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Materialising Power: The Role of looted European Cultural Objects in Nazi Elite Self-fashioning

Rachel Amy Owen

Student number: 1801974

Supervised by: Katharina Zinn

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Y Drindod Dewi Sant
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Abstract

This dissertation examines how Nazi elites instrumentalised looted cultural objects as tools of power, ideology, and self-fashioning. It argues that looting was not a by-product of war but a deliberate strategy central to Nazi cultural policy, disguising theft as legality while reinforcing the regime's symbolic authority.

Focusing on Adolf Hitler, Hermann Göring, and Heinrich Himmler, the study reveals how each leader used material culture differently. For Hitler, imperial regalia and funerary remains constructed a mythic narrative of German continuity, legitimising his role as heir to imperial tradition. Göring transformed his estate, Carinhall, into both a private collection and a projection of cultural authority, aligning with Nazi aesthetics while pursuing personal wealth. Himmler employed religious relics and artefacts to promote a mythic Aryan prehistory, legitimising the SS as both racial forerunner and spiritual order.

Using an interdisciplinary approach, archival research, art history, biography, and material culture studies, the dissertation situates these practices within broader institutions such as the Reichskulturkammer, the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, and the *Ahnenerbe*. It concludes that material culture was an active force in Nazi Germany: legitimising authority, reinforcing ideology, and elevating leaders, while also serving emotive ambitions of prestige, rivalry, and personal gain.

Introduction

This dissertation aims to discuss and demonstrate that in Nazi Germany, material culture was not passive but central to the exercise of power. The regime used cultural objects as political tools and symbols of ideology. Looted property legitimised racial policies, rewrote history through Aryan ideals, and presented the Third Reich as Europe's imperial heir. Looting was not a by-product of war but a deliberate strategy, disguised through staged legal transfers that masked dispossession as legitimate

This study examines Adolf Hitler, Hermann Göring, and Heinrich Himmler, whose collecting practices reveal how cultural objects influenced Nazi leadership. It explores how looted artefacts reflected and reinforced their identities, serving as tools of propaganda, ideological proof, and personal prestige. More than mere markers of personal taste, these artefacts acted as instruments through which Nazi elites aligned themselves with, and occasionally reinterpreted, the regime's political, social, and cultural policies, thereby embedding their self-fashioning within the broader ideological and institutional context of the regime. By placing these artefacts within the wider framework of Nazi Kulturpolitik (Cultural Policy) and the regime's aim of cultural cleansing, the research shows that such objects were vital to the regime's symbolic universe, functioning as means of ideological reinforcement, personal elevation, and identity creation.

The starting hypothesis is that each of these leaders had a different approach to appropriating material culture. For Hitler, reclaiming imperial regalia and noble funerary remains was crucial to constructing a historical narrative that positioned him at the pinnacle of German destiny. Göring's extensive art collection operated simultaneously as a public demonstration of ideological alignment and a private pursuit of status, wealth, and influence. Himmler's engagement with religious relics, archaeological artefacts, and occult objects served to substantiate a mythic Aryan prehistory and to legitimise the SS as both a racial frontline and a spiritual order.

Focusing on these three figures illuminates the multifaceted ways in which Nazi leaders instrumentalised material culture: as political propaganda, ideological proof, personal enrichment, and performative assertions of cultural authority. Each case study reveals how looted objects were mobilised to align personal ambition with broader political and social objectives, whether through the redefinition of national heritage, the manipulation of religious symbolism, or the establishment of monumental cultural institutions. These practices further underscore the calculated deployment of legality; the theft was concealed through the pretext of returning or safekeeping items, thus obscuring the coercive nature of the act. While the central aim of this study is to analyse the political, social, and cultural functions of material culture in shaping Nazi leadership, it also aspires to move beyond these structural dynamics to explore the emotive dimensions of collecting, where personal gain, rivalry, and prestige infused looted objects with meanings that exceeded official policy and ideology.

Literature Review

Most scholarship on Nazi cultural policy concentrates on institutions, restitution, or broad ideology. Less focus has been placed on how individual leaders used looted objects for personal and political purposes. This dissertation addresses that gap by comparing Hitler, Göring, and Himmler, showing how each employed cultural property to assert authority, promote ideology, and shape their legacy. Case studies include Hitler's strategic use of imperial regalia and funerary remains, Göring's orchestration of art looting, and Himmler's manipulation of religious, archaeological, and occult artefacts. These examples reveal the diverse and sometimes conflicting roles that material culture played within the Nazi elite.

By focusing on the personal motives of Hitler, Göring, and Himmler, this study challenges the view of Nazi looting as mainly economic or purely state-driven. Instead, it highlights how cultural policy was contested, performative, and shaped by individual ambition.

The relationship between history and material culture forms a foundational framework for understanding the political and ideological significance of cultural artefacts in Nazi Germany. Fritz Stern offers a seminal exploration of how German intellectuals in the early 20th century cultivated a cultural distrust that informed Nazi racial and historical narratives (Stern, 1974). Stern's analysis clarifies the ideological backdrop against which cultural property was mobilised, not simply as a historical record but as a vehicle to articulate a mythic Germanic past and to assert a racialised national destiny. This foundational context is critical for situating the Nazi engagement with material culture as an active and symbolic process rather than a passive inheritance.

Building on this intellectual framework, Jonathan Petropoulos examines the entanglement of artists, collectors, and political actors in the Nazi art apparatus, revealing how material culture became both a site of ideological enforcement and personal ambition (Petropoulos, 2001). Petropoulos's study is especially pertinent for understanding the performative dimensions of art collecting among Nazi elites such as Göring, whose activities blended public propaganda with private enrichment. Similarly, Steven Kasher offers insight into Hitler's aesthetic sensibilities and his instrumental use of art to legitimise the regime's cultural policies, reinforcing the introduction's focus on individual agency in the appropriation of cultural property (Kasher, 1992).

