

# Secularism and Sanctity: The Body and the Body Politic under Fascism in the Third Reich

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**Abstract:** Under fascism in Nazi Germany, ideas of the self, the body, and the soul are completely restructured in opposition to Judeo-Christian ideas and Western thought. While the latter believed that the soul was something that existed outside of and was superior to the body, the former instead insisted that the soul was chained inside the body. While the latter promoted spiritual freedom and agency, the former took a fatalistic stance—the soul was powerless against the destiny prescribed to it by the body it was born into. This paper looks specifically at ideas of the self in Nazi Germany, specifically in World War II, and how ideas of nation and the self are deeply intertwined. Because of this conflation, I assert that Nazi propaganda both sought to degrade religiosity in its citizens and promote a secular society that valued blood and carnality above all else while also lifting the physical body and the body politic (the nation) to a quasi-religious level. This fatal contradiction exposes the fault in fascistic ideology.

**Keywords:** Fascism, Spirituality, Fatalism, Nazism, Nationalism

## 1. Introduction

During the first half of the 20th century, a vast array of political structures took root after the boundaries of European states and territories had been radically reconstituted in the aftermath of World War I. Consequently, the idea of a “homeland” became prevalent among nationals, as increasingly modern ideals regarding cosmopolitanism and universality came to the fore in international politics. Yet, there were also undercurrents that pushed back against these modern notions: fear of the “other,” nostalgia, and racism characterized the sentiments of many 20th century Europeans. In Nazi Germany, fascism became the epitome of this hatred. It was a political movement that sought to counteract Western modes of Enlightenment thought, democratic politics, and religious observances. Fascism values the absolute exaltation of the nation above all else, even the individual, and maintains that the source of one’s identity and one’s hatred should be directed towards the nation and the “other,” respectively. To justify such hatred and praise simultaneously, fascist thought had to first restructure the entire idea of the self, the body, and the soul in the mind of the Nazi.

In opposition to previous Western modes of thought, fascism teaches that the soul is defined not by freedom from, but by its chaining to the body. Individuals are given a community and a set of ideals by virtue of their birth and possession of their particular form. Fascism is characterized by a certain fatalism, in regard to the soul being defined by its confinement within and inescapability from the body. This, however, is countered by the fact that there are many aspects of the fascist regime that are exalted to an almost religious status. Through this dichotomy—the secularization and sanctification of the body and the nation simultaneously—the essential fault in the logic of the fascist is revealed. Though fatalism is elemental to the structure of the fascist personality, the mysticism that surrounds the idea of the nation itself implies a wish to take part in something transcendent, beyond the chains that bind them to their body and the material. In contrast to religion, this is constituted by

the expansion of the nation-state and its ideals beyond the homeland, which is spread not by activism, but by force, bloodshed, and war. The desire to dominate and expand beyond the boundaries of the nation's homeland into other territories betrays the very idea of the self and the relation to the land, which is at the core of fascism itself.

## 2. The Fascist Self in Nazi Germany

First, it is necessary to understand this new conception of the self under fascist principles. Levinas writes as a Frenchman witnessing the rise of the Nazi party and distills his observations into the “Reflections on Hitlerism,” which was first published in 1936. In this, he details what makes the fascistic understanding of the self so different from other established Western modes of thought. To define the Western self, he first describes Judaism and Christianity at their most basic level, relating their essential function as “proclaim[ing] freedom and mak[ing] ... the choice of destiny a free one” (Levinas 1990, 65). He also remarks that it is this freedom upon which the soul is based. Sin, the past, and the passage of time all ordinarily ravage humanity, but religion offers redemption and freedom from those bonds. He also puts forward the Enlightenment era view of the soul, which he asserts is still prevalent in European countries at the time of his writing. In this view, the soul is seen as separate from the body, and reason and logic “tend to place the human spirit in a place superior to reality ... outside of the brutal world and the implacability of human existence” (Levinas 1990, 66). The soul is viewed as something that transcends the physical—free to make decisions based on a higher understanding of reason and logic, divorced from the physical world. Levinas says that Western religion provides adherent freedom, and the liberalist view offers autonomy. Yet both of these principles emphasize the transcendent, otherworldly quality of the soul and are convinced of the “equal dignity of each and every soul, which is independent of the material or social conditions of people” (Levinas 1990, 66). From this worldview springs the idea of inalienable rights—the equality of each human

based on their possession of a soul, and their capability to be recognized as valuable beyond their physicality.

