, sacrificing one’s life represents the highest ideal. Through sacrificial death, soldiers fortify the sanctity and future of the *Volksgemeinschaft* and *Heimat*.

The letter itself, written by Friedrich Wilhelm Hymmen, a young writer serving on the Eastern Front, appeared in modified form in his book, *Briefe an eine Trauernde. Vom Sinn des Soldatentodes* (Letters to a Mourner: The Meaning of Soldierly Death). Published by the NSDAP propaganda ministry, the book revolved around the “life-affirming power of heroic death.” For example, one story portrayed soldiers burying a fallen comrade with an oak sapling over his heart so that it could be nourished by his heroic spirit.<sup>17</sup> In this light, we should read the letter less as an actual piece of correspondence than as a promotion of a very specific aestheticization of death. For Berliners reading the letter, this propagandized image of sacrifice and death suggests a celebration of soldierly contributions to upholding communal sanctity; they die for the Reich – the telos of German history. Thus in the wake of the Wehrmacht’s first major strategic failure, the iconography of death and sacrifice in the Berlin VB could be read as a means to control subjective perceptions of war. Control over what war meant was control over what war produced: not mere death but the perpetuation of German life.

Moving beyond interpretations of war and the masses of dead soldiers, the representation of death also presented the nature of sacrifice as an individual act; a service to the Reich which required active work. By late August 1942, the fighting around Stalingrad was in full swing. The German Luftwaffe frequently carpet bombed the surrounding area as General Friedrich Paulus prepared his advance into the city. Despite high

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Hymmen, *Briefe an eine Trauernde: Vom Sinn des Soldatentodes* (Sonderdruck für das Hauptkulturamt in der Reichspropagandaleitung der NSDAP, Stuttgart: J. Engelhorn’s Nachf. Adolf Spemann, 1942) in Baird, *To Die for Germany*, 226-7.

death tolls, commanders on the ground thought military victory was near.<sup>18</sup> At the end of the month, the *VB* published the last letter of a dead field correspondent which ostensibly dealt with honoring the dead. Adopting what had become established rhetoric, the letter refers to the dead remaining among the living – aiding in, and supporting their struggle. But beyond this repetition of rhetoric, the letter also suggests that Berliners on the homefront have a responsibility to soldiers, specifically dead soldiers, on the battlefield. Perhaps in reference to Heroes Memorial Day, the fallen correspondent Herbert Staake argues that to honor the dead one day a year is insufficient. “The sacrifice they have given is entitled to a different appreciation and has the right to guide and be the benchmark for what we do for the nation in everyday life... [they are] reminders of the fact that we have to measure our own work.”<sup>19</sup> For Staake, it becomes not so much an issue of simply honoring the sacrifices of the dead, but *how* one does so. Simple meditation on special occasions must be replaced by a recalibration of one’s entire life. By manipulating the meaning of death, Staake attempts to define, or “aestheticize” death, thereby assigning a specific meaning to, and a desired attitude toward the German encounter with it.

Throughout history, Staake writes, German hegemony has grown out of struggle and been paid for with the blood of fallen soldiers. Nevertheless, he continues, the unprecedented scale of death in the East does not suggest

... that the sacrifice of life has become easy... With knowledge of the dangers of the struggle, [the dead] became heroes by consciously and determinedly crossing the narrow threshold of life into the infinity of death. Death on the battlefield alone is not heroic. Rather, heroism is taking on danger in the total knowledge of one’s own necessary sacrifice for the existence of the larger idea of the nation.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, death and sacrifice require purpose driven action; the dead do not represent a faceless mass but a community of distinct individuals who have consciously participated in the work of sacrifice.

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2010), 408-10.

<sup>19</sup> Herbert Staake, “Vermächtnis eines gefallenen Schriftleiters. Die Mahnung der Gefallenen” *Völkischer Beobachter*, August 26, 1942, Berlin edition, 238, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Herbert Staake, “Vermächtnis eines gefallenen Schriftleiters”.

