

Inhumanities. Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture

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For the past few years, David B. Dennis has had the unenviable task of steeping himself in the (turgid, yet strangely compelling) prose of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi party's major propaganda organ, and the Third Reich's daily paper of choice. The result is a synoptic compendium of National Socialist thought on major cultural and artistic figures, which is both chilling in the delusion it reveals, and startling in its originality. Startling in particular because – as Dennis claims – this key resource for scholars of Nazi thought and propaganda has apparently barely received any scholarly attention to date (p. 4; p. 466, n. 8).

In many ways, this volume offers the reader a veritable treasure-trove of Nazi absurdities – ranging from swastika-shaped crosswords (p. 4) and analysis of Bach's personality as the product of 'the "best hereditary powers of a healthy species"' (p. 25), to attempts to attribute Brahms's and Wagner's long-standing personal enmity to "'Jewish hatefulness'" (pp. 270–1), and the characterisation of Heine as a plagiarist, pornographer, necrophiliac, "'muckraker'", "'thug'", "'communist'", "'soul of s****'", or even a stinking, poisonous "'swamp'" (pp. 112–20). Meanwhile, every single (non-Jewish) German artist, composer and intellectual seems to be in constant competition for the coveted title of "'the first great *völkisch* thinker'", in a riotous profusion of contradiction and irrationality (e.g. pp. 142, 177).

However, there is something deeply depressing about the way in which such Nazified ideology and language became so tragically widespread, creeping into every last crevice of intellectual life. 'Political correctness' during the Third Reich was so totally at odds with that of our own age, that there is a danger that immersion

in such ideas and language can merely feel distasteful (or even deranged). Yet, as Dennis points out, we should guard against ‘the urge to refuse to acknowledge ... that “anyone could believe all this” and recognise that the purveyors of Nazism firmly – or, in their word, unshakeably – thought that they were bringing about political revolution, cultural achievement, and spiritual order’ (p. 454). If fanatical National Socialists really took these outpourings seriously, so the argument runs, then in order fully to understand the regime and its excesses, we must do so too.⁽¹⁾

In general terms, *Inhumanities* aims to provide an exploration and analysis of the ways in which those journalists and academics who contributed to the *Völkischer Beobachter* between 1920 and 1945 appropriated figures from Western intellectual and cultural history, in an attempt to legitimise their racial and ideological *Weltanschauung* with a veneer of *Bildung*. In his introduction, Dennis asserts that:

Tracing precisely what *Völkischer Beobachter* writers asserted about their favourite masters and about those they despised makes clear how the party tried to convince readers that Nazism offered not just political renewal but cultural advancement, while at the same time advocating the destruction of Jews along with other perceived opponents. (p. 2)

The work as a whole is divided into five parts, the content of which advances broadly chronologically through the periods of cultural history which the paper appropriated (though there is a certain amount of overlap, particularly between the first section and those which follow). Part one, entitled ‘Foundations of Nazi cultural history’, is conceived as an explication of the ‘conceptual framework’ promoted by the paper’s contributions on culture (p. 5), stressing in particular the dogma that all high culture had to originate in the *völkisch* impulse, and that all the greatest figures in the Western cultural tradition were political, patriotic, anti-urban and anti-Semitic. Whenever there was any suspicion that a revered German artist might have the slightest taint of Jewish blood, this had to be explained away with all due haste and vehemence, while famous foreign artists (such as Michelangelo and Rembrandt) concomitantly had to be recast as suitably Germanic, or at least of German descent. Meanwhile, the writings of figures such as Luther, Shakespeare and Goethe were scoured with (un)scrupulous diligence, in search of passages which could be interpreted as fittingly anti-Semitic. Any Jewish artist of note, such as Mendelssohn or Heine, had to be recast as a ‘cynical, opportunistic imitator’, and ultimately a ‘destroyer’ of true German culture (pp. 106–7).

Part two, ‘Blind to the light’, explores variously the *Völkischer Beobachter*’s responses to the Classics, the Enlightenment, and Romanticism. Perhaps surprisingly, given the generally positive attitude of the leaders of the Nazi regime towards ancient models, and the philhellenist tendencies of many Nazi activists and educators ⁽²⁾, ancient historical and literary figures apparently suffered relatively short shrift in the cultural pages of the *Völkischer Beobachter*. Moving forwards in time, contributors displayed remorseless criticism of enlightened and “‘French” revolutionary thought, preferring to promote Romantic culture, which was seen as fundamentally anticipating National Socialist tastes and values, particularly in those “‘steely” forms of Romanticism which had emerged in response to the Wars of Liberation (p. 175). Meanwhile, Enlightenment figures of Jewish descent were, predictably, ‘despised as the originators of the modern Jewish-intellectual conspiracy’ (p. 144), while reformers and early nationalists such as Fichte and Herder were heralded as “‘Prophets of National Socialism”” (p. 142).