Nancy Yeide and Patricia Teter-Schneider analyse the Reichskulturkammer (Reich Chamber of Culture), showing how it enforced aesthetic conformity while organising looting and redistribution (Yeide and Teter-Schneider, 2008). Their work links state policy directly to the ideological and material control of culture.

Integral to this framework is the concept of Kunstschutz, the Nazi policy supposedly aimed at protecting art in occupied territories, which in practice facilitated systematic looting. Hector Feliciano offers a comprehensive account of these operations, tracing the state's complicity and the mechanisms by which cultural theft was masked under the guise of preservation (Feliciano, 1997). Feliciano's work underscores the centrality of cultural expropriation as a deliberate state strategy, reinforcing the introduction's argument that looting was not a mere by-product of war but a calculated instrument of power.

The Kümmel Report, compiled by Professor Otto Kümmel, represents a critical primary source that illuminates the administrative processes behind Nazi art seizures. Its detailed

cataloguing of artworks highlights the bureaucratic rigour and ideological selectivity informing the regime's cultural policies (Petropoulos, 2001, p. 56-7). This report serves as an important evidentiary basis for examining how individual Nazi leaders, such as Himmler and Göring, leveraged official structures to acquire objects that reinforced racial and ideological narratives. The report's significance lies in its exemplification of the intersection between state policy and personal ambition within the Nazi cultural hierarchy.

Mary-Margaret Goggin and Ellen Simpson explore how Nazi policy divided art into "decent" and "degenerate." They show how the regime used these categories to police culture, valorising some works while vilifying others to serve political ends (Goggin, 1991; Simpson, 2010). Collectively, these works contribute to a multifaceted understanding of the Nazi regime's instrumentalisation of material culture, aligning with this dissertation's focus on the active role of objects in the construction of power. They emphasise that cultural artefacts under Nazi control were deeply embedded in ideological, institutional, and personal frameworks, tools wielded by figures like Hitler, Himmler, and Göring to articulate identity, assert dominance, and legitimise authority. By engaging with these seminal texts and primary sources such as the Kümmel Report, this study situates itself within an established scholarly tradition while addressing the underexplored terrain of individual agency and performative cultural politics within the Nazi elite.

Methodology

This dissertation uses an interdisciplinary approach to study how Nazi leaders used material culture, focusing on Hitler, Göring, and Himmler. It combines historical analysis, archival research, art history, and material culture studies to explore how ideology, personal ambition, and cultural policy interacted in the Third Reich.

Archival and Historical Research

This study draws on archival documents such as the Kümmel Report, correspondence, inventories, and restitution records to trace Nazi looting practices (Petropoulos, 2001; Alford, 2014). These sources are set alongside secondary histories of the political and military context (Beevor, 2003; Edsel, 2006; Shirer, 1960). Together, they provide a grounded view of the institutions that shaped cultural policy, including the Reichskulturkammer and Kunstschutz (Yeide and Teter-Schneider, 2008).

Art Historical and Material Culture Analysis

The dissertation uses close analysis of selected objects, from imperial regalia to looted art and "degenerate" works (Kasher, 1992; Goggin, 1991). This approach shows how artefacts served as propaganda, proof of ideology, and symbols of prestige. Material culture theory frames these objects as active agents in shaping power, identity, and history (Baxandall, 1980; Macdonald, 2009).

Comparative Political Biography

Utilising biographical analysis, the research compares the cultural practices and motivations of Hitler, Göring and Himmler, highlighting the differentiated ways in which material culture served their political ambitions and ideological commitments. This comparative lens reveals the personal dimension of Nazi cultural policy and challenges rigid interpretations of looting as solely a state system (Kershaw, 2000; Manvell and Fraenkel, 2007; Alford, 2014).

Institutional and Ideological Contextualization

To frame individual and material analyses, the dissertation incorporates studies of Nazi cultural institutions and ideological frameworks, including the Reichskulturkammer and the contrast between "decent" and "degenerate" art (Petropoulos, 2001; Goggin, 1991; Yeide and Teter-Schneider, 2008). This study also draws on *Mein Kampf* as a primary ideological source, not for its factual reliability but as a programmatic text outlining the cultural, racial, and expansionist visions that later guided Nazi cultural policy. Situating *Mein Kampf* alongside institutional sources and subsequent cultural policy documents clarifies how Hitler's early ideological constructs informed the symbolic use of artefacts (Hitler, 1925). It further explores the occult and pseudo-scientific ideologies underpinning Nazi cultural politics, particularly concerning Himmler's collecting practices (Kurlander, 2015; Yenne, 2010). This institutional and ideological contextualization clarifies the regime's use of legality and propaganda to legitimise looting and cultural expropriation (Feliciano, 1997; Edsel and Witter, 2014).

Interdisciplinary Synthesis

By combining archival research, art analysis, biography, and ideology, this study gives a full picture of how Nazi leaders used material culture as power. This approach highlights the performative and contested nature of Nazi cultural politics, showing how individual actions shaped and sometimes conflicted with state policy.

Chapter 1 - Adolf Hitler and Royal Regalia

Adolf Hitler joined the Nazi Party in 1919 after reluctantly serving in World War I. His rise to leadership was facilitated by his persuasive public speaking and aptitude for propaganda (Toland, 2014, p. 84-8). By 1933, Hitler had ascended to the role of Chancellor and established a totalitarian regime. Under his leadership, the Nazi state enacted policies geared towards territorial expansion, racial purification, and the revival of traditional cultural and authoritarian values. These policies ultimately catalysed the outbreak of World War II and enabled Hitler to carry out acts of unprecedented violence, revealing the extent of his ruthlessness and ideological extremism (Kershaw, 2000, p. 5–11).

