Norse Mythology and Nazi Propaganda

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Introduction

November 1918, World War I ended. With the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, the German Empire was replaced with the Weimar Republic. Portions of Germany were gifted to its neighbors, heavy reparations were imposed and democracy was forced.[1] Burdened with war reparations, Germany's economy worsened, unemployment grew and starvation became common.[2] The country's people, searching for direction, turned to various forms of extreme nationalism, and war veteran Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party rode the wave of nationalistic fervor and took control. By eliminating all other political parties, censoring the media and imprisoning political opponents, Hitler and the Nazis quickly established a totalitarian regime known as the Third Reich before instigating World War II with the invasion of Poland.[3]

Throughout the Third Reich, Hitler and the Nazis aimed to create a "neo-pagan 'religion of the blood' with Adolf Hitler as the godlike figure at its heart" to unify Germanic and "Aryan" peoples about a common past.[4] Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS and the second most powerful person in Germany for much of the war, was the main founder of this new German sect and chiefly contributed to the misappropriation of certain Norse myths and symbols to Nazi ideologies.[5] Evidenced by the ban of Norse symbols, such as the swastika, sig-rune and wolfsangel, in Germany, a stigma surrounds the study of Norse mythology.[6] Examining World War II Nazi propaganda rooted in Scandinavian myths and symbols sheds light on the tragedy that is the scholarly avoidance of Viking myths and symbols.

This essay aims to briefly discuss the misappropriation of Norse mythology by the Nazis, which is exemplified in eight carefully composed posters. These cases have been categorized based on four themes that have combined to socially stigmatize Norse mythology for years after the war. The first two posters (artifacts 1 and 2) pair the Third Reich's specialized SS military personnel alongside noble-looking Vikings to portray the SS as honorable and effective soldiers.[7] The second two posters (artifacts 3 and 4) liken Nazi Germany's expansion during World War II to that of their Viking ancestors between 700 and 1000 AD via popularized images of Viking ships in order to promote Nazi Germany's expansion as predestined.[8] Next, to suggest a common past between Scandinavian countries and Germany, the third pair (artifacts 5 and 6) directly associates Nazism with images of certain Viking mythological tales.[9] The final pair (artifacts 7 and 8) also provokes associations between Nazism and aspects of Viking mythology but focuses specifically upon the winter leading up to the Vikings' judgment day, Ragnarok.[10] Of course, Norse mythology does not objectively support Nazi ideologies. Viking myths, sagas and symbols had extremely different meanings and connotations before the Nazis rose to power. In this essay, comparisons given between Nazi propaganda and Viking history are meant to distance Nazism from Viking mythology and consequently encourage the study of Viking history.

The SS: Viking reincarnates

The proceeding pair of images (artifacts 1 and 2) shows the SS, Nazi Germany's elite military branch, together with Norse warriors and ships. Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, was a devoted occultist who, taken with Hinduism's caste system and belief in reincarnation, carried

a copy of the *Bhagavad-Gita* with him on his travels; he also led a search for the "Aryan Holy Grail."[11] Working together with Karl Maria Willigut, who thought himself descended from the Norse god Thor and was known as "Himmler's Rasputin," Himmler seemingly aimed to ignite Germany's intense nationalism with a new "religion of blood."[12] While not entirely convinced by Himmler's mixture of paganism and racialism, propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels nonetheless valued the lore as a tool for promoting the war effort.[13] The propaganda posters in this essay's proceeding discussion clearly demonstrate Goebbels' desire to base the Nazi war effort on a common, Norse foundation. The Nazi propaganda addressing "Nordmenn" (artifact 1) is meant to recruit fresh soldiers, asking Norwegian volunteers to "fight for Norway."[14] It depicts a soldier from the SS next to a ghost-like image of a Norse warrior. The two similarly don determined facial expressions as they stare into the distance to create the façade that both warriors have similar, predestined and noble goals. Visually pairing the SS soldier with the Norse warrior was meant to define Himmler's SS soldiers as the time period's elite warriors. Next, the "SS-Dagen 1943" poster (artifact 2) from Oslo displays a member of the SS holding a sword and shield above a Viking ship manned with a full crew.[15] Meant to promote celebration of SS day, the imagery of this poster also holds up SS members as mythical beings, seemingly prepared to carry out a fate-driven plan.