But for Staake that is not enough: sacrifice should not only be the work of soldiers. He writes,

It is easy to lose the ability to assess the deeds and allowances of the individuals in a war. [But] we can be proud of our dead heroes only when we are worthy ourselves, and only then do we have the right to remember them and their lives and their struggle for us. Then our fallen become reminders in the hour of seriousness and danger that demand the fulfillment of our duty, just as they have fulfilled theirs.<sup>21</sup>

Here Staake encourages his audience not only to think of sacrifice as an individual act but also to accept the notion that they may need to do the work of sacrifice as well. Staake's words carry a deeper sense of import or credibility due to the fact that they appear post-mortem. His plea represents not only a call to appreciate individual sacrifice but also a communication from the other side of death; advice from the dead on how to behave for the Reich. Thus at precisely the same time that military casualties were soaring, the Berlin *VB* nudged its readers toward embracing not just death *en masse* but also the fact that it is composed of the work of individuals much like themselves.

Thus on the eve of the Soviet counter-offensive at Stalingrad, the Berlin *VB* encouraged readers to understand death as a conscious individual act which facilitated the perpetuation of the Reich: the embodiment of the National Socialist *Volksgemeinschaft*. Although the physical act of death required individual action, it became, in a sense, unimportant in that it changed nothing in an individual's ability to support the Reich. Monica Black aptly describes this notion of death as "the immortal soul's liberation from the tyranny of flesh."<sup>22</sup> This understanding of death conjures traditional, if extreme, images of Thermopylae – dying for the salvation and purity of one's homeland and culture. Sacrifice represented subordinating the self to the community, the culture, and the livelihood for which one fought. To be sure this classical idea of sacrifice becomes central to the representation of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad. But beyond soldierly sacrifice, the *VB* also increasingly focused on the relationship between the dead and the living and blurred the lines between soldier and civilian.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Black, "The Meaning of Death and the Making of Three Berlins," 82.



## The Dead and the Living

On October 3, 1942, General Willibald Freiherr von Langermann und Erlencamp died near the Don River in the Soviet Union. His extended obituary – a sizeable article on page three – portrays him as the ideal German soldier. It dramatically narrates his personal military history and the deeds for which he received his numerous distinguished honors: Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. Readers can learn of his service in the Great War and his membership in the fabled 5<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Regiment of the Prussian and Imperial militaries.<sup>23</sup> The article makes special note of the General's *Rittergeist*, or knight's spirit. In his service to the Reich, the General frequently rallied his troops through military hardships with his knight's spirit.<sup>24</sup> As war hero of both the Second and Third Reich, as well as a Baron of the old Prussian nobility, the life of this highly decorated General represents the mythologized or aestheticized trajectory of the German nation. His obituary conjures the spirit of Prussian militarism, strategic decisiveness, and German unity, and serves to remind all readers that the greatness of the nation rests on the sacrifice and diligence of every individual.<sup>25</sup> His actions and his heroic life and death, embodied by his knight's spirit, strengthened the struggle of the collective. Sacrifice then, represents not only an individual act but an individual act which puts the sanctity of the whole above the self.<sup>26</sup>

Two days after the Baron's obituary, the article about Horst Wessel which opened this essay appeared in the *VB*. Taken together, the two crystallize sacrifice as an individual act. But more than that, they contribute to a narrative of German behavior and identity that spans beyond the Third Reich. They anchor the struggles of modern Germany in history: in the wars of unification, in Prussian militarism, in the

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<sup>23</sup> The 5<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Regiment was formed in 1717, and played a decisive role in one of Frederick the Great's crowning victories at the Battle of Hohenfriedberg in 1745.

<sup>24</sup> "Der Heldentod des Generals von Langermann und Erlencamp" *Völkischer Beobachter*, October 7, 1942, Berlin edition, 280, 3.

<sup>25</sup> On the Prussian militarism and strategic decisiveness referenced here see Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), especially 110-130.

<sup>26</sup> On this reading of sacrifice see the introduction: John Borneman, "German Sacrifice Today," in Eghigian and Berg, eds., *Sacrifice and National Belonging in Twentieth-Century Germany*, 3-25.

Second Reich, and in the ascension of National Socialism. If death meant not an end but merely “the immortal soul’s liberation from the tyranny of flesh,” Langermann’s and Wessel’s sacrifices perpetuate the Reich and grant it historical legitimacy; to die *for* Germany meant to join young Werner in the pillars of the German *Heimat*. Although the word *Rittergeist* does not reappear in subsequent articles and letters, the same type of rallying spirit applies to the dead amongst the living. The dead come to strengthen the struggles of the living; they come to grant those struggling for German hegemony on the battlefield and homefront a sense of historical legitimacy.