National Expectations and Cultural Symbolism

Hitler's view of Germany was shaped by its defeat in World War I, which he saw as a national humiliation (Evans, 2005). He regarded the nation as politically fractured and weakened after losing its imperial power. Joachim Fest notes that Hitler's ideology rested not on simple nationalism but on a belief in Germany's historic destiny (Fest, 2002). Cultural symbolism reinforced this vision of a racially pure and unified Germany. Reclaiming imperial artefacts allowed him to present continuity for "Aryans" while excluding and stigmatising those he defined as "undesirable.

Image left: The Holy Roman Empire regalia garments.

Image right: The Holy Roman Empire regalia.

Edsel, R.M. (2006). *Rescuing Da Vinci: Hitler and the Nazis Stole Europe's Great Art: America and Her Allies Recovered It*. Dallas: Laurel Pub.

For Hitler, the Holy Roman Empire regalia symbolised legitimacy, unity, and military authority. See Appendix A for item description. Once used in coronations, they embodied key moments in German history and tied his vision to the "Thousand-Year Reich" (Paulus, 2017, p. 11–17). After the annexation of Austria, recovering the regalia became a priority. Though presented as a legal transfer, the act was state-sanctioned theft (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 113). Hitler valued their physical presence, insisting they be relocated for his direct access rather than remaining in Austrian territory under full Reich control.

Hitler and the German Aristocracy

These objects are compelling because they represent the contradictory relationship between Hitler and the aristocracy. Unlike many of its European counterparts, which were often ceremonial, the German aristocracy remained deeply integrated into the nation's political life. Many still held military commands and legislative positions. This political visibility and self-

perception as custodians of national tradition made them sceptical of Hitler, whom many regarded as an uncultured political opportunist (Urbach, 2015, p. 194). While publicly undermining them, Hitler cultivated their symbols, the regalia being collected amongst the first looting operations.



Images above, left to right: Coffins of Frederick Wilhelm I, Frederick the Great, and President Hindenburg.

Edsel, R.M. and Witter, B. (2014). *Monuments Men: Allied heroes, Nazi thieves, and the Greatest Treasure Hunt in History.* London: Arrow Books.

Coffins containing the remains of kings and nobles were selected for their racial background and military distinction, regarded as ideological predecessors to Hitler (Mosse, 1964). See Appendix B for item description. This calculated symbolism was particularly effective in a society still mourning the loss of its monarchy. For ordinary Germans, seeing Hitler flanked by crowns, swords, and imperial robes suggested an unbroken line from the Holy Roman Empire to the Third Reich. The aristocracy recognised it as a usurpation of their heritage, lending legitimacy despite private disdain (Koonz, 2005).

A core component of Hitler's cultural policy involved repatriating German artefacts. This extended beyond art collection into a nationalist campaign to recover Germany's rightful heritage, restoring items to heal historical wounds and unify the populace (Edsel, 2006, p. 10). The 10th-century regalia comprises 32 objects, symbolising the legacy of Charlemagne and the First Reich, making them key to Hitler's narrative of German continuity. Housed in Nürnberg for four centuries before their transfer to Vienna during Napoleon's conquests, the regalia became the subject of contested ownership. Despite efforts by the Nürnberg city council to reclaim the regalia, Austrian officials refused, transferring the artefacts to the Habsburg royal family (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 94–95).

Hitler's fascination with the regalia was intertwined with his contempt for the German aristocracy. Though many nobles held positions in the Nazi regime, Hitler mocked them in *Mein Kampf* as corrupt and genetically degenerate (Hitler, 1925). Many members of the German aristocracy believed Hitler lacked refinement and education, perceiving him as mismatched due to his populist speeches and aggressive political tactics, which contrasted with their usual diplomatic and formal manner. Hitler was privately insulted by the German aristocracy, highlighting their view of him as an outsider with little respect (Roland, 2019, p. 197). His contempt was particularly focused on the Hohenzollerns and the Habsburg royal

families. The abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II and assassinations in the Habsburg family symbolised, for Hitler, the betrayal and dissolution of imperial power. Raised under Habsburg rule, Hitler despised their multinational empire, which he interpreted as diluting German dominance and particularly scorned Franz Ferdinand for marrying a Czech countess, underscoring his broader rejection of multinationalism (Longo, 2018, p. 15).

The Habsburgs placed immense importance on the regalia as symbols of dynastic legitimacy and political continuity. Used in coronations and marriages, the regalia symbolised Habsburg authority, historical continuity and admiration for imperial tradition in their empire (Curtis, 2013, p. 236–252). Upon annexing Austria, Hitler swiftly confiscated the regalia and arrested the sons of Franz Ferdinand, deporting them to the Dachau concentration camp (Longo, 2018, p. 11). The regalia offered Hitler a way to symbolically bridge a social chasm. By presenting himself alongside objects once reserved for emperors and kings, he appropriated their legitimacy and cloaked himself in a mantle of historical authority. To the public, such imagery blurred the distinction between Germany's old elite and its new Führer, allowing Hitler to position himself as the rightful heir to centuries of German statecraft (Koonz, 2005). Despite his disdain, Hitler exploited the nobility for strategic purposes. Nobles presented an element of legitimacy to the regime, symbolising continuity and order (Urbach, 2015, p. 194). Moreover, they held valuable diplomatic networks and the capacity for unchallenged international travel, which the Nazis leveraged for foreign policy, notably in cultivating alliances with powers like Japan. Nevertheless, their influence waned after World War I, and many feared the spread of Bolshevism, aligning themselves with right-wing factions in opposition and in exchange for protection.

Some nobles actively participated in the Nazi regime, particularly in the military and the SS, to preserve their status or as a sense of duty to protect Germany. However, not all nobles were loyal. Several opposed Nazi radicalism, anti-Christian views, and the disruption of traditional structures. Count Claus von Stauffenberg exemplified aristocratic resistance by attempting to assassinate Hitler in 1944. Stauffenberg's actions were driven by a sense of patriotism, military strategy, and moral disgust at the crimes committed by the government during the war, including atrocities against civilians. The plot's failure resulted in Stauffenberg's execution and that of many other suspected conspirators from noble families. It demonstrated that loyalty among aristocrats was conditional (Malinowski, 2020, p. 268–277).