(Artifacts 1 and 2)

One aspect neglected thus far is the prominence of two symbols used in the Viking Age that have since been strongly associated with Nazi ideologies. The first, the swastika, is emblazoned on the front of the Norse shield in Artifact 2. This specific image of a swastika has curved ends instead of the more familiar right-angled ones. This could be classified more specifically as the sonnenrad, or sunwheel swastika, which was the Old Norse representation of the sun that was donned much later on the uniforms of Waffen-SS Scandinavian divisions 'Wiking' and 'Nordland.'[16] Popular amongst Germanic, Norse and Anglo-Saxon people and others throughout the globe, the swastika is much older than the Nazi party.[17] Scholars believe that the symbol had several meanings between early societies, but none promoted the radical ideological values the Nazis attributed to it. Specifically within Norse society, the well-known version of the swastika is believed to have signified Thor's spinning hammer and the sound of thunder while the sonnenrad, sunwheel swastika, symbolized the sun.[18] Found on weapons and scabbards, temples and burial sites, the swastika acted as a multicultural, ritualistic source of power and inspiration.[19] In contrast, Hitler explained the swastika in *Mein Kampf* as a symbol for the mission of "the struggle for the victory of Aryan mankind."[20] His and the rest of the Nazi party's use of the swastika as a symbol for their violent movement based on the interests of one ethnic group ignores the symbol's multicultural and wholesome origins. The unbreakable bond the Nazis drew between them and the swastika instigated its ban in many institutions today.[21] The second commonly recognized symbol prominent in these posters is the Norse sig rune, which was used as the letter "S" in many runic inscriptions.[22] Instead, in 1931, graphic designer and SS-Sturmführer Walter Heck, while employed by a badge-manufacturing firm, drew two sig-runes side by side.[23] The SS then paid him 2.50 Reichsmarks for the rights to his design and renamed the Norse sig rune siegrune (victory rune).[24] Wherefrom the symbol has, similar to the swastika, become synonymous with Nazi ideologies.

This misappropriation has led to the symbols being banned in Germany, as well as some scholars and schools avoiding research of the symbols' histories for fear of stigma.[25] Such stigma contributes to false but popular myths about the Vikings. The fact that myths such as the Vikings preceding the Romans and the Vikings wearing horns on their helmets are generally accepted testifies to the mass ignorance of the Vikings' character and lore.[26] Thus, conscious efforts must be made to segregate Norse history and mythology from Nazi ideologies to encourage study of the influential culture.

Germanic history and fate

This section's posters (artifacts 3 and 4) both emphasize images of the prototypical Viking ship.[27] The "Nordmannafolket" poster (artifact 3) shows the bow of a ship alongside a compass and a map. While the imagery of Artifact 3 does not directly reference the Nazis, it performs work similar to other, more obvious examples of Nazi propaganda in Scandinavia during World War II. Artifact 3 was an advertisement for an exhibition in Oslo meant to remind Scandinavians of their naval pioneering during the Viking Age.[28] Meanwhile, Artifact 4 shows a member of the SS accepting a recruit in front of another Viking ship.[29] This image of the SS accepting recruits for its voyage was meant to recruit Norwegian volunteers for the Waffen-SS (a special SS regiment composed of German and foreign volunteers) and the Norwegian legion to travel east, like their Viking forefathers, to fight Bolshevism.[30] The aim of artifacts 3 and 4 draw parallels to the manner with which United States' officials purported the concept of Manifest Destiny to encourage expansion westward to the Pacific Ocean. Members within the Nazi hierarchy intended to instill belief in its citizens that their war for expansion was predestined.

(Artifacts 3 and 4)

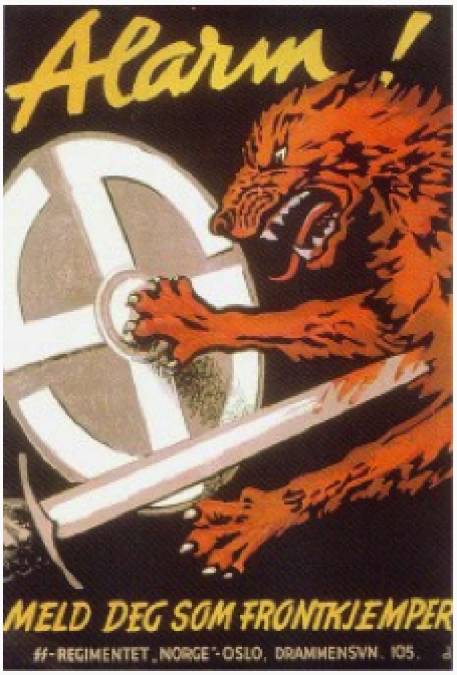
Additionally, the Nazis attempted to convey the Norse people as a united people who worked together to conquer and settle. Their version of Norse history, however, neglects the heterogeneous climate of Europe during the years of Viking expansion. Diverse environments