The last months of the Battle of Stalingrad produced a gargantuan and unprecedented death toll. In combat alone over 200,000 German soldiers died. Tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands more died from extreme cold, starvation, and disease. A further 91,000 German soldiers marched into captivity after the battle and were likely presumed dead.<sup>27</sup> On Christmas Eve 1942 Goebbels reveled in the largely successful Christmas Operation (which redistributed plundered goods through the Reich) but acknowledged that the now inevitable loss at Stalingrad would dampen spirits at the tenth anniversary of the Reich.<sup>28</sup> In this bittersweet context he proclaimed, “the dead have earned more than our tears, they form the national conscience and admonish us to demonstrate the same zeal and fanaticism in both work and battle that they have themselves shown.”<sup>29</sup> Propagandists in the Berlin VB echoed a similar sentiment; sacrifice increasingly became a marker of proper German identity.

On the eve of the tenth anniversary of the Reich, General Paulus, surrounded by the Red Army, wrote to Hitler telling him that the Sixth Army should be seen as an example of persistence for present and future generations. On the same day, Hermann Göring gave a radiobroadcast speech in which he compared the Sixth Army to the Spartans at Thermopylae. Hitler echoed the insinuation – given that all the Spartans at Thermopylae died – on the anniversary of the Reich when he promoted Paulus to Field Marshal. Paulus, as Richard Evans writes, understood the promotion as an invitation to commit suicide.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, and in spite

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<sup>27</sup> Indeed, only some 6,000 returned to the Reich after the war. Statistical information from Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 410-420.

<sup>28</sup> Aly, *Hitler’s Beneficiaries*, 132-134.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Goebbels, *Der steile Aufstieg. Reden und Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1942/43* (Munich: Franz Eher, 1943), 101-102, quoted in Baird, *To Die for Germany*, 211-212.

<sup>30</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 419.

of Hitler's repeated ordering of the Sixth Army to fight down to the last man, Paulus and the German Sixth Army surrendered. Hitler and other leading Nazis were greatly disappointed by the surrender. It seems at this point that death served a greater purpose for the perpetuation of the National Socialist utopia than life.<sup>31</sup> In the *VB* propagandists constructed a specific interpretation of the loss; an aestheticized image which pointed to the sacrifices at Stalingrad as a means of fortifying the collective community.

On the tenth anniversary of the Third Reich, the *VB* printed a photograph of a relief by sculptor Arno Breker titled "Kameraden," accompanied by a poem by Herybert Menzel: "If one of us shall fall/ the other stands for two./ For every soldier is a God/ amongst his comrades" (Image I).<sup>32</sup> Both artists were Nazi Party members as well as pioneers in developing an aesthetic to capture National Socialist ideology. Breker's work as a sculptor focused on muscular bodies inspired by Hellenic and Roman precedents. Much of his work showcases allegorical nudes in pseudo-mythological contexts. Although aimed directly against so-called "degenerate" aesthetics, avant-garde artists, modernism, cubism, Dadaism and surrealism, Breker's work could be categorized as equally unrealistic and fantastical.<sup>33</sup> The meticulous portrayal of every sinew, every muscle, and the large and powerful bodies with proportionally small heads reflect the Nazi archetype of the *Übermensch*, the over-man or superman as the goal of humanity – itself an unrealistic concept twisted out of history. This specific relief came from a series commissioned for Hitler and Albert Speer's enormous Arch of Triumph in the megalomaniacal *Welthauptstadt Germania*. Finished in 1940, the work served as a centerpiece for the 1940 Great German Art Exhibition in Munich. It represents the foundational ideals of Nazi ideology and in the *VB* it conjures the ideological concepts outlined above – especially *Volksgemeinschaft* and *Weltanschauung* – but also conjures the word *Bildung*, or cultivation, the perfection of the self and the community.

