

# Triumph of the Will

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In the canon of great films, the place of *Triumph of the Will*, a documentary about the sixth Nazi Party Congress of 1934 directed by Leni Riefenstahl, seems to be impregnable. For received opinion, the film is, in Susan Sontag's words, 'the most successfully, most purely propagandistic film ever made'.

Yet this is more than a little curious, for the film lives, outside of neo-fascist circles, only as a species of awful warnings against fascism. It is not regarded as a persuasive text – unlike say, the silent, Soviet film, *Battleship Potemkin*, which Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels himself thought 'a marvellous film without equal in the cinema ... anyone who had no firm political conviction could become a Bolshevik after seeing the film'. Even in the 1930s, few claims were made that *Triumph of the Will* would do the same for fascism. In fact, political scientist and film historian Richard Taylor states that 'the film was not used generally for propaganda purposes' in Germany at the time.

The response of most non-fascist viewers is probably best summed up by critic Lotte Eisner's 1952 judgement that: 'The film leaves one finally with an impression of insanity'. The images of *Triumph of the Will* are endlessly recycled in every anti-Nazi documentary precisely as evidence of the essential madness of those who appeared in and paid for the film. Surely, this is strange for what is, supposedly, 'the most successfully, most purely propagandistic film ever made'.

The initial propaganda problems with the film are easily understood. The Sixth Annual National Socialist Party Congress was not quite the jubilant affair it ought to have been. Hitler had been Chancellor of Germany for over a year. In the election of March, 1933, following the Reichstag fire, the Nazis had taken 44 per cent of the popular vote. But it was the destruction of the leadership of the SA (the *Sturmabteilung*, the storm troopers) in the episode known as the Rohm Putsch just a few weeks before the faithful gathered in Nuremburg for the congress that threatened to spoil it.

The backbone of Nazi support came from the middle and lower-middle classes but nevertheless the Party, by its very use of the term 'socialist' in its title, also sought working-class support. Although the SA had its share of minor civil servants and schoolteachers, young working-class lads constituted a major recruiting ground for the organisation's brown-shirted street-fighters. Ernst Röhm, the SA leader, became the guardian of the populist rhetoric of the Party.

In the aftermath of the 1933 election the SA needed to redefine its role, just as Hitler's successful strategy of seeking power through the ballot box was now leading him into accommodations with other elements of the German establishment. The SA would have been an embarrassment even if Röhm had not chosen to stress a populist, 'socialist' agenda. Demanding machine guns for his 2 million Brownshirts, Röhm declared: 'The SA is and will be the arbiters of Germany's fate'.

Encouraged by the German establishment, especially the army, and pressured by the French, Hitler, with Goebbels and members of the *Schutzstaffel* (the SS or Black Guards) and the *Geheime Staatspolizei* (Gestapo – the secret state police) murdered Rohm and his entire command at Bad Wiessee during the so-called 'Night of the Long Knives', June 30th, 1934. His pretext, plausible enough, was that Röhm was planning a putsch against him; but, within weeks, he had to fly to Nuremburg to confront the mass of Röhm's SA at the sixth *Parteitag*, 'Men of the SA and the SS', he cried:

*... a few months ago, a black shadow spread over the movement. And the SA has as little to do with this shadow as any other institution in the Party. They deceive themselves who think that even a*

*single crack has appeared in the edifice of our united movement.... And if any one sins against the spirit of my SA this will break not the SA but only those who dare to sin against them. Only a madman or a deliberate liar could think that I, or anyone, would ever intend to dissolve what we have ourselves built up over many long years. No, comrades, we stand firmly by our Germany and we must stand firmly by this Germany.*

What this speech lacked in eloquence and logic was more than compensated for by nerve. Hitler performed this 'big lie' before 97,000 SA men drawn up in the Luitpold Stadium, after more than 200 of their leaders had been murdered and many thousands more lower-level cadres were still being purged. An American eye-witness noted:

*Hitler faced his SA stormtroopers today for the first time since the bloody purge. There was considerable tension in the stadium and I noticed that Hitler's own bodyguard was drawn up in front of him separating him from the mass of Brownshirts.*

But this rally was to be a perfect example of the *Führerprinzip*, the 'leadership principle', in action. Constantly wearing SA uniform, Hitler used the congress to insist on personal loyalty to himself even as he offered ceremonial and rhetorical crumbs of the populist sort favoured by Röhm. Any potential internal threat to the Party was removed.

This, then, is the immediate and potent triumph of Hitler's will which necessarily becomes the central theme and organising principle of the filmed record of these events. Despite the blindness of cinema scholars, who would save *Triumph of the Will* for art by ignoring its politics, and the strenuous denials of Riefenstahl, who has a pressing need to disclaim any political understanding on her part, the film, especially in the selection of the speeches, deals with either the SA problem, the need for absolute loyalty to Hitler or the Party's undying concern for the German worker and peasant.