This view is entirely negated by fascist or Nazi ideals. Rather than focusing on the transcendence of the human spirit and the immaterial qualities of humanity, fascist thought places the soul squarely within the body, unable to escape the confines of the flesh into which it has been born. In some ways, this concretization of the soul is less abstract and more straightforward than the aforementioned ideologies. The soul and the body are one and the same, and “its concrete and servile existence has more weight and importance than does impotent reason” (Levinas 1990, 66). The needs of the body come before ideations on the nature of truth; the station of life one is born into then informs the way the individual sees the world. The concretization of reason anchors the spirit to “an inevitable relation to a determined situation” which cannot be escaped because of its permanent placement inside of a body. Levinas writes that “man’s essence no longer lies in freedom, but in a kind of bondage” which cannot be shaken (Levinas 1990, 67). This view of the fascist self is corroborated in a contrast put forth by Theodor Adorno in his *The Authoritarian Personality*. When discussing characteristics of those who were not considered to be anti-Semitic, he notes the distinct absence of fatalism in his subjects, where the individuals find themselves believing not in the inevitable evilness of man, but in the possibility of good in the world. Adorno remarks that these people decidedly oppose the idea that all existence is set and incapable of change. Those who are vehemently against anti-Semitism reject the creeping and powerful fascist ideology of determinism. By virtue of the chaining of the body to the soul, the individual is given an inescapable fate, a community, and is “linked to a certain number of ... ideas, just as he is linked by birth to all those who are his blood” (Levinas 1990, 70).

The solidification of the spirit and its connection to the body/community point logically to the creation of a tight blood-related polity and the necessary exclusion of all others. In his diary, Joseph Goebbels, the head of propaganda for Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich, echoes this

thought with alarming clarity. He says, “We have replaced individuality with collective racial consciousness and the individual with the community” (Goebbels 1962, 4). The collective racial consciousness about which he speaks is the complete reverence and loyalty to the Aryan race. Goebbels goes on to explain that this is a replacement for the concerns of the individual, expanding their ideas of self from the mere individual unit to the race as a whole. This collectivism risks the alienation and death of the personal. If the self is politicized to this degree, allowing the person to become subsumed in the polity, the very survival of the citizen depends on the continuation of the nation-state. The polity which is drawn across lines of race and blood then necessarily must exclude those who do not fit the racial criteria, and the success and preservation of both the nation and the individual (which is encompassed by the former) are based on the successful expulsion of the “other.” This ideology condones racism of all kinds and compels the fascistic individual to adhere to its principles from birth. The stateless person then may have no rights, alienated from the community in the eyes of the law. Under this view of the self, the Inalienable Rights of Man do not apply; Goebbels admits that the sphere of the individual has passed away and that the soul is no longer seen as something equal nor separate from the literal bodies of these minority groups.

### **3. The Biological Body in the Third Reich**

Kevin Passmore also notes that fascist regimes and their leaders were often “quite open about the superiority of their own nation and happily used the category ‘race’ when discussing the difference between citizens and those of lesser status (Passmore 2014, 108). Bestowing citizenship and the accompanying rights upon certain inhabitants of the land is what Passmore calls “biological racism,” an inflexible ideology that says “biological destiny cannot be changed, and assimilation is impossible” (Passmore 2014, 109). Again and again, the idea of determinism in relation to the body is seen throughout fascist dialogue. However, the

preoccupation with the biological is not only a way to further ground the individual in their own body and station in life, while justifying racism, but also a way to further legitimize and secularize fascist worldviews. As opposed to preceding modes of thinking (i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and liberalism), fascism insists on the importance and gravity of the body, going as far as to negate the existence of a higher power or higher sphere of influence altogether. Secularizing the body differentiates the fascist ideology of the self from previous variations.