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<sup>31</sup> By "utopia" I mean to suggest that National Socialism, like all political movements had a specific world view or ideal end state of being which guided its trajectory. In this vein see for example Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> *Völkischer Beobachter*, January 30, 1943, Berlin edition, 30, 9. *Völkischer Beobachter*, February 4, 1943, Berlin edition, 35, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Caroline Fetscher, "Why Mention Arno Breker Today? The work of the Nazi sculptor is on exhibit," *The Atlantic Times*, August (2006), accessed October 15, 2010, [http://www.atlantictimes.com/archive\\_detail.php?recordID=602](http://www.atlantictimes.com/archive_detail.php?recordID=602)



**Image I.** The image in the *VB* was highly distorted and of low quality. This specific image was taken from Mortimer G. Davidson, *Kunst in Deutschland, 1933-1945* (Tubingen: Grabert-Verlag, 1988). Photograph credit: *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich*, Ausgabe A, April 1940 (Munich: Franzwedding-Verlag, April 1940). For my original reference, see *Völkischer Beobachter*, January 30, 1943, Berlin edition, 30, 9.

Together with Menzel's poem, Breker's relief "Kameraden" or "comradeship" suggests that the death of each individual serves to strengthen the National Socialist cause. The reference to soldiers as Gods suggests that German soldiers become immortal through struggle and death; the living *redeem* the dead – meaning both how one might redeem a failure and also how one might redeem a coupon. Fittingly Breker's

relief focuses less on the dead soldier in the center than on the comrade bracing him. Almost like a reverse touch of God on the Sistine Chapel, the deceased appears to be injecting his spirit – perhaps his *Rittergeist* – into the living with his left hand. Although central in the image, the primary work of the deceased is to fortify the strength of the living. The living soldier's muscles, especially his right calf, are tight and rigid in strain. Yet at the same time he does not appear to be exerting himself too greatly; the dead are not a burden. Rather his physical and mental focus remains on the unpictured enemy. Billowing cloth presumably caught in the wind further enlivens and strengthens the drama of the continuing struggle. As suggested by the accompanying poem, the soldier becomes more than an individual – he becomes a Godly warrior in the service of Germany.

Five days later – two days after the last soldiers surrendered at Stalingrad – another Breker relief appeared on the front page of the *VB* with the caption “Our Oath: Revenge!” (Image II). Like “Kameraden,” the relief “Vergeltung,” translated as retaliation, retribution, or revenge, was also commissioned for the Arch of Triumph. Two articles accompany the photo, one on each side, but neither references it directly. Thus the image is positioned to speak for itself. The figure – perhaps the same figure from image I – hurls a giant rock towards an unseen foe. The warrior stands with one foot near shield and sword, suggesting that military success reflects the will and might of the soldier not the tools of war. Considering the physical action in the image, the figure does not appear overencumbered. Bolstered by his dead comrades, this warrior has become a godly agent of service. No fallen comrade lies on the ground; showing the deceased on a lower plane might suggest a submissive or defeated position. Rather, the dead seem present only in spirit. In this sense, both living and dead are immortal; the former more god than man, the latter more spirit than corpse. The title of the picture, “Our Oath: Revenge!” suggests that the dead have not been left behind or forgotten but rather have become metaphysical aggrandizers of military power and collective strength.

The first article accompanying the image narrates the last days of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad in a way that clashes with the historical record. The author claims that “twice the enemy's attempts at forcing surrender met a proud rejection... Generals, officers, NCOs, and other ranks fought shoulder to shoulder until the last bullet. They died so that

Germany could live.”<sup>34</sup> On both accounts this statement embellishes the historical reality to construct a myth. Not only did the Sixth Army surrender rather than fight to the last bullet, they also did not die so that Germany could live. In the last letters from Stalingrad many soldiers convey a forlorn view of war reminiscent of Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless the Berlin *VB* presented its own image of war. The author continues, “the sacrifice was not in vain [because] they gave the necessary time and opportunity for the German leadership to develop counter-measures on which the entire fate of the Eastern Front depends.”<sup>36</sup> By this account the loss at Stalingrad serves as a means of developing future strategic victory.

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<sup>34</sup> “Getreu ihrem Fahneneid: Zweimal die Aufforderung zur Übergabe stolz abgelehnt” *Völkischer Beobachter*, February 4, 1943, Berlin edition, 35, 1.

<sup>35</sup> See *Last Letters From Stalingrad*, trans. Franz Schneider and Charles Gullans, (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1962). In an attempt to gauge the morale of the troops, the High Command allowed soldiers to write letters which they subsequently impounded, opened, and sorted by content. This anthology is composed of such letters from the encircled Sixth Army.