Operation Body Snatch and Symbolic Preservation

In the chaotic final months of World War II, Operation Body Snatch was launched by Erich Koch, a high-ranking Nazi official and one of the most brutal administrators of occupied territories. The aim was to secure the funerary remains of President Paul von Hindenburg, Frederick Wilhelm I of Prussia, and Frederick the Great. Their coffins, along with artefacts emblematic of German military tradition, were transferred to Bernterode salt mine to protect them from advancing Soviet forces (Edsel & Witter, 2014, p. 339–341). Hitler viewed these figures as ideological predecessors whose preservation reinforced his vision of historical continuity. Their remains were considered too politically and symbolically important to leave behind, and by safeguarding these bodies, Koch and others were attempting to preserve the "soul" of Germany, even as the Third Reich collapsed. Hindenburg, revered as a World War I general and later President of the Weimar Republic, was a direct link to the imperial past.

Frederick Wilhelm I, known as the "Soldier King," implemented reforms that laid the groundwork for Prussia's rise to power, while his son, Frederick the Great, elevated Prussia to a European power through military and administrative innovation (Clark, 2007). In the hands of the USSR, the remains could have been desecrated or used for propaganda by Soviet authorities to dismantle German nationalism. By capturing the remains of such revered leaders, the narrative of German glory and historical significance could be undermined. Seizing the remains would have been a powerful propaganda tool for the Soviets, reinforcing their dominance in postwar Europe (Pritchard, 2000, p. 85-92). In this example, the significance lies in the symbolism of the figures rather than the remains themselves.

The removal likely served more than a protective purpose. Hitler had previously visited Napoleon Bonaparte's tomb in Paris and was profoundly influenced by the symbolism of his monumental burial. Napoleon captured Hitler's imagination, known for his military genius and ambition, served as a model for Hitler in terms of leadership and empire-building. By assembling the coffins, Hitler may have envisioned a similar site intended to bolster nationalist sentiment (Edsel, 2006, p. 96). The presence of a wreath of unknown origins bearing Hitler's name in Bernterode mine supports the hypothesis that he intended to be interred among these figures. This would have served both a personal and propagandistic purpose, reinforcing Hitler's image as the culmination of German military greatness. Nazism imbued funerary practices with ideological significance. Hitler emphasised that burials should reflect Aryan values of sacrifice and honour. Elaborate state funerals and national cemeteries became tools for instilling patriotism and legitimising militarism, intended to bind the individual to the collective identity of the *Volksgemeinschaft* (Grunberger, 1993, p. 34). A tomb for Germany's martial elite would have seamlessly aligned with this narrative, serving both as a site of remembrance and a powerful instrument of propaganda. The remains had more significance to Hitler in this example, as they would be central to the plan.

Expansion

Hitler's expansionism stemmed from intertwined ideological, strategic, and economic aims (Kershaw, 2000). Central to this vision was *Lebensraum*, the drive to seize Eastern European territory for German settlement and racial supremacy, as outlined in *Mein Kampf* (Hitler, 1925, p. 305-10). Gerhard Weinberg emphasises its ideological foundation, while Adam Tooze highlights economic ambitions such as *Autarky* and resource control. Strategic opportunism influenced key moves, including the Anschluss, the Munich Agreement, and the invasion of Poland (Tooze, 2008). Andreas Hillgruber argues for a long-term expansionist plan, whereas historians such as Hans Mommsen interpret Hitler's policies as reactive and improvised (Hillgruber, 1981; Mommsen, 1991).

The objects' dual purpose draws my analysis, revealing layered intentions in their assemblage. Hitler sought to expand and reassert Nürnberg as the symbolic heart of German nationalism while diminishing the cultural and historical significance of Vienna. These actions also advanced Hitler's broader expansionist aims, particularly the reunification of Austria and Germany.

The Holy Roman Empire served as a model for Hitler's envisioned Reich, capable of exerting dominance over Europe. He admired the empire's unification of German territories, underscoring his commitment to building a greater Germany that would foster national pride.

By aligning the Nazi regime with the perceived divine and historical authority of the Empire, Hitler framed his territorial conquests as a restoration of a fractured Reich, rather than mere expansionism (Kershaw, 2000, p. 61). Hitler's ambition was spearheaded by reuniting Austria and Germany, a concept he linked with the regalia in *Mein Kampf*, describing it as a symbol of Austria's historical ties to Germany (Hitler, 1925, p. 563–566). By invading and subjugating various European nations, Hitler strategically employed the symbolism of the regalia and their association with the ruler of an empire to assert his authority and reinforce his imperialistic agenda (Brockmann, 2006, p. 200).

Enhancing Nürnberg

The regalia held deep historical and cultural significance for Nürnberg. The city's association with the regalia dates back to 1424, when Emperor Sigismund decreed that they should be permanently housed there, in so doing shaping its identity and establishing it as a key location of imperial power (Brockmann, 2006, p. 192). The city's advantageous location, economic and logistical advantages made it an ideal choice for safeguarding such valuable treasures. Additionally, Nürnberg's history of loyalty to the Holy Roman Emperors further solidified its position as the official custodian of the regalia. For more than 400 years, the regalia became central to Nürnberg's identity. They were publicly displayed during an annual grand procession, reinforcing the emperor's authority and evoking admiration from the populace. Echoing this tradition, Hitler arranged for the regalia's return during a Nazi rally and placed them in a public shrine at Saint Katharina's Church (Macdonald, 2009, p. 120-5). The return of the regalia to Nürnberg symbolised a natural progression from the First Reich to the Third, a continuation of the idea of the state's greatness. For the 1933 inaugural Nazi Party rally, Hitler commissioned a replica of the medieval shrine that once housed the regalia, but its emptiness underscored Nürnberg's lost imperial legacy. In preparation for a 1935 rally, Mayor Willy Liebel commissioned a replica of the ceremonial sword as a gift for Hitler, presenting it as emblematic of German unity and strength, reinforcing its ideological utility. He cited the work of Walter Buch, now a major in Himmler's Waffen-SS, whose research supported Nürnberg's legal claim to the imperial regalia. Hitler publicly acknowledged the regalia's profound meaning to his regime. So important were the artefacts to Hitler that, following his speech, he promised the original treasures would be returned to Nürnberg, once Austria was successfully annexed (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 117-8). This promise demonstrates the greater significance of the regalia themselves, as Liebel's replica, while cherished for its symbolism, did not appear to wholly satisfy Hitler.