This also explains the preoccupation with bodily functions that Nazism demonstrates within its ranks. At the surface, Nazi Germany was concerned with the continuation of the German people, more specifically the Aryan race. Increased birth rates were an obvious part of achieving this goal; therefore, they encouraged women to become pregnant and raise the next generation of Aryans. A political cartoon in *Der Stürmer* illustrates this point excellently. Entitled “Unfruitful,” the cartoon shows a woman in a habit with a priest behind her and another



**Figure 1:** “Unfruitful” woman locked in a romantic glance with a visibly Jewish man. The caption reads, “She belongs to the church, she belongs to Satan. Both are lost to the German race”

Implicit in this illustration is hostility towards religious institutions such as the Catholic Church and disapproval of relationships between German Jews and Anglo-Germans. Beyond an overt denunciation of the women in the picture, the illustrator is also implying that it is sex, more specifically sex with Aryan men, that results in a child and characterizes the role of the woman in the Third Reich. The woman who has taken her orders can never marry and have kids, and therefore cannot carry out her essential role in the Reich, and the woman in love with the Jewish man would produce a child unfit to carry on the Aryan legacy. The image demonstrates the initiative with which German society promoted fertility among its citizens, cautioning those reading against falling into either of the women's fates. Under the Reich, it is a woman's purpose to populate the earth and care for her family within the home sphere, and this necessitates that these women be sexually active with the right men.

However, the National Socialist Party's relationship with sex and sexuality was much more complicated than that. Herzog writes that "no prior regime in history had ever so systematically set itself to the task of stimulating and validating especially young people's sexual desires—all while denying that this was what it was doing" (Herzog 2007, 18). While officially recommending that sex stays within the marital bed, Nazi propagandists alluded to the fact that pre- and extra-marital sex was acceptable. This was evidenced in the expansion of rights for illegitimate Aryan children and the inclusion of outright pornographic material for propaganda purposes in magazines during the rule of the Third Reich. Herzog also records an interviewee who remembered the Reich Labor Service as having "a very sexual climate" where young women "were deliberately brought together with young military men for coed 'social evenings'" (Herzog 2007, 62). She notes that while all this sexual encouragement may be for the good of the nation—the production of new Aryan youths and the next generation of Nazis—this hypothesis is incongruent with the Nazi leadership's focus on pleasure, "fun," and passion. Instead, she furthers the point that they intended to politicize the act of sex itself. Herzog says the aim is to "reinvent it as the privilege of heterosexual 'Aryans'"

(Herzog 2007, 5). In making the private act of sex publicly controlled under the nation-state, the politicized act can be seen as a pleasure for and a privilege of those whom the government has deemed “normal” or worthy. The opposing circumstances further confirm this phenomenon, as passed legislation sought to force sterilization procedures on women of “non-Aryan descent” and forbid Jews and “Aryans” to marry and procreate. These essential actions of depersonalization in the eyes of the law were all seen as logical measures to legislate or control the body, both for those of their race and those of the “other.”

However, the body and the body politic, or the nation, can be considered similar. The body politic, too, has been given a supposedly superior station in life, as Passmore explains above. Like the body, its needs are considered to be paramount to the exercise of reason. The body politic demands fealty to nationalism, or the community “based on sanguinity” that Levinas proposes, “condemn[ing] socialism, feminism, capitalism, and any other ‘ism’ on the grounds that these ideologies place some other criteria above the nation” (Passmore 2014, 26). In the fascist mindset, the nation and those who belong to it are destined to exist as a part of a unit, with those of the same race and blood existing in a united community. The entirety of the population must subscribe to a set of values not drafted by thinkers, but by the very nature of their existence as a whole. This ideology and its obsession with biology secularized the body and likened it to the nation itself.

#### **4. Spirituality of the Body Under National Socialism**

While the fascistic conception of the body completely denies the soul’s transcendent and free nature, this lack of freedom and lack of choice implies the allocation of a destiny by someone or something. If one’s fate is inescapable, it implies the presence of destiny. Hoping to distance themselves from religious freedom and liberal autonomy, Nazi and fascist thought was characterized by the inescapability of destiny. It is in this way the fascist regime actually mysticized the same thing they wished to

secularize. Emmanuel Levinas points out that under this ideology “the biological, with the notion of inevitability it entails, becomes more than the object of spiritual life. It becomes its heart” (Levinas 1990, 69). While this further reveals how fascist thought secularized the human experience, it also brings fascism into the realm of quasi-religion. Adolf Hitler himself corroborated Levinas’s argument, saying that “anyone who interprets National Socialism as merely a political movement knows almost nothing about it. It is more than a religion. It is the determination to create the new man” (Rauschnig 1940, 208). The ethos of the fascist Third Reich is said plainly by their leader: man himself will become new again, reconceptualized under the state. The idea of superseding religion, however, is both a fascinating and incredibly important concept for our study. As it pertains to sexuality and the body, the Nazi Party invoked religious language and traditions while also denigrating established religions like Christianity.