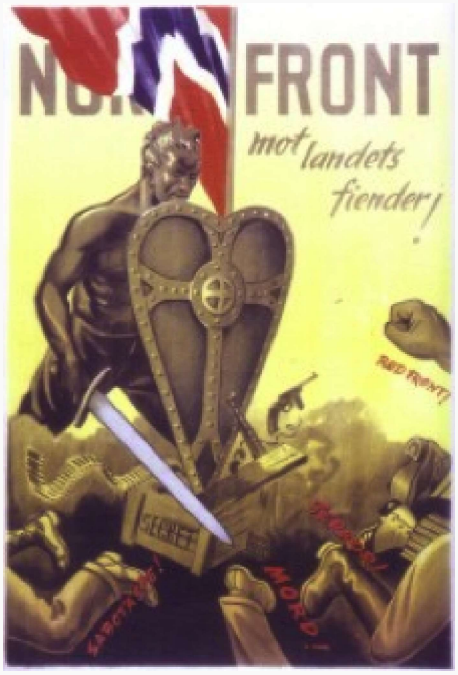
segregated peoples geographically, preventing the establishment of expansive nations.[31] Early, local chieftains independently ruled small Viking communities. While rulers of more organized kingdoms arose eventually in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, nationalist sentiments remained low.[32] Regional differences and needs frequently caused conflict amongst Scandinavians despite the fact that they shared similar language and religious beliefs. Furthermore, Viking colonies abroad (e.g. Iceland) generally did not report to a king back home as most colonies arose from people seeking freedom from political and religious oppression at home.[33] Note that the peoples who lived within the borders of 20th century Germany during the Viking Age have not been mentioned yet. Infertile soils of southern Jutland acted as a natural buffer zone between the German peoples to the south and the Scandinavians to the north.[34] While there is evidence of similar religious and language origins, the mostly land-locked Germanic tribes did not partake in the naval expansion along with the Vikings of Scandinavia. Germans, thus, do not fit quite as nicely into the Viking motif. Most of the popularized raiders and settlers instead came from lands that are now Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Flaws thus exist in the Nazis' use of Norse ships as symbols for predestined fate and unified past and ignore the fact that the Germans were not directly involved in the rapid Viking expansion.

Viking myths and symbols

Since the middle ages, the Vikings have been regularly portrayed as cruel, cunning and of "super-human stature."[35] One myth that has consistently provoked debate amongst scholars is the level of violence used by Vikings, particularly against the Church.[36] The biases of the literate monks writing these sources must be taken into account and compared to archaeological finds. Another factor limiting general knowledge of the Vikings is the stigma of the field that has been created by Nazi propaganda. The bond forged between Norse mythology and Nazism by Nazi propaganda is demonstrated in the proceeding two posters (artifacts 5 and 6).[37] Artifact 5 includes a Norse sword and shield combatting a red wolf to warn the public of impending danger. The red wolf is meant to symbolize the menacing Soviets to the East but could also be an allusion to the wolf Fenrir, son of Loki, who is a key character in two Norse stories. In the first, Fenrir was brought up in the home of the gods, Asgard, but he grew so large and fierce that only the god Tyr dared to feed him. Fenrir became so fearsome that dwarfs, guided by Odin's wisdom, forged a chain to restrain him. The wolf believed the chain not a threat; nonetheless, he