It is possible to see *Triumph of the Will* not as a propaganda classic, but rather as a classically flawed persuasive communication, in that it had two contradictory aims. Albeit some considerable time after the event, it functioned as an internal Party message demonstrating, with the compelling supposed veracity of the moving photographic image, that the vast mass of the SA were, quite literally, with Hitler. It implicitly confirmed that the SA's populist concerns remained central to the Party.

But, by the same tokens, it did not work as a general propaganda message for the majority of Germans who, even after the intimidations of the post-Reichstag fire election, had not voted Nazi. On the contrary, by constantly referring to the problem with the SA (safely buried by the time of the film's release in late March, 1935), *Triumph of the Will* highlighted the fact that the Party was not perhaps so monolithic as it appeared. By stressing the *Führerprinzip*, virtually deifying Hitler visually, it drew attention to the cult surrounding a political boss whom 56 per cent of voters had rejected.

But there is more than this. In terms of the overall propaganda tactics of the Nazis, *Triumph of the Will* was aberrant. 'We National Socialists', remarked Goebbels in his initial briefing to the German film industry in 1933, 'do not place any particular value on our SA marching across the stage or screen.... The National Socialist government has never asked that SA films be made. On the contrary – we see danger in a surplus of them'.

Goebbels developed a coherent propaganda strategy relying primarily on the news media – press, radio and cinema newsreels – for direct political message making. The new technology of television was also in part encouraged and deployed for these purposes. A complex structure was put in place immediately the Nazis came to power in 1933 whereby a public distance was established between the Goebbel's ministry and these organs of opinion. All artists and media workers, including print, broadcast and film journalists, were licensed through the *Reichskammer* system. The existing trade unions, artists' leagues and other organisations were either banned or transformed.

Goebbels claimed that this 'concept of corporate professional groups' was going to be 'the great sociological concept of the twentieth century'. Membership was, of course, restricted. 'Alien', that is Jewish, and other undesirable elements were excluded and could not work; but Goebbels required no further proof of loyalty, such as party membership, from those included. Indeed, it was more useful to the regime if such prominent public figures, the film-star and director Leni Riefenstahl, for example, remained 'independent'.

Goebbels was also at pains to maintain the fiction of the independence of production companies such as the newsreel firms. Both UFA and Tobis, the leading newsreels, were taken over by a Nazi trust company in 1936 in what historian David Welch calls, 'almost complete secrecy'. It is not hard to see why, at the outset of the Nazi period, Goebbels adopted such an approach. Although the implicit triumphalism of films celebrating the Party's uniformed ranks or the *Führerprinzip* might (except perhaps in the circumstances following a Rohm putsch) encourage the faithful, it was not necessarily going to win converts to the cause.

Immediately after the election of 1933, as the new Reich Minister for Popular Education and Propaganda, Goebbels had told the film industry that the Nazis were 'not satisfied with having 52 per cent of the nation as supporters while terrorising the other 48 per cent. We want the people as the people, not only passively but actively'. But he did not require 'parade ground marching and the blowing of trumpets' as the means of getting them. And, the newsreels apart, the industry did not proffer such images – with the exception of *Triumph of the Will*. So why was it made? The answer is to be found in the opening frames of the film, in a title which says: 'The document of the National Party Congress 1934, produced by Order of the Führer, created by Leni Riefenstahl'.

By her mid-twenties Riefenstahl was a star, specialising in the popular German genre of mountain pictures. The Nazi leaders were no less attracted by the glamour of show business than other politicians have been, before and since. Riefenstahl was friendly with them prior to 1933, sometimes taking her mother and father with her on social visits to Hitler. As a very famous, extremely beautiful and charismatic actress, she had a line to the Führer which was outside Goebbels' control. 'Produced by Order of the Führer' meant not produced by order of Goebbels.

Hitler had previously personally commissioned Riefenstahl to contribute to the sequence of Party Congress films which had began in 1927. She had produced *Victory of Faith*, a short account of the fifth *Parteitag* in 1933. He then asked her to film the sixth as well. Goebbels had the two good reasons outlined above for objecting to this plan: it did not fit within his announced films policy and he was also against publicising the unavoidable aftermath of the Röhm affair in so relatively permanent a form as a documentary film. In addition, apart from any personal animosity or sexism, he was concerned at the explicit threat to his power that Riefenstahl's special relationship with Hitler represented.

The only effect of these hostilities was to give Riefenstahl the basis of her defence to subsequent charges of complicity in the regime. She used Goebbels' animosity towards her over this project (and over her subsequent film of the 1936 Berlin Olympics) as evidence of her distance from the Nazis. Naive American officers overseeing Riefenstahl's post-war denazification proceedings completely misunderstood the significance of this, just as they failed to appreciate the reason why she was not a member of the Party, another element of her defence.