While Hitler may have thought he superseded religion in his party, in practice, the National Socialist Party in Germany simply appropriated many religious vestiges. An example of this is the adoption of “naming ceremonies” in German households as an alternative to christenings, stripping the religious aspect from the ritual and replacing it with a nationalistic sentiment (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** German naming ceremony

However, at the center of this quasi-religious community is again the body—or the reinvented Aryan man. Because they placed so much emphasis on the corporeal form, the Levinas quote above can be understood as capturing the way the spiritual being is brought down into the body—and in becoming the seat for the spirit in this realm, the body itself is seemingly imbued with power. The body is no longer an obstacle, but its biology and very structure houses the soul. While this image is oppressive by nature, it also imbues the body with otherworldly power. In addition, the body is allowed to exert this power and its divine sense of inevitability (given to it by the nature of being mortal) over the soul on a daily basis. This tension between both the sacralization and concretization of the body can be seen time and again, with the following paragraphs detailing some of those instances.

## **5. Tensions Between Sacred and Secular: An Exploration**

One school of thought that specifically corroborates this spirituality in regards to the body is natalism. Natalism, a popular ideology under the Third Reich, promoted the exponential growth of the population through healthy births. Within this ideology, the births of babies by German women were seen as crucial to the good of the nation because they enabled the continuation of genetically desirable families. The importance of “Aryan” women giving birth is emphasized by the Nazi government’s protection of mothers and by giving rights to illegitimate children. In one major exhibit, “The Miracle of Life,” Nazi race theory was introduced to the public. The public’s acceptance of this idea is seen through the appropriation of a Catholic song about the Virgin Mary. “Immaculate and holy is the conception out of worthy love” it goes “immaculate and holy is the birth of life of a healthy type.” Herzog calls this slogan “a mockery, an imitation, and a radical redefinition of the Catholic praise song” in order to fit Nazi ideals. (Herzog 2007, 46). Once again, the song demonstrates the undergoing secularization (or specifically the de-Christianization) of the German cultural sphere, subversively using religious language to des-

cribe healthy out-of-wedlock births. The act of having babies outside of marriage had already been politicized but was also now being sanctified. The slogan is a mockery because the act goes against Christian values, with its imitation obvious in its appropriation of the religious language. But redefinition is an incredibly powerful word in this case; Nazi ideas surrounding sexuality are defined and upheld by traditional religious language, likening the subject matter to the holy affairs of the Church. Mothers are also represented as almost holy figures in Nazi propaganda. When representations of women were shown in the media, it was often with their children –caring for them in the home, holding them by their side while they charged onward, or sometimes holding their suckling babe to their chest. The last depiction



**Figure 3:** Mary and Child Detail    **Figure 4:** NSV Propaganda Poster

specifically has overt religious themes, closely resembling the Madonna with Child (Figure 3). The mother looks benevolently down at her child, who is peacefully drinking from his mother's breast (Figure 4). She is dressed in traditional clothing with a pastoral background, and a sky lit up behind her is so bright it is almost white. The halo of light around

her head mimics holy Christian imagery of Mary and other saints. While Nazis promote no religious agenda, they have appropriated the visual language of Christianity to assert that Aryan mothers are saint-like, pure, and just as worthy of praise as the Virgin Mary. Passmore goes as far as to say that this duty extends far beyond the act of giving birth and that the “mission of transmitting life” and “educating the hearts, minds, and sensibilities of children and adolescents” is “quasi-divine” (Passmore 2014, 132). The continuation of the nation, both in a literal sense and a figurative one, forms the basis for this elementary argument. However, the divinity of the body under fascism is also seen in regards to sexuality.

While I have previously discussed Nazi encouragement of secular/fun intercourse, the sacredness of birth, sex, and the body are also seen as sacred under the fascist regime. In passing the Nuremberg Laws, the act of sex is seen as something almost “holy” – something to keep pure and intact, meaning by their racist definition, between two members of the same race. However, the body itself is seen as holy, especially in the issues of *Das Schwarze Korps*. Photos of naked young women were given a full-page spread, with captions like “beautiful and pure” ascribed to them. This language again evokes religious overtones regarding virginity, how a young woman should remain before marriage, without implying virginity should be coveted, nor that they are involved with the Church. A 1938 issue of *Das Schwarze Korps* includes a full page of fit young women engaging in various exercises with the title “Maiden In Front” in English in a stylized text (Figure 5). These photos include women walking in unison while smiling, jumping rope while beaming, playing instruments, and practicing gymnastics.