Nürnberg's Nazi rally grounds were subject to architectural improvements to receive and display the regalia. The plans reflected Hitler's preference for Greco-Roman architectural symbolism. Ancient Greek culture had a strong influence on Hitler's ideology, especially his idealisation of militarised Greek city-states. The promotion of Aryan ideals, perceived as a reflection of Greek culture, fuelled Hitler's belief in racial supremacy. He viewed ancient Greek civilisation as a symbol of power, creativity, and intellectual prowess, qualities he sought to instil in the German state (Scobie, 1990, p. 69-73).

Opposing Vienna

Hitler's desire for the regalia was also likely driven by his deep-seated hatred of Vienna. Hitler's animosity progressed from personal experiences and ideological convictions. His time in Vienna, between 1908 and 1913, was marked by personal failure, which shaped his hostility

towards the city and its perceived cultural decadence. This resentment became crucial in shaping his political ideology and his desire to control Viennese culture upon his rise to power. He perceived Vienna's cross-culturalism, particularly its Jewish and Slavic populations, as undermining Aryan racial purity and German cultural dominance (Moorhouse, 2021, p. 19-22).

The regalia held considerable symbolic and political significance for Vienna, particularly from the 15th century onwards when the city became the Habsburg capital. The regalia legitimised imperial rule and conveyed divine authority. Although the empire remained a decentralised political entity, the custody of the regalia elevated Vienna's status, effectively establishing it as the de facto capital of the empire, a status previously held by Nürnberg. Housed in the Hofburg Palace from 1424, the regalia affirmed Vienna's political authority and reinforced its religious importance, as the regalia were used in coronations and were believed to embody sacred power, particularly the Holy Lance, thought to have pierced Christ's side (Wilson, 2020, p. 255-62). Even after the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, Vienna retained the regalia, affirming their continued association with imperial heritage (Whaley, 2012, p. 70-5). The regalia were not mere ceremonial objects but crucial in sustaining imperial ideology and Vienna's central role in early modern Europe.

The Fourth Reich

Far-right movements today continue to invoke Hitler's leadership and violent ideology, sustaining his legacy beyond 1945. As Robert Gellately shows, enabling the reinterpretation of fascist ideals in a modern context (Gellately, 2020). Once a mockery, the concept of a 'Fourth Reich' has been adopted by neo-Nazis and conspiracy theorists to promote authoritarian and racist ideologies, as discussed by Martin A. Lee (Lee, 2013). Roger Griffin documents the use of the term 'Fourth Reich' in conspiracy theories and as a rallying cry to promote anti-globalist, antisemitic, and anti-democratic ideas in contemporary politics (Griffin, 1993).

Hitler's acquisition of regalia and coffins initially served clear symbolic and propagandistic purposes; Hitler's handling of these artefacts in the final war stages suggests an awareness of impending defeat. This shift indicates that he sought to employ these artefacts to support a projected Fourth Reich and perpetuate Nazi ideology (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 234-51). The objects' layered symbolism warrants closer examination. There is a lack of certainty about the object's intended purpose post-war, but numerous ideas align with Hitler's obsession with history, propaganda, and displays of wealth and power.

The Fourth Reich is primarily associated with neo-Nazi ideologies and speculative fiction. It refers to a hypothetical revival of Nazi rule, restoring its authoritarian and racial doctrines. While no formal political entity bearing this name has ever existed, the idea reflects the ongoing appeal of fascism and idealised legacies (Stahl, 2018, p. 19-22). Within such frameworks, the regalia, symbolic of historic Germanic power, can be seen as symbols of imperial power and militarism. These objects could be repurposed to legitimise political claims by invoking an imagined continuity with the legacy of emperors and conquerors, as the Third Reich did. This symbolic potential appears to have motivated high-ranking Nazi officials during the final stages of World War II.

Concealment for continuity

Lieutenant Walter William Horn, a German-American art historian and member of the Monuments Men initiative, was tasked with recovering the regalia missing from the vault under Nürnberg castle. According to Horn, Himmler ordered the relocation of the imperial crown, sceptre, orb, ceremonial and imperial swords, along with $25 million in gold bullion, in early 1945. This cache was intended to fund and legitimise a future Nazi resurgence. Under the direction of Mayor Liebel, appointed by Himmler for this covert operation, the regalia were concealed in a wall and hidden with elaborate measures, including a decoy convoy to mislead Allied troops. Horn suggests Liebel's mission extended beyond preservation, hinting at efforts to revive Nazism through civilian infiltration in postwar occupation administrations in Nürnberg. In this vision, the regalia awaited a future leader who would symbolically restore Nazi rule (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 225–229).

Similarly, the cache of artefacts discovered alongside the coffins in the Bernterode mine was a carefully curated collection intended to preserve and promote the regime's ideology under a prospective Fourth Reich. The site housed a collection of German regimental banners dating from the early Prussian wars through to World War I, along with stashes of paintings and tapestries originating from royal residences in Potsdam, Berlin, and Sanssouci. Ammunition boxes were repurposed to store books and photographs from the personal library of Frederick the Great, as well as swastika-embroidered memorabilia and commemorative ribbons. The mine also contained portraits and photographs of military leaders of the Prussian state, from King Frederick Wilhelm I to Hitler, reinforcing a visual narrative that linked Hitler to earlier militaristic rulers. Most notably, the regalia of the Prussian monarchy were present, including the Reich sword of Prince Albrecht forged in 1540, as well as the sceptre, orb, and crown used at the coronation of Frederick Wilhelm I in 1713. According to Captain Walker Hancock and Lieutenant George Stout of the Monuments Men, who uncovered the site, the Bernterode cache was interpreted as a reliquary, one of the most significant assemblages of German military and imperial heritage, likely meant to support a postwar Nazi revival (Edsel & Witter, 2014, p. 339–341).