Moreover, Goebbels' hostility at the time was as nothing compared to Hitler's support. Riefenstahl was allowed to deploy extraordinary resources – some forty-nine camera-men (nineteen of them senior cinematographers), an airship and a plane to help make the film. She was given total co-operation from the Congress' organisers, including the provision of special camera positions. She also had the option of re-staging shots if things went wrong. Albert Speer claimed she re-shot some speeches in Berlin because of sound problems and I also believe from the internal evidence of the film that some shots in the sequence of Hitler's arrival at the airport were not done at the time. She eventually had more than sixty hours of material from which she edited 107 minutes.

Despite received critical opinion, the end result is as unimpressive a piece of film-making as it is propaganda. The majority of Riefenstahl's cameramen were work-a-day newsreel operators who provided their usual level of coverage. Their enormous numbers notwithstanding, there are endless continuity jumps. For example, on Hitler's

triumphal drive into Nuremberg his Mercedes' windscreen assumes a number of different positions. There are even shots of Hitler himself which are out of focus. But the real problem with the film is that, shaped by Riefenstahl's Nazi sensibility, it just goes on, and on, and on, as march past follows march past and ceremonies succeed ceremonies.

Take the last quarter of the film. The Ceremony of the Fallen, at which Hitler makes the 'shadow' speech quoted above, lasts eleven minutes and seventeen seconds, more than half of which is taken up with marching. It is followed by eighteen minutes and four seconds of a great march past. This in turn is followed by the closing sequence which contains, in addition to a lengthy march past of banners, Hitler's fifth speech of the film. In short, *Triumph of the Will* is monotonous and repetitive.

So why is it so highly regarded? Why did it win the Gold Medal at the Venice Film Festival in 1935, and, more surprisingly, the Grand Prix at the Paris Film Festival in 1937? Why have film critics (assuming they are not themselves Nazi or neo-fascist) continued to claim, in the words of film-buff Glenn Infield that *Triumph of the Will* is 'one of the technical and artistic masterpieces of film history, a truly great film', when it is palpably no such thing?

The answer is Albert Speer. It is in fact the glamour of the spectacle that Speer created for the 1934 Party Congress that has blinded us to the extremely limited value added to the event by Riefenstahl. Given more or less professional film coverage of a stadium filled with 100,000 anonymous uniformed men in perfect formation, it would be very hard to produce an unimpressive image. And that is all that Riefenstahl does. The power of *Triumph of the Will* is not one conjured up by the film maker. It is rather the raw power of the original event which even a modestly talented (if lavishly resourced) film maker could not obscure.

Riefenstahl's post-war reputation in the English speaking world dates from October 1971 when she allowed herself to be interviewed by an American cineaste, Gordon Hitchens. Safe behind the veils of time, she rehearsed what was to become a familiar litany. She knew nothing of the Röhm business not least because she was location hunting for her feature film, *Tiefland*, in Spain at the time. Goebbels hated her. She was never given a prize by the Nazis. She knew nothing about atrocities or anything else. She never did anything of which she is ashamed. She was not political. She was never a member of the Party.

All of this is either false, extremely unlikely or, at best, tendentious. Riefenstahl was, for instance, given the Nazi national film prize in 1935. She used Romany extras taken from a holding camp for *Tiefland* (which she eventually began shooting in 1941) and according to the Holocaust Chronicler, Nina Gladitz, they were then returned to the camp system and ultimately to Auschwitz. Nevertheless, unquestioning critics and journalists have endlessly repeated her tale and in the process have transformed her into 'an authentic genius', 'ignorant of the outside world', 'an artist of an immensely naive political nature'. In addition, she also benefited unexpectedly from the rise of the women's movement. Susan Sontag, for example, states that Riefenstahl is 'the one woman who made films that everybody acknowledges to be first rate'.

*Triumph of the Will* was firmly declared to be 'art' rather than 'propaganda' – although, paradoxically, it was still a propaganda masterpiece. Some of these critics, within what has become a veritable Riefenstahl industry, do have the grace to concede that, in the words of Richard Barsam, the film sustains 'a vicious ideology'. But the art versus politics division allows for this. Nowhere is the distinction between form and content made more insistently than in favourable appraisals of *Triumph of the Will*. The film has also benefited from being little seen, certainly in its original form. There are re-cut shortened versions in circulation which omit the speeches and the smaller-scale ceremonials to highlight Speer's brilliant spectacles. Riefenstahl's authorial claims on such versions is tenuous.

The authority for making the art/politics distinction is Hitler himself who said in an interview of 1934: 'It makes me sick when people make art under the guise of politics. Either art or politics'. Goebbels, of course, agreed. He was already classifying films as valuable politically, artistically or culturally. *Triumph of the Will* ('produced by Order of the Führer') was classed (inevitably) as 'Staatspolitisch besonders wertvoll' – 'Politically especially valuable'. It could have been 'Staatspolitisch wertvoll und künstlerisch besonders wertvoll' – 'Politically and artistically especially valuable' – but it was not.

If Goebbels understood this, why can't we? The time is long past for the glamour of Speer's spectacle to be dispelled and for this film to be classed by history where it really belongs – not in the artistic canon of great cinema works but in the archive as vivid evidence of twentieth-century mania.

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