They wear only a white top and small shorts, exposing their extremities for the camera to linger upon, and maintain wholesome smiles and an air of ease in their expressions. These pictures evoke both an innocent and natural feeling, while also showing a good amount of their bodies, and implicitly allowing the reader’s appetites to be sequestered. By making the body sacred in this way, fascist authors fetishize the body to both entice the sexual appetites of their readership and criticize Jewish

people through contrasting pictures. In other spreads, equally uncovered women are censured for their licentiousness, their physical features and makeup described as Jewish, their poses more suggestive and performative. This phenomenon perfectly describes the profound tension within the Fascist and Nazi parties– Herzog says that “Incitement and disavowal were inseparable.” (Herzog 2007, 37). These parties embody the very thing they rebuke.



**Figure 5:** “Maiden In Front”, Das Schwarze Korps, 1938

## 6. Beyond The Body: Hypocritical?

Take, for example, the want for power and the quasi-divine status given to the body and the nation at large. At its very base, the preoccupation with certain biological features as previously stated is compliant with the “chained soul” theory, wherein the human soul cannot escape the body to rise beyond the station given to themselves on earth and their community of blood-relations. Levinas does make the point that the only freedom in this school of thought is the “ineluctable original chain that is unique to our bodies, and above all accepting this chaining” (Levinas 1990, 69). However, how does the sacralization of specific bodies accept

that chaining? Instead of allowing the soul to become carnal, they make the body seem divine. Even more so, in the expansionist, colonial ideologies of fascist Germany, the idea of fighting wars was seen as important and necessary for the good of the nation. However, as with the body, the nation has been conscripted with no destiny, no right, no explicit inkling that their race was fated to be anything beyond the homeland, the community they so carefully cultivated and chose to be made up of those of like mind and blood. To express the fact that the nation hopes to establish a “universal order through expansion...that constitutes the unity of the world...” not through a process of equalization, but through “its own form of universalization: war and conquest” (Levinas 1990, 70). To understand that the nation believes it is entitled to that indicates the presence of a conscious choice: the choice to believe that this expansion is his, or the nation’s, collective destiny.

In Westernized thinking, the prospect of transcending the station in life which one was born into and electing a path or worldview implies autonomy and a sense of agency, a liberal and decidedly anti-fascist concept. While this scenario plays out on a national level, the assertion remains unchanged. The idea that a nation is fated to gain territory is self-asserted. There is no scripture promising land, and no biological basis to assert ownership of territory. It is only the mystification and quasi-religious language that imbues the individual and the nation they belong to with the ability to transcend their station and believe in a higher calling for them. To fully keep in line with the fatalism of fascism, the existence of the spirit and the sacred must be negated entirely, and all the religious language, including appropriations of Christian values, should have been completely done away with also. However, if the mysticism that accompanies fascist thought is done away with, there would be no basis upon which to justify expansionist and violent war practices to increase territory. The mysticism surrounding fascist nations allows racist and violent regimes to justify their practices under fatalism and call it destiny, while still electing their own path towards universal control. In fascist ideology, the idea of the self has been completely reconstructed. While Western re-

ligious and liberal views saw the soul as something separate and superior to the body, fascist ideologies work under the assumption that the soul is chained to the body, and cannot escape the circumstances into which it was born. This contributes to the fatalism common in fascistic personalities and colors their worldview; the situations and ideas that are imbued within individuals when they are born are inescapable. The secularization of the body in Nazi thought and media corroborates this claim; the body and the biological contextualize the meanings of community, race, and value in society, providing a weak logical justification for racism and discrimination. However, there is also a tendency in Nazi thought to idealize or make sacred the physical body and the body politic (the nation) to justify not only claims of racial superiority, but colonist violence and war. This self-assertion that the nation must grow is an act of autonomy at the national level, a more liberal and decidedly anti-fascist move. It is solely in this contradiction that fascists can justify both expansionist agendas and racism on the individual level.

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