Moving the coffins symbolised the regime's collapse and a final attempt to preserve a curated national myth. The Nazis had skilfully manipulated German history to legitimise their rule, casting themselves as the inheritors of a glorious past. By evacuating these symbols, the regime implicitly acknowledged its impending demise and the failure of its grand project. It also reflected a desperate attempt to salvage some semblance of national identity amidst the ruins of war. As Germany faced total defeat, preserving these figures reflected an effort to retain links to a selectively constructed national past (Beevor, 2003, p. 140-5).

The Flensburg Government and continuity

Attempting to manage the Nazi regime's collapse and preserve influence post-Hitler, the Flensburg Government formed a short-lived successor regime. Led by Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, President of the Reich and Hitler's successor as head of state and Albert Speer, a German architect and later Minister of Armaments and War Production, at the top. The pair manoeuvred to remain politically relevant by distancing themselves from Hitler's extremism while positioning themselves as post-Hitler leaders. Leveraging their positions to appear indispensable during the regime's collapse, they sought to convince the Allies of their non-complicity in the Nazi regime, emphasising alleged efforts to undermine Hitler's scorched-

earth orders, subtly appealing for leadership in a restructured, Allied-approved Germany. This came to an end when they were arrested by the Allies and sentenced for war crimes at the Nürnberg Trials (Delaforce, 2017, p. 47-52).

The promise of a lasting Reich appears to fuel the assemblage of caches in the network of mines. While legacy remained central to Hitler's vision, it was through these symbolic artefacts that he imagined historical continuity. The collection comprises artefacts that paved the road to the Germany he shaped based on traditionalist values. This implied hope for a future revival mirroring the historical gap between the Second and Third Reich ultimately contradicted his scorched-earth policy.

Conclusion

Hitler's obsession with imperial regalia, the noble funerary remains of German military icons, and cultural artefacts was not merely an exercise in historical nostalgia; it was central to the ideological and symbolic architecture of the Nazi regime. These objects served as tools of propaganda, unification, and exclusion, linking the Third Reich to an idealised vision of Germany's imperial past while reinforcing Hitler's authority as the rightful heir to that legacy. The regalia's relocation from Vienna to Nürnberg, the symbolic "return" of Germany's lost grandeur, and the elaborate concealment of treasures and coffins in the final months of the war all reflect a calculated effort to enshrine Nazi rule within a mythic continuum of national destiny.

Yet, this manipulation of history also exposed deep contradictions. Hitler simultaneously despised and exploited the aristocracy, undermined old monarchies while appropriating their symbols, and cast himself as both destroyer and saviour of Germany's imperial identity. He looted Vienna not just for its treasures but to symbolically destroy its legacy and replace it with his own. His revival of Nürnberg as a cultural capital, paired with the theatrical return of the regalia, was not only about national pride but about crafting an origin story for the Nazi state. These artefacts reveal not only the regime's propaganda ambitions but also its anxieties: a need to secure permanence through objects even as the Reich collapsed around them. Ultimately, the attempted preservation and repurposing of symbols reflect a desperate effort to script the future through the past, projecting the possibility of a Fourth Reich that was never realised yet continues to haunt historical memory and far-right ideologies today. The brief survival of the Flensburg Government further illustrates this paradox: even as the Nazi state collapsed, senior figures sought to preserve symbolic continuity while distancing themselves from Hitler's extremism to retain political relevance. These efforts underscore how deeply Hitler and his inner circle believed in the power of material culture to forge identity, continuity, and legitimacy. Yet in failing to secure lasting dominance, the artefacts now stand as enduring reminders of the regime's attempt to manipulate history. At the same time, their possession satisfied an emotive desire to inscribe leaders into a sacred national past, blurring the line between state propaganda and personal self-fashioning. This dual function, both political and personal, provides a framework for understanding how other Nazi elites, such as Göring and Himmler, mobilised cultural property for their own ends.

Chapter 2 - Hermann Göring and Art

Hermann Göring was a leading figure in Nazi Germany, known for his role in the Nazi Party's rise and the implementation of its oppressive policies. As a decorated World War I fighter pilot, he became a close ally of Hitler. Göring founded the Gestapo, led the Luftwaffe, and was once named Hitler's successor (Evans, 2005, p. 16). He was instrumental in militarisation efforts and anti-Jewish persecution, becoming a symbol of Nazi brutality and corruption (Kershaw, 2000, p. 392-4).

Shared vision

Göring and Hitler both regarded art as a strategic tool for ideological and cultural control in Nazi Germany. Both leaders rejected modernist movements, promoting classical Greco-Roman aesthetics aligned with Aryan ideals to serve their racial and nationalist agendas, as highlighted by Peter Adam (Adam, 1995). Their shared ideological goals led to the systematic plunder and exploitation of art, leaving a lasting legacy of cultural theft explored by Hector Feliciano (Feliciano, 1997). This intersection of personal greed, political power, and racial ideology underscores how art was instrumentalised in the regime's pursuit of supremacy.

Artistic taste

The selected artworks highlight both the shared and opposing artistic preferences, cultural backgrounds, and favoured artists of Göring and Hitler. They reveal the extent of their ideological alignment, particularly in cultural policy and aesthetics. Furthermore, they demonstrate how Göring's public actions supported Hitler's cultural programme, but his private actions developed Carinhall as a similar grand collection site, somewhat mirroring and reinforcing Hitler's broader vision for the arts in the Third Reich.