did not allow the gods to place it on him until someone placed his hand between his jaws. Brave Tyr did so, losing his hand but restraining the wolf.[38] The actions and consequences of the binding of the wolf provide more credence to the allusion to Fenrir in Artifact 5. The Nazis wanted their citizens to believe the Soviets were a grave threat that would bite if not put down properly. The second Norse story in which Fenrir plays a key role is that of Ragnarok. Ragnarok, preceded by a period of bitter winter and great wars, is the Norse faith's judgment day. In it, Fenrir advances with "his great gaping jaws filling the gap between earth and sky" along with the mischievous Loki, the great serpent and the giants to do battle with the gods and men. [39] Death consumes the world as the wolf devours Odin before the wolf is slain by the young god Vidar. The sea finally engulfs the world before Odin's son Balder rises again to lead the worlds into a new age. [40] Again, Fenrir's role in Norse mythology parallels the aims of Nazi propaganda in Scandinavia. The Nazis professed that if the Soviets were not sufficiently repressed, they would rise like Fenrir to kill. This allusion by the Nazis to Norse mythology in their propaganda has regrettably fostered greater association between Nazism and Viking lore.





(Artifacts 5 and 6)

Artifact 6 contains another intriguing appropriation of Norse mythology.[41] The poster displays a god-like Norwegian figure fighting against "our country's enemies": murder, sabotage, terror and the red front. One striking characteristic of the figure presented is his

lack of protection in the heat of battle. The Norse berserks who in a god-fueled frenzy did not feel the bite of steel possibly inspired the imagery used in Artifact 6.[42] The character, similar to Norse berserks, seems to be protected by the gods' blessings instead of physical armor to purport Norwegian involvement with the Nazis as righteous.[43] Representations of Norse mythology in Nazi propaganda further tabooed the study of Norse mythology, contributing to the public's illiteracy in Norse stories and religion.[44]

Men of the north

The last two images (artifacts 7 and 8) demonstrate themes mentioned earlier in this essay while also introducing another motif meant to further the association between the Nazis with the Norse.[45] Artifact 7 on the left displays a soldier from the SS in front of a background of cold, icy mountains. Similar to Artifacts 1 and 2, the soldier is gazing into the distance, possibly focused on the future. In addition, the soldier has a swastika and a sig rune emblazoned on his uniform. As mentioned previously, the use of these symbols served to unite the Germans and Scandinavians under one, nearly religious cause. The major feature lacking from the previous six posters but present in these two is the mountains in the background. Ice and snow atop the peaks serve to remind the citizens of Nazi occupied Scandinavia of their similar climates and environments. Appropriation of such mountains to Nazi propaganda helps promote unity amongst men of the north because climate and available natural resources greatly impact historical cultural values.

(Artifacts 7 and 8)

Similar to Artifact 7, Artifact 8 presents cold mountains.[46] Artifact 8 does so more mystically, however, with a starry sky to represent the heavens. The poster depicts three large, icy peaks dominating the background with three swords held upright in the foreground, displaying insignias from each of the three "Nordic" nations: Norway, Nazi Germany, and Finland. As with Artifact 7, the cold mountain imagery could remind northern countries of their common environments. Perhaps the mountains in this poster, in conjunction with the stars and swords, are intended to join three nations around a supposedly common Norse heritage in the fight "for frihet" (for freedom). Artifact 8's combined imagery prompts association with themes key to the Norse myth Ragnarok and the long and bitter winter that precedes it.[47] Thus, tall, icy peaks could symbolize the looming judgment day on which Norway, Nazi Germany, and Finland must unite as the gods did at Ragnarok to combat evil forces. Similar to the red wolf and the shirtless warrior in Artifacts 5 and 6, the icy images in Artifact 7 and 8 provoke associations between Nazi Germany with Norse mythology.

Conclusion

Economic instability within Germany post-World War I created a void within the country's power structures that the Nazis filled. During their reign, they attempted and succeeded in part to establish the dominance of a Nordic "Aryan" race via the cruel purge of unwanted peoples, and in doing so the Nazis misappropriated several Norse

myths and symbols. The eight examples of Nazi propaganda presented in this essay reveal the bending of Norse mythology for the party's own needs via clear themes. These themes, common to other Scandinavian Nazi propaganda, include: determination of Nazi Germany's elite SS branch as a mystical reincarnation of the Vikings of old; associations between Nazi expansion and the Vikings' expansionary period; and, finally, the visual comparisons between Nazi ideologies and Viking mythology. These have, in some instances, antagonistically combined to discourage the study of certain aspects of Viking mythology by students and scholars. Therefore, while difficult, Norse mythology and images must be judged independent of the version venerated by the Nazis to combat the popular ignorance that surrounds Norse history.

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Endnotes

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