Part three, ‘Modern dilemmas’, explores the paper’s hostility towards modernism, and its attitudes towards important post-romantic cultural figures. The Romantic tradition had to be presented as eternally valid, whilst all modernist developments had to be refuted at all costs. Thus:

Völkischer Beobachter contributors rejected the realism of Tolstoy, Ibsen, Hauptmann, and Heinrich Mann as irrelevant relics of the past at best, and as threatening instigators of revolution at worst. Simultaneously, in the works of Dickens, Raabe, Storm, and Freytag they applauded a realism that remained ‘full of warm love for the soul of the Volk,’ while conveying warnings

and reminders about the Jewish threat. (p. 229)

To this end, the paper even reprinted Dickens' *Oliver Twist* in serial form between March and August 1923, almost certainly because of the way in which Fagin the Jew was characterised within its pages (p. 226).

Finally, parts four and five (respectively entitled ““Holy” war and Weimar “Crisis”” and ‘Nazi “solutions”’) bring us up-to-date with the 20th-century present. Part four chronicles the paper’s responses to Great War novels, jazz, and other aspects of literature, art and music in the Weimar Republic (see further below). The paper’s authors attempted to insinuate that great figures of the cultural past would most assuredly have joined them in condemning the new Republic’s modernist excesses (p. 308), and tended ‘to treat the leading artists of the inter-war era as fixated on distortion, intent on undermining order and security, and overly inspired by shadowy race-based influences’ (p. 346). The paper was confident that, ‘while the reputation of a “true German like Händel” would live on for another 200 years, it was doubtful that anyone would ever hear or say anything about Schoenberg in the year 2128’ (p. 356). The chapters in part five, meanwhile, chart the course of what Dennis terms the Third Reich’s ‘stillborn renaissance’ (p. 384), a much-bruited ““renaissance of humanity”” which was supposed to enable Germans not only truly to appreciate the cultural achievements of the past, but also to bring forth new great artists as creators of the burgeoning National Socialist tradition (Arno Breker or Josef Thorak being seen as cases in point). Needless to say, none of the ideologically-influenced work of this cadre of Nazi artists, authors and composers has stood the test of time, except as an obscure monument to the utter folly and inadequacy of the Nazi ‘renaissance’.

This is undoubtedly a work of great scope and originality, and the further comments below should not in any way be seen as detracting from this. Nevertheless, it is only fair to warn prospective readers that the volume as a whole does suffer from some serious methodological flaws, two of which are only briefly touched upon at the book’s very end, and one of which is never resolved adequately at all.

Firstly, one might ask whether the (for the most part) relentless synchronicity of Dennis’ approach does in fact leave some salient questions unanswered.⁽³⁾ If so, then one cannot avoid taking issue with the work’s monolithic, undifferentiated picture of the National Socialist *Weltanschauungsbild*, which (apart from a few exceptions, as mentioned below) extends from the early 1920s all the way through to 1945, without any distinction being made between interpretations from different periods. For instance – and this is a particularly clear, but by no means the only, example – in his discussion of attitudes to Mozart on pp. 157–8, Dennis flits from 1941 to 1923, to 1934, to 1929, back to 1934, on to 1942, and back to 1929, all in the space of three paragraphs.⁽⁴⁾ It seems hard to believe that, between the early *Kampfzeit* and the war years, the propagandistic use of Mozart had existed in a kind of vacuum, with no stimulus whatsoever from current events. However, even if this is the case, then it needs to be proved definitively, rather than simply skimming from decade to decade, picking out the juiciest propagandistic examples for rhetorical effect (cf. p. 531, n.4). Did the reception of all these figures really remain unchanged over the 25 years of the paper’s existence, both pre- and post-*Gleichschaltung*?