Göring stated that modern art repulsed him, preferring traditional styles and messages also favoured by Hitler (Goldensohn, 2005, p. 106). Both leaders particularly admired the neoclassical style, inspired by the culture of ancient Greece and Rome. Göring was known to collect Roman architectural fragments, while Hitler idealised the style's depictions of the human body, seen as representing the Aryan ideals of power and wealth (Grosshans, 1983, p. 44).

La Belle Allemande and Carinhall

Image left: La Belle Allemande statue.

Alford, K.D. (2014). *Hermann Göring and the Nazi Art Collection*. North Carolina: McFarland.

Göring's acquisition of the *La Belle Allemande* statue echoed Hitler's racial ideology and the regime's cultural agenda. Created in the 16th century by German artist Gregor Erhart, the statue depicts an idealised Aryan woman and embodied Nazi aesthetic values (Alford, 2014, p. 70). See Appendix C for item description. Göring displayed it at Carinhall, his country estate, which became one of the largest private collections in Nazi Germany.

After the Nazis took control, Göring and Hitler planned for numerous cultural centres in addition to Hitler's prized Linz Museum. Göring was to gather a collection that would be named after him and passed to Germany in a museum. Carinhall was intended as a symbolic cultural institution, with a dedicated rail link from Berlin to facilitate public access (Alford, 2014, p. 15). In support of this initiative, Göring planned to turn over the gallery at the beginning of 1953 to avoid a conflict with the establishment of the Linz Museum (Alford, 2014, p. 125).

Renaissance Art

Image left: The Madonna and Child.

Edsel, R.M. (2013). *Saving Italy: The Race to Rescue a Nation's Treasures from the Nazis*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Hitler's preference for Renaissance and Baroque pieces and Göring's admiration of early Italian Renaissance works intersect in Bernardino Luini's 16th-century painting of *The Madonna and Child*. See Appendix D for item description. Created during the Italian Renaissance, considered a high point in Western civilisation by Hitler, it depicts themes of motherhood, purity, and idealised beauty, resonating with Hitler's ideological and aesthetic preferences. Göring had the piece transferred to the Altaussee Mine, where similar Madonna depictions were stored alongside other key pieces for the Linz Museum (Alford, 2014, p. 125). The symbolic alignment of these artworks with Nazi ideology appears to have held greater significance for Göring than their inherent artistic or monetary value.

Looting and the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR)

While Hitler's cultural policy provided the ideological framework, Göring operationalised it through his dominance of the ERR. Through his work with the ERR units dedicated to seizing cultural property, Göring funnelled artworks into the Linz collection. He had exclusive privileges to select from looted items before they were catalogued for redistribution. Hitler received *Old Masters*, elite Western European works from the Renaissance through the 18th century, often in a Realistic style, usually religious, mythological, or historical in theme and Germanic works that fit his Aryan-Germanic aesthetic ideology (Nicholas, 1980, p. 158–165).

The ERR and Enemy Property Control were implementing Hitler's cultural program by compiling the property and assets of the Jewish population and others considered enemies. Hitler gave Göring complete control over the disposal of confiscated items, who, as head of a 4-year plan starting in 1936, sought to make Germany economically self-sufficient. He used confiscated Jewish property to fund Germany's rearmament programme, redirecting confiscated Jewish wealth into Nazi coffers (Alford, 2014, p. 54). Money from this operation was also funnelled into Art Bureaus set up across Europe to purchase pieces for the Linz Museum (Alford, 2014, p. 31). Göring's actions demonstrate his active support for Hitler's ideological and economic objectives as a senior figure within the Nazi hierarchy.

Self-interest

Göring's involvement in Nazi art looting was primarily motivated by personal ambition and a functional view of culture. As detailed by Jonathan Steinberg, Göring exploited state mechanisms like the ERR to build an extensive private collection, particularly from Jewish collectors (Steinberg, 1990). Jonathan Petropoulos argues that Göring manipulated Nazi cultural policy to serve his tastes, often prioritising aesthetic or financial value over ideological purity (Petropoulos, 2021). While the Nazi regime sought to redefine European art along racial and nationalist lines, Göring's collection reflected a more opportunistic and transactional approach. Unlike Hitler's legacy-driven vision, Göring leveraged political influence for personal gain. Their collaboration blurred the lines between personal ambition and state policy.

Rivalry with Hitler

These objects have been selected for the insight they offer into Göring's personal tastes and private conduct, particularly concerning perceptions of greed and self-interest. They support an alternative interpretation of Göring as a rival, rather than a complement to Hitler's cultural programme, most notably through his development of Carinhall as a competing project to the Linz Museum.

Hitler was his biggest rival in collecting, with many stores first being dedicated to the Linz Museum and Göring being offered what remained. Hitler recognised Göring's self-interest, stating, "I collect for the people, he for himself" (Alford, 2014, p. 32). In France, Hitler would request art through the ERR, while Göring would negotiate in person, which often confused the acquisition of pieces and led to delays that gave the resistance time to move key artefacts out of Nazi reach (Chanel, 2018, p. 145-51).

Göring's preferences

Göring stated his tastes differed from Hitler's; he expressed a preference for nude studies, intricate altarpieces, and his favourite style was Gothic, a stark contrast to Hitler's love of Classical-Romantic 19th-century works (Goldensohn, 2005, p. 106). Göring hired specialist art dealers in Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Medieval works to scout for his collection (Alford, 2014, p. 65). He stated his weakness for luxury stemmed from his upbringing in wealth; his godfather wished for him to become knowledgeable and accomplished in many different fields, and Göring excelled at art collection (Urbach, 2015, p. 183). He began his collection pre-World War II, and his ability grew with the wealth and status of the party. He desired the statue not only for its aesthetics as a nude, but also for its creation in the Gothic period and preferred wooden material, opposing Hitler's love of bronze and stone (Goldensohn, 2005, p. 106).