<sup>36</sup> “Getreu ihrem Fahneneid: Zweimal die Aufforderung zur Übergabe stolz abgelehnt” *Völkischer Beobachter*, February 4, 1943, Berlin edition, 35, 1.



**Image II.** Once again, this specific image comes from Davidson, *Kunst in Deutschland*. Davidson provides no photographic credit but the image appeared in *Die Kunst im Dritten Reich*, Ausgabe A, March, 1941 (Munich: Franz-wedding-Verlag, March 1941). For my original reference, see *Völkischer Beobachter*, February 4, 1943, Berlin edition, 35, 1.

In conjunction with the relief “Vergeltung,” the article suggests that Berliners think not of the dead but of the impending victory which *necessitated* their death.

The article on the other side of the image developed the historical significance of the Stalingrad dead. Written by Alfred Rosenberg, Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories, the article historicizes the

sacrifices at Stalingrad. Rosenberg equates the epic nature of the Völkish project to *The Iliad* and other famous myths. Further, he ties the Third Reich to the larger struggle of the Germanic people from the war torn origins of the Burgundians. For Rosenberg, the Third Reich represents the telos of a long and arduous Germanic trajectory. In this interpretation the sacrifices of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad become less a matter of awe than “only one symbolic example in the struggle of a great nation.” For Rosenberg a unified Germanic, and even European spirit will rise from the ashes of Stalingrad as nations around the world reevaluate their position based on the threats of Bolshevism. He writes,

The order of this great struggle is to hold the shield of Europe – the German Wehrmacht has volunteered for everyone. The army sacrificed itself for everyone.

It cannot be the meaning of European history to end in the dirt of Bolshevism’s pollution. It cannot be that the meaning of German history is to be the last victim of international Jewish hatred. It cannot be a genuine world order that the handiwork and treacherous scheming of these powers will destroy the heritage of the greatest conflicts of our continent.<sup>37</sup>

For the Nazis, as Rosenberg suggests, conflict determined history: from the invasion of the Huns to the defeat at Stalingrad, German hegemony reflects the military engagements of the Germanic people. The story of the Third Reich represents almost a master narrative; a legitimization of existence. The threat from Bolshevism to destroy the accumulation of “the heritage of the greatest conflicts of our continent,” suggests that not only contemporary Germany, but historic and future Germany, and indeed all of Europe, stood on the brink of erasure. At this point, Germany effectively ruled continental Europe, so any notions of “Europe” could be read as a Europe purified and Aryanized in accordance with the Nazi *Weltanschauung*. For Rosenberg, the Germanic spirit embodied in the Third Reich represents the apogee of European history. What was at stake then was German (read as European) hegemony, history, and existence.

Within this master narrative, individual sacrifice represents the foundation of the state built on struggle. Those reading this article, rather

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<sup>37</sup> Alfred Rosenberg, “Die Helden der 6. Armee” *Völkischer Beobachter*, February 4, 1943, Berlin edition, 35, 1-2.



than being *ready and willing* to sacrifice, must now come to terms with the notion that the “order,” or perhaps fate, of Germany and the Germans is to “hold the shield of Europe” and give all that is necessary to repeal the “pollution” of Bolshevism. Even the language of “pollution” suggests threatening industrial grime juxtaposed to Breker’s pseudo-classical, organic over-man or superman: protector and avenger. The article makes the accompanying image and caption, “Our Oath: Revenge!” into an archetype; every German must become a strong willed avenger, backed by the dead, seeking revenge against the threats of “Bolshevism’s pollution.” Berliners must tap into the collective spirit of the Volk – past and present – and attack the unseen foe. In Berlin, this imagery and representation of Stalingrad and the mass death of war foments an examination of the self; not only the physical self – as the articles about Langemann and Wessel may have suggested – but of the spiritual self as well: the internal sense of being one defines through personal, familial, and national history.