For instance, it would be fascinating to know whether attitudes to Heine changed significantly in the run-up to the promulgation of the Nuremberg Laws; were there more articles on Heine and other Jewish figures, with a more hostile bent, during this period? Did propaganda tropes generally tend to vacillate in accordance with changes in National Socialist governmental policy? Even if the answer to all these questions is ‘no’, that in itself would still be a very interesting and important point to make.

Four of the 19 chapters, however, work far better: those in part four (““Holy” war and Weimar “Crisis””), and the final chapter, ‘*Kultur* at war’. These are the sections in which Dennis’ analysis bears some connection both to an overarching historical narrative, and also to current affairs; articles are seen as responses to specific events, rather than simply being lumped together in an achronic vacuum. Thus, his discussion of the *Völkischer Beobachter*’s coverage of Ernst Jünger’s *Storms of Steel* and Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (including the scandal which arose over the Hollywood film adaptation) in chapter 13 (‘Heralds of the front experience’), is far more effective because of the way in

which the articles he analyses are clearly rooted in – and a response to – particular historico-cultural incidents which were crucial in defining and constructing post-First World War mentalités. Similarly, the selection of material in chapter 15 (‘Weimar culture wars 2: combating “degeneracy”’), which charts attitudes to ‘asphalt literati’ such as Heinrich and Thomas Mann, ‘so-called’ scientists (Einstein), the blasphemous art of George Grosz, and Ernst Krenek’s ‘nigger-jazz-opera’, *Jonny spielt auf*, works very well, because it is generally time-limited to the later Weimar Republic, clearly charting changing cultural attitudes to the figures under discussion throughout the period. Finally, in chapter 18, Dennis does successfully fulfil his promise on p. 403 – to ‘show how the thematic trajectory of the *Völkischer Beobachter*’s cultural section closely followed the war experience from the first stages of the war, through the Stalingrad debacle, to the final days of the regime’.⁽⁵⁾ The clarity with which the reader can perceive the vicissitudes of the Second World War providing the catalyst for the articles which Dennis discusses is extremely effective, and works far better – both structurally and stylistically – than much of the rest of his narrative. One is even left wondering whether these chapters are the sole surviving remnants of a previous incarnation of the work, in which cultural developments in the paper were all considered in the context of real ‘historical’ time. Indeed, this might well have been a more effective way of structuring the volume as a whole.

The two other major points which should be mentioned here both have their root in the fact that most of the methodological discussion – which is of paramount importance for a fair evaluation of the analysis which Dennis presents – can only be found in the work’s final, concluding chapter. It almost seems as if much of the material which had originally been intended for the introduction has been moved wholesale to the end of the book, in order not to put off potential non-academic readers. If the exclusion of this material from the introduction – and its concomitant relegation to the conclusion – has been motivated by CUP’s wish to market the book in a more ‘popular’ fashion, however, it is an unmitigated failure, since it denies any reader the means to judge the material with which they are to be presented throughout the book fairly and realistically.⁽⁶⁾

Firstly, the paper is generally presented as a single, unified voice, with little attention given to different contributors’ status or background. This gives the impression that the *Völkischer Beobachter* was a many-headed (or many-penned) Hydra, with all contributors toeing exactly the same party line; the fact that different authors might actually disagree with each other is very seldom raised (for a rare example, see p. 149). While Dennis mentions briefly on pp. 8–9 that the contributors included editors, staff members and freelancers, he does not mention here the fact that we do not know who many of these were (cf. p. 459). Therefore, as I continued to read, I became progressively more and more irritated by the fact that, for every instance where a named contributor’s background was given, there were several more instances where the words were either attributed solely to the paper, or a contributor’s name was given without any explanation or context (e.g. pp. 152–4, 252–3 – who were the mysterious Heinz Henckel and Ernst Nickell?). Only on p. 459 (which is not directly cited in the introduction) did I discover the cause:

Of the articles cited in the text, 50 per cent were written by one or another of 159 authors whom I have managed to track down. The other half were written either by anonymous authors (32 per cent) or by authors whom I have not been able to place (18 per cent) ...