His collection functioned as a symbolic assertion of cultural authority and aesthetic sophistication. The statue depicts Mary Magdalene, an image repeatedly collected by Göring in statues and paintings for its pure, strong, serene iconography, suiting his preference for dramatic, evocative art. Similarly, the image of *The Madonna and Child* was collected in multiple forms, highlighting these depictions of prominent religious figures by renowned artists, which elevated his cultural status (Alford, Johnson and Morris, 2013, p. 40). It raises questions about whether Göring's interest lay in the object's style and iconography aligning with his tastes or its enhancing effect on his social status to own numerous high-quality pieces.

Expanding his collection

In 1939, his collection had roughly 200 objects. By war's end, Göring's collection had expanded dramatically to over 2,000 individual artworks and artefacts, including paintings, sculptures, tapestries, and period furniture spread across 9 separate properties in Germany (Alford, 2014, p. 25-6, 126). His collection was able to grow at this rate through the strategic looting from the ERR reserves and placing his art dealers within the Foreign Currency Control, they would freeze collections for Jewish heritage inspection, and intercept any confirmed cases (Alford, 2014, p. 124). When a ban was placed on exporting purchases out of Italy, Göring bypassed restrictions through official embassy channels to have them sent to Germany; Göring continued acquiring art despite diplomatic complications (Alford, 2014, p. 101).

Göring frequently acquired "degenerate" works with the intent of reselling them on the foreign art market, pocketing the profits for redistribution. By 1943, he was attempting to sell these pieces anonymously through intermediaries, indicating a deliberate effort to obscure both the ownership and the legality of the acquisitions (Petropoulos, 2021, p. 91–92). The funds used to amass his collection were, by Hitler's directive, to be drawn from state resources. Göring utilised state organisations to launder this money and conceal his looting operations (Petropoulos, 2016, p. 548–555).

Post-War legacy

Despite the extensive evidence of art looting, Göring maintained his innocence during post-war investigations. He claimed that his actions were legal and ethical, asserting that he never looted for personal enrichment, always paid for the art, and received works through official channels. Nevertheless, his motives and methods suggest otherwise. As the Göring family's wealth declined during the economic crisis and with Hermann's military career increasingly uncertain after World War I, he sought to sustain his redeveloped wealth in the Nazi Party. He routinely haggled over art purchases, often suggesting less than the pieces were worth, a fact he admitted to openly (Goldensohn, 2005, p. 107, 128–129).

His chief agent in Paris, Bruno Lohse, played a key role in this system by trading modernist or abstract works, often confiscated from Jewish collectors or museums, for more traditional art that aligned with Göring's tastes and Hitler's cultural programme. This approach not only evaded Göring's currency restrictions but also advanced the regime's cultural propaganda by removing modern art from circulation and replacing it with classical European works (Petropoulos, 2021, p. 91).

His self-interest in both pieces is demonstrated through their display at Carinhall before being hidden upon Allied invasion. The painting was showcased as part of a limited exhibit matching Göring's appreciation of the Early Italian Renaissance (Alford, 2014, p. 125). The pieces were

moved several times before being sealed in mines or bunkers. The statue was sealed in Berchtesgaden with concrete covering the bunker's entrance; Göring's attempts to preserve the statue during his escape suggest that its value to him was predominantly material rather than symbolic (Alford, Johnson and Morris, 2013, p. 34-40). When it was suggested that his collection was for self-interest, he emphasised the need to distinguish between two completely separate categories of items. On one hand, there were the artworks he had acquired through his resources, his personal property to be enjoyed by him. On the other hand, there were pieces obtained using the official art budget. He stated that he had informed the Reich Finance Minister Count von Krosigk that the entire collection was ultimately meant to be transferred to public ownership through Carinhall as Hitler intended (Alford, 2014, p. 125). Notably, Göring referred solely to Carinhall when discussing public inheritance, omitting the 8 additional storage sites under his control, indicating limited intent to transfer the collection in its entirety.

Power and status

Göring employed art strategically to assert status, consolidate power, enhance his standing within the Nazi hierarchy, and craft an image consistent with the party's ideological and cultural programme. As documented by scholars Nancy Yeide and Patricia Teter-Schneider, Göring amassed one of the largest private art collections in Europe through widespread looting, coercion, and manipulation of the art market (Yeide and Teter-Schneider, 2008). Carinhall served as both a symbol of his elite status and a venue for Nazi cultural propaganda, as detailed by Patricia Grimsted (Grimsted, 2011). Göring's collecting practices were not merely acts of personal indulgence but calculated efforts to align himself with European aristocratic traditions, reinforce Nazi ideals, and erase Jewish cultural contributions as discussed by Volker Knopf and Stefan Martens (Knopf and Martens, 2006). Through art, Göring constructed an image of refinement and authority, leveraging cultural capital as an instrument of ideological and political power.

These objects warrant analysis for the tensions they reveal regarding Göring's influence and status. While the circumstances of their acquisition reveal underlying vulnerabilities in his position, their eventual consolidation into his collection simultaneously affirms his considerable power. Moreover, these artworks offer insight into Göring's approach to foreign policy, his relationship with wealth, and his broader influence within the Nazi Party.

Cultural propaganda in Carinhall

Carinhall orchestrated displays of authority and wealth, intended to consolidate Göring's status within Nazi elite circles. These events often featured theatrical presentations, attended by Nazi elites and foreign dignitaries who expressed allegiance to Göring through the presentation of luxury goods and rare artworks. Art dealer Walter Bornheim compiled a collection of art from which Nazi officials would select gifts for Göring (Alford, 2014, p. 42-3). The estate included a 34-metre Grand Gallery and a domed library filled with an extensive collection of paintings by artists such as Rubens, Monet, and Van Gogh, much of which was looted from Jewish collectors and occupied territories during the war (Le Tissier, 2004, p. 72).

This collection exemplified Göring's exploitation of Nazi looting operations to fulfil both personal ambition and cultural self-fashