

Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer SS

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Himmler in 1929. Photograph by Bundesarchiv, Bild 146II-783 / CC-BY-SA. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 de via Wikimedia Commons.

National socialism was a theatrocracy. Staging and role-playing lay at the heart of this tragic episode in the life of the German people. As Henry Pachter's contribution to the collective work, *The Third Reich*, has pointed out, Nazi propaganda tended to swallow up the Nazis themselves: the means became the end. *Schwarzer Heinrich*, Black Henry, the Reichsführer SS, epitomised the self-dramatisation of the leaders of Nazism.

On July 2nd, 1936, Heinrich Himmler made a speech in the cathedral at Quedlinburg in the Harz mountains. In doing honour and homage to Henry the Saxon ('The Fowler,' 919-936) under the auspices of his *Schutzstaffel*, Himmler was engaged in propaganda for himself and his Black Order.

Printed in an illustrated brochure, with an introduction by Gunter d'Alquen, editor of the *Schwarze Korps*, the speech embodies the aspirations and the self-image of that strange figure whom Goering called 'the Reichsheini.' It is surely the tragedy of a people that sham and nonsense such as Himmler exuded should have been presented in such high fashion. For the show at Quedlinburg was not designed just for groundlings but with an eye to the 'elite.' Precisely

because it was to Himmler's own taste, the staging would appeal to the men he was seeking for his intra-Party elite. We find not only some of the propaganda-techniques of the Nazis in this speech but also their very own tastes and dreams.

Prior to the actual day of the speech, the SS had taken over not only the Quedlinburg cathedral but Burg Dankwarderode at Brunswick, allegedly founded by Henry I, and the supposed royal estate near Quedlinburg. The latter was put permanently into the charge of the SS as a national monument. The cathedral was 'purified' by the removal of statuettes and rich ornaments. Two SS guardsmen were placed, like living statues, with rifles and helmets, but bowed heads, in the burial crypt, which was illuminated only by tapers.

Himmler sent out in advance special invitations to a 'festival of Germans' to leading figures in the Party and the state administration. Regional Party authorities packed Quedlinburg with formations of all kinds, and summer sightseers and tourists congregated too, drawn by the publicity. The buildings were decorated with flags, wreaths and festoons of oak leaves, and at night strings of electric lights were turned on. On the cathedral, lights spelled out '936-1936 (1000).' Military bands gave concerts, and youth groups marched and sang. Accompanied by his official guests, including flag-bearers of the Hitler Youth, Himmler paid visits of inspection to the castle of Dankwarderode and to the royal estate, where he was shown the Wigperti crypt, the oldest room still preserved from the era of Henry I. 'We already felt he was among us up at his castle,' wrote Gunter d'Alquen, 'in the sober, honest simplicity' of the surroundings and of the ceremonies.



The Reichsführer SS and the representatives of State and Party continued their pilgrimage up the narrow roadway to the cathedral between ranks of the SS-*Standarte* 'Germania.' 'Like true knights of old in the service of their lord,' wrote d'Alquen, describing these armed soldiers of Heinrich Himmler. 'They may call us heathen, uncomprehendingly, but if they could have seen us then,' d'Alquen observed, 'they would have experienced what real German piety is – fitting our faith and our kind.'

At the cathedral, the Nazis were searching for the symbols of a 'manly' religion, of a religion of life 'going on forever, from yesterday until tomorrow.' They wanted to find 'an ancestral hall dedicated to a mighty God in which they could, nevertheless, stand upright and proud.' Honouring the 'spirit of life,' embodied in their forefathers, they used a kind of primitive symbolic magic to endow themselves with the supposed prowess of Henry I.

Himmler's speech abounded with romantic words emphasising the tie between present-day Germans and the distant past, embodied in the cathedral. The expressions *Ahnen* (forefathers) and *Erbe* (heritage) not only placed his listeners 'in the endless chain of life' but reminded them of Himmler's own *Ahnenerbe*, an organization dedicated to preserving the sacred relics and monuments of Germanic life.

Runic inscriptions had been the source of the ubiquitous, lightning-shaped double S. With these affirmations of faith, of belonging, Himmler and his cohorts wooed people who felt lost in the senseless mechanisms of the modern world.