By the beginning of February 1943, Berliners could understand soldierly death and sacrifice as a mandatory step toward the perpetuation and ultimate victory of the Reich. With each dead soldier the strength of the community grows and victory becomes more attainable. Despite this contradictory relationship, the idea that death could contain life – that destruction could be constructive – does not appear historically or historiographically unprecedented. Michael Geyer has already argued for a push towards death as a means of ideological immortality at the highest levels within the Reich. Likewise, the notion of destruction as constructive smacks of Albert Speer’s “Theory of Ruin Value” in that the VB increasingly developed a subjective value – a structure – which, even in a destroyed state, mesmerizes observers long after its deterioration.<sup>38</sup>

## Dying for the Narrative

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<sup>38</sup> By “mesmerize” I mean to suggest not only the psychic fuel endemic in Neo-Nazi movements, but also that historians still dedicate chapters, indeed entire monographs, to attempting to explain the level of fanaticism seen at the end of the Reich. On Ruin Value, see Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs by Albert Speer* trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1970), 59-83, especially 65-66; Alex Scobie *Hitler’s State Architecture: The Impact of Classical Antiquity* (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 97-106; and the film *The Architecture of Doom*. DVD. Directed by Peter Cohen. 1989; Sweden: First Run Features.

On March 21, 1943 National Socialism celebrated *Heldengedenktage*. Though the holiday commemorated all war dead, Goebbels ordered all propaganda offices to focus on Stalingrad as the ultimate example of heroism. The celebration was not “to be one of mourning; rather, the spirit of the heroic Sixth Army was to steel the resolve of the nation for the coming battle for the life or death of the Germanic Volk community.”<sup>39</sup> On the front page of the Berlin *VB* the poet Wilhelm Ehmer wrote an article titled “Pride and Mourning.” Ehmer narrates the relationship between death and life beginning with individual representations of death in obituaries and ending with the historicization of mass death and the immortalization of ideology. For Ehmer, Heroes Memorial Day facilitates the fortification of the collective spirit. He explicitly argues that individual sorrows combine into a unified mass compelled to act for the greater good and the future of the Nation and Volk.<sup>40</sup>

Ehmer encourages readers to imagine their individuality as part of something larger than themselves and embrace death as its foundation. He writes, “we are in the process of beginning a new chapter in the book of humanity and are forced to write the first paragraph of the chapter in blood. We must persist with the beloved, precious blood of the sons of our people.”<sup>41</sup> Although Ehmer employs dramatic rhetoric, the dead represent but the first paragraph of a single chapter. The sacrifices of the dead are necessary for the beginning of a new chapter in the book of humanity; they are not an end but a continuation. Because of the war dead, the tome of humanity will forever feature the story of the German Volk, and their story written in blood will forever be a memorial to the greatness of their struggle and their cause. But more than that, that someone else died is not enough, Ehmer also suggests that the living must define their future through the dead.

As Goebbels hoped, Heroes Memorial Day 1943 dealt more with the living than the dead. Ehmer writes that the task of the immortal dead has passed; they have already fulfilled their duty. He continues,

We remember the dead today; we remember our dead not in a sorrowful pain, but in the sense that the great hour of destiny has

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<sup>39</sup> Baird, *To Die For Germany*, 225.

<sup>40</sup> Wilhelm Ehmer, “Stolz und Trauer” *Völkischer Beobachter*, March 21, 1943, Berlin edition, 80, 1-2.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

come... [in which] *each and every act of cowardice becomes an offense to the spirit of our fallen*. They went ahead of us into battle – the flag of strength and confidence which slipped from their hands, we now hold high in the storm winds. It is a spring wind of the full force of renewal, it is the roar of a new era!<sup>42</sup>

With this passage Ehmer suggests that courage, sacrifice, and perhaps death are now the duty of civilians. The blood of the dead used to write the eternal record of human history mandates that the living not betray that sacrifice and end the chapter prematurely. Ehmer situates Berliners as bearers of the banner of the Reich and suggests that they not fear death but acknowledge that to die may be their honorable duty. Berliners should not fear this duty but rejoice in their ability to participate in the “full force of renewal.” Alfred Rosenberg’s article encouraged readers to interrogate themselves; to situate themselves in the trajectory of the German nation. Ehmer’s article encourages readers to balance their position in that trajectory against the threatened future and existence of the German nation. He writes that they should gracefully and dutifully accept their role as bearers of the flag and not defile the memory and sacrifice of the dead through cowardice. In short, Ehmer promotes the act of sacrifice, perhaps the act of sacrificing one’s life, for the future of the German nation.