Better late than never, perhaps – but the initial reading would have been far more profitable if such a caveat had been explicitly stated in the introduction.⁽⁷⁾

Secondly, and more importantly, we come to the way in which the material from the articles themselves is presented. Dennis tends overwhelmingly to quote tiny snippets of the articles in question, so that we very rarely see their rhetoric and style at work in context; rather, their manifest absurdities are piled up on each other artificially. This is a stylistic problem as well as a methodological one, since the constant punctuation of the flow of the sentences with an interminable series of double quotes is disruptive to the eye. Just to take an example at random (on Edvard Munch’s supposedly “Nordic” artistic spirit):

While the “highest aspiration of Latins” was applying aesthetic theory, Germans demanded “intellectual and spiritual content as an essential component of art”. In this sense, [Thilo] Schoder felt, Munch’s realism was “typically” Nordic-Germanic: “sturdy, without intellectual refinement, without theoretical background, without aesthetic doctrine”. He wanted people to “feel the sacred in” his works “so strongly that they would remove their hats, like in church” (p. 246).

I would argue that, by ‘snippetising’ as much as he does, Dennis risks the very thing he hopes to avoid – texts being constantly perceived ‘in inverted commas’ – too bizarre for anyone to have ever taken seriously. This experience is somewhat akin to that of being offered a series of canapés, but never a square meal; one is also often left wondering whether the text really meant what it is being ‘made to say’ in context. This difficulty is even further compounded if the reader has the good fortune to find, hidden away in a footnote half-way through the conclusion, an absolutely crucial piece of information concerning Dennis’ criteria for selecting his material:

Regarding the mass of articles that I processed, I should point out that I have focused my efforts on those sections which did place a Nazi “spin” on the cultural-historical subject at hand, according to the main ideological concepts outlined above. To be sure, not every article in the *Völkischer Beobachter* involved such interpretations and not every column of each cited article was as exploitative as the passages I have discussed. (p. 531, n. 4)

This, of all explanations, should have been brought to the fore from the very beginning. For, suddenly, we realise that the excerpts with which we have been presented for the past 400-and-something pages are not necessarily representative at all, but have been carefully mined for their ideological extremism.⁽⁸⁾ We might even go so far as to wonder whether Dennis himself has become akin to the ‘plundering soldier’ of his initial Nietzschean epigraph (which he presumably sees as applying to the paper’s contributors rather than to himself): ‘The worst readers are those who act like plundering soldiers: they take a few things they can use, dirty and tangle up the rest...’ (p. vii). Quoting more, longer, extracts (even if these had to be drawn from fewer articles), and allowing readers some space to draw their own conclusions, would have made the book a much more satisfying read, and would ultimately have made its arguments far more compelling.

Finally, the work’s self-proclaimed mission to elucidate the cultural politics of the *Völkischer Beobachter* for as wide an audience as possible (p. 5) would ultimately be far more convincing if the volume a) contained a bibliography of any kind, and b) notified its readers of how access to the paper might actually be obtained, whether on microfilm, or in physical form. Incidentally, the further reading detailed in the endnotes often seems rather arbitrary, and there is a real dearth of secondary citations outside quite a narrow range. Thus, to take one example, classic works on the Nazi reception of figures such as Goethe and Schiller, including the relevant sections of Karl Robert Mandelkow’s *Goethe in Deutschland: Rezeptionsgeschichte eines Klassikers*, and Nicholas Martin’s 2006 article on ‘Images of Schiller in National Socialist Germany’⁽⁹⁾ are not mentioned in the endnotes at all. Additionally, while lesser-known paintings and artworks are generally supplied with adequate historical context, and are often themselves reproduced in the text (the rich variety of illustrations is one of the book’s most attractive features), lesser-known composers and intellectual figures are sometimes given disappointingly little introduction. For example, even the present author (a sometime musician, raised in a family of musicologists) had not the slightest idea who the composer Hans Pfitzner (1869–1949) was, and a straw poll among musician colleagues revealed the same result. No background on the composer is given, except the fact that he resisted modernistic innovation in music; instead, we are immediately launched into the *Völkischer Beobachter*’s coverage of his work (pp. 279–82) – here is a classic example of a place where a discursive footnote with references to some further reading, even if only the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, would be invaluable. It is also never made clear whether Pfitzner’s opera *Palestrina* – to which the paper apparently ‘devoted most space’ – concerns the

composer or the place (it is actually a celebration of the composer, but the discussion on pp. 280–1 never reveals enough information for one to be sure). It also seems unlikely that many less musically-minded readers would have heard of less obscure musical figures such as Franz Schreker or Max Reger (who suffers from a similar dearth of background information – cf. pp. 277–9). One might even wonder whether the volume was originally intended for a more specifically musicological audience, with the subsequent inclusion of a much wider range of artists and intellectuals representing a later development in the book's overall conception (cf. p. 469, n. 23).