Many factors supported the romantic tone of Himmler's speech. The German language itself is full of cloudy, deep-sounding propaganda words. Even slightly educated Germans had for many years been filled with medieval history and pseudo-history. From Hermann in AD 9 to Heinrich in AD 900 the average German moved comfortably and easily among heroes and demi-gods. Finally, the soft emotionalism of the hard-headed *petit bourgeois* in the Nazi ranks heightened the effect of every romantic phrase. The Nazis were incredibly sentimental.

Himmler soon launched into two of his favourite *bêtes noires*, Charlemagne and Christianity. It was the German leaders' own fault, said the Reichsführer SS, that the German stem-duchies were mechanically centralized by the West - Frank Karl, impelled by an alien, Byzantine model. Inner discord, the old evil of Germanness, almost destroyed Germany before it was ever realised, when Charlemagne momentarily succeeded in substituting central administration and naked power for Germanic leader-follower relationships. Moreover, he introduced Christianity into Germany so violently that he left bloody wounds in Germandom which have never healed. He paved the way for worldly power-grabbing on the part of the hypocritical 'spiritual' princes and for interference by the church in secular affairs. Lastly, he turned the Germans' gaze away from their age-old settlement territory to the east along the Vistula, south toward Italy.

By contrast, Heinrich of Saxony was an heroic figure. After dismissing Ludwig the German and Conrad I as shadow-kings who presided over the liquidation of German unity, especially of Alsace-Lorraine (*sic*), Himmler described his name-sake as a tough, clever politician who had the foresight necessary to rebuild Germany.

The analogy was obvious. If the Weimar state was an alien 'administrative mechanism' wielding naked power, as the Nazis often alleged, the Nazi state must be the modern heir to Heinrich I's Germany.

Later in his speech, Himmler was to make it clear that it was Adolf Hitler whom he regarded as the reincarnation of Heinrich the Saxon. But was it just a coincidence that Heinrich Himmler chose to idealise a medieval ruler bearing his own Christian name? 'The great Heinrich had the courage to carry out unpopular policies,' continued Himmler. He united the old groups of servile troops (*Dienstmannen*) with the Germanic peasant army, instilled new discipline into his creation, and gave it military practice by installing units in many new fortified castles as *Wehrbauern*.

These measures were precisely Himmler's own dream. Not only did he take pride in his ability to carry out unpleasant tasks unflinchingly, which was not at all true of Hitler, but he designed the *Schutzstaffel* as the future aristocracy of the soil (*Neuadel von Blut und Boden*).

He had already conceived the idea of SS military settlement on the Russian steppes which he was to implement in 1942. The SS was simultaneously a corps of janissaries committed to absolute obedience and a popularly based movement of 'uncommon common men' in revolt against the caste-ridden German General Staff. Yet on the face of his remarks, the average listener could read praise of Adolf Hitler. Was he not, like Heinrich I, carrying out an unpopular policy of friendship with Germany's enemies, while he rearmed – infusing the old professional soldiers with the fresh blood of universal military service?

This Aesopian language is characteristic of all totalitarian communication, and of the conspiracy inherent in totalitarianism before and after the seizure of power. Even when they understood the implications, the dictator and Himmler's rivals would have to allow such Aesopian language to continue until they could do without their fellow-conspirator. Himmler, of course, also laid stress on Heinrich's personal qualities – the ideals of the SS leader. He was a sober, soldierly type, to whom all religious *Schwärmerei* (enthusiasm) was alien.

Yet his word and his handshake were holy to him. He truly surpassed his followers in courage, stature and wisdom. He reintroduced the old German organic loyalty between the leader and his people, and thereby won the friendship of the other stem-dukes who had fought bitterly against the Carolingian ecclesiastical administrative hierarchy. He saw the value of peaceful union among all Germans instead of short-term victories over valuable elements of Germandom.

The German people, he recognised, must begin to raise their vision beyond the tribe and the tribal lands, to a defence of the Marches, and he knew that the stem-dukes could not be expected to defend the Marches if they were treated meanly after the Carolingian fashion. Only restoration of their sovereign rights would enable them to fight off the barbarians. 'The law of life teaches that men do not defend what they do not possess.'