## Conclusion

Monica Black argues that there is no specifically Nazi view of death but rather “a more profoundly German way of death.”<sup>43</sup> By this Black means that Nazi ideologues tapped into existing German ideas about death. On the one hand she is precisely right; in the *VB* the iconography of death and sacrifice conjures historical reference points. On the other hand however, they are not all German. The sources also invoke classical imagery – Thermopylae, Sparta, *The Iliad* – thus moving far beyond German history. These sources, in juxtaposition to the Soviet Union, Bolshevism and the “Asiatic hordes,” advocate sacrifice not only for a Germanic *Volksgemeinschaft*, a German imagined community, or even the Third Reich, but also for the perpetuation of western hegemony and the values of classical antiquity. Germany, which as Rosenberg writes, “now holds the shield of Europe,” becomes the guardian of

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

<sup>43</sup> Black, “The Meaning of Death and Making of Three Berlins,” 82-3.

occidental supremacy against the threats of “Bolshevism’s pollution.” And this cause, the *VB* suggests, was worth sacrificing and dying for.

The choice to end this narrative on the eve of Allied bombardment is intentional and significant. Although the bombardment of Berlin did not commence in earnest until November of 1943, the Berlin *VB* attempted to cover German news more broadly and thus bombardment became a central subject almost immediately after Heroes Memorial Day. The choice to stop before the Allied bombing campaigns reflects the fact that the *German* narrative of struggle and survival against an oriental Other breaks down when aerial bombardment and mass death, what Black calls “the pure and visible reality of death,”<sup>44</sup> come at the hands of fellow occidentals. The years between 1943 and 1945 thus become the outlier of German identity. This precise narrative resurfaced amongst post-1945 politicians in West Germany and abroad who argued the Western Allies realized only too late the dangers of Communism.<sup>45</sup> And indeed the narrative set deep roots, remaining prevalent in popular culture even into the twenty-first century, to the extent that the German defeat *in the East* “shapes up to have been something approaching a tragedy.”<sup>46</sup>

In the Berlin *VB* from early 1942 to early 1943, the iconography of soldierly death and sacrifice repeatedly (re)defined the meanings of “victory” and “death.” In the beginning of this essay, sacrifice and death represented the work of soldiers as they fought for military victory. In subsequent sources, the *VB* encouraged Berliners situate themselves within the trajectory of German and European history. As military victory slipped away, so too did the prospects of the thousand year Reich. In the *VB*, propagandists increasingly blurred the line between the seemingly antithetical words victory and death and injected them with a sense of immortality. As Ehmer writes, the dead mark the first paragraph of a new chapter in the book of humanity. But what is a chapter, indeed a whole book, if not a reference to, a reminder or memorial of, an idea which outlasts the thing; that is, something that transcends space through time? The cultural meaning of sacrificial death in the Berlin *VB* can be read, as Albert Speer wrote of architectural aesthetics in the Third Reich,

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 43.

<sup>46</sup> Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II, *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3.

as an attempt to “transmit [Hitler’s] time and its spirit to posterity.”<sup>47</sup>  
The result of this rhetoric which blurs victory and death is something not easily articulated – perhaps fanaticism.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 65.

<sup>48</sup> Getting fully into the nature of fanaticism and how it comes about is beyond the scope here. Briefly, the word fanatic etymologically refers to a frantic and orgiastic devotee in the context of a system of beliefs, a religion, or a cult. Fanaticism then is a state of fervor, a state of escalated faith. Fanaticism is both a communal phenomenon and an individual one. In both cases it draws on a system of beliefs and marks the point at which the belief system gains primacy over the self, the community, and the other: fanaticism violates humanity for the sake of faith. I would argue that “belief systems” and “aesthetic myths” share many similarities. In the Berlin VB, the aestheticized myth of life and death, Germanness and Otherness shape the perceptions of what is worth fighting and dying for. Further, modern war necessitates not only killers and targets but public supporters. The states and belligerent bodies that engage in war encourage their respective community of followers to believe that war, killing, and dying are a means which justify an end. The Third Reich shows us what happens when this formula gets pushed to the extreme. For more see Matthew Hughes and Gaynor Johnson eds., *Fanaticism and Conflict in the Modern Age* (London and New York: Frank Cass, 2005), especially 1-18.