Nevertheless, despite these deficiencies, this is ultimately a work which demands serious attention. Whatever else, *Inhumanities* is an important, interesting, and thought-provoking book, which is valuable in particular for its dissection and exemplification not just of Nazi propaganda, but of the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*. Not only should this volume be extremely useful to scholars of the Third Reich, but one can only hope that it will inspire many scholars to come (10), provoking a spate of further exploration into the murky, yet strangely fascinating, depths of National Socialist journalism.

Notes

1. Though the author's claims to this effect in the work's concluding paragraph, where he suggests that these cultural attitudes may have concretely contributed to 'the transformation of some ordinary Germans into murderers' (p. 463), are perhaps somewhat overstated.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For more on this, see e.g. H. B. E. Roche, *Sparta's German Children: The ideal of ancient Sparta in the Royal Prussian Cadet Corps, 1818–1920, and in National Socialist elite-schools (the Napolas), 1933–1945* (Swansea 2013), pp. 16, 22–5, 188–245; also H. B. E. Roche, "'Anti-Enlightenment': National Socialist educators' troubled relationship with humanism and the philhellenist tradition", *Publications of the English Goethe Society*, 82, 3 (2013), forthcoming.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Dennis terms this approach a 'chronological tapestry' (p. 5).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Even the ease with which these dates could be ascertained was severely compromised by the infuriating fact that the footnotes only give the date of an article the very first time that it is cited – so that, by the end of the book, one is forced to search the notes to all the previous chapters in order to contextualise almost any given article (the publisher's house-style is presumably at fault here). It took me about ten minutes to track down one particular date-reference in this section, and others I simply gave up on. At the very least, in the glaring absence of a comprehensive bibliography (and it should be noted that promising a complete list of articles on the Loyola University website at some future date cf. p. 531, n. 4 is no real substitute for this*), it would have been immensely helpful to the reader if the dates of the articles had been repeated the first time that they appeared in each chapter.

*N.B. At the time of writing (July 2013), I could find no such bibliography on the university's website, neither on the home page, www.luc.edu [2] (which is given as the reference), on the author's information pages, or by typing '*Inhumanities*' or '*Inhumanities bibliography*' into the website's search engine.[Back to \(4\)](#)

5. Though some of the articles (such as one on Schopenhauer by Alfred Bäumler, published on 22 February 1938, and cited on p. 411) are not all from the war period as such, but simply contain 'bellicose ... propaganda' (p. 410).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Moreover, to open the volume with an explication of the work's starkly propagandistic cover image (currently situated on pp. 452–5) would have been an extraordinarily powerful way to begin – and one far stronger than the depiction of Rosenberg's speech at the 100th anniversary of Beethoven's death, more than six whole years before the *Machtergreifung* – a choice which merely reinforces the impression that the volume was originally conceived as an exploration of the *Völkischer Beobachter*'s exploitation of 'German masters' of music alone.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. It is also possible that some of the 'unplaceable' contributors might merely have been members of the usual staff using a variety of pseudonyms, in order to lend the paper the impression of drawing on a more diverse pool of talent than it actually possessed.[Back to \(7\)](#)

8. This also makes a nonsense of the author's claim, on p. 8, that the work intends 'to provide a synthesis of thematic analysis and chronological coverage that highlights concepts that transcended individual arts and artists in the ideological symbolism of the party, *while approximating the flow that the newspaper's readers would have experienced through its cultural coverage*' (my emphasis). If only the most ideological passages have been selected for analysis in the first place, then surely this does not approximate the real coverage at all – rather, all shades of grey have been abruptly banished.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Karl Robert Mandelkow, *Goethe in Deutschland: Rezeptionsgeschichte eines Klassikers* (Munich, 1989); Nicholas Martin, 'Images of Schiller in National Socialist Germany', in *Schiller: National Poet – Poet of Nations*, ed. N. Martin (Amsterdam, 2006) pp. 275–9.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. For instance, it would be fascinating to explore some of this material within a comparative study of propaganda from other regimes. Is the type of propaganda found in the *Völkischer Beobachter* qualitatively different from that of, say, *Pravda* in the USSR? Perhaps, in such a context, wider parallels could be drawn, and deeper ideas about the power of cultural propaganda mined, which do not merely conform to prevalent notions of Nazi exceptionalism.[Back to \(10\)](#)

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