After this fashion, Himmler not only appealed for Austrian *Anschluss* and defended the independence of *Gauleiter* like Julius Streicher and Erich Koch; he reminded the better instructed of his followers of their own dreams of a great Nordic Order including Scandinavia, Britain and the Baltic peoples, and of a feudal appanage for the SS in the Ukraine and the Crimea.

Pictures in the brochure show Himmler in the cathedral during the magical 'blessing' of Hitler Youth banners, Himmler giving the password to his SS guard of honour (King Henry and Germany!), and Himmler laying a wreath on the grave of Heinrich's consort, Mathilde. Combined with theatrical effects there is a perceptible mysticism. We are not confronted here with consummate showmanship so much as with a remarkably primitive 'acting-out' of the cravings and strivings of leading National Socialists. These men sought to 'restore the broken link in the chain of life,' to place themselves as intermediaries between the mythical past and the vigorous, hopeful young people of Germany. To Nazis like Himmler, heroic myths were undoubtedly more real than the dusty tomes of the professors from which they sprang.

Breaches in a sound tradition seemed alone capable of explaining to countless Germans the great gap between the 'German ideal' which they had been taught and the bleak and tragic realities of the twentieth century. Himmler's generation felt themselves to be the last hope, the last gasp of the good old times, the old ways of righteousness in Germany. If they could not save Germany's youth from what seemed barbarism and degeneracy, the chance would never recur.

Himmler and his SS were weak vessels, as indeed was the whole National Socialist movement, for such a precious heritage. Himmler's personal ambitions had led him to accept, indeed to seek, the role of German policeman and executioner.

The very year in which the ceremony at Quedlinburg took place saw Himmler realise his ambitions in becoming Chief of the German Police. Yet the hatred and the loathing of so many Germans, even Nazis – or *especially of Nazis* – for the role he had assumed drove Himmler to despair and then to the very fantasies we have just seen. Because of his 'negative side,' Himmler sought desperately to be 'constructive' – to make his SS his real gift to

Germany, to find in myths the strength he knew he lacked. In reality, the man was tied up in emotional knots, which gave rise to torturing physical symptoms. Unfortunately for the world, these were not the only symptoms. They may even have justified Himmler on his course, as pathological suffering so often does.

The *Schutzstaffel* was never to repeat the Quedlinburg ceremony. It turned increasingly in later years to military training and the recruitment of its own soldiers. Himmler was to dismiss his chief theoretician and stage-manager, Richard Walter Darré, in 1938 for being 'too theoretical.' The SS flung off domination by the romantic enthusiasts in exchange for practitioners of naked power like Heydrich. The pot-bellied bureaucrats of the elite and the brainless ramrods among the recruits combined to nullify the 'idealism' of the Reichsführer himself. The consequences were to be seen in Auschwitz.

The romantic-idealistic aspect of National Socialism is still significant. Without the beautiful props of Germany's architectural remnants, the legends of German prowess, and the enormous craving to be part of a living if not eternal heritage, Germans would not feel justified in submitting to discipline and hard work. Above all, they would not 'understand' and tolerate cruelty. Once recruited, however, National Socialists could be acclimatised to discipline, hard work and cruelty, even as the memory of the Quedlinburg ceremonies faded away. Furthermore, a man like Himmler would never give up his personal dreams. Three years later, in 1939, Himmler persuaded Hitler to make him solely responsible for strengthening Germandom everywhere in eastern Europe.

From 1939 to 1945, Himmler sought to carve out feudal domain for himself and his SS, stretching from Poland and the Baltic States to the Crimea. Names like *Altburgund* (Poland) and *Gothenland* (Crimea) suggest the appeal to German history. In this new Prussia, thousands of SS soldiers died to defend SS strongpoints to the last man, would-be elements of a second Teutonic Order. Their contribution to the tales of German military prowess and *Deutsche Treue* have today become the focus of a revitalised SS tradition in post-war Germany.

Perhaps Heinrich the Great (fl. 1036) built better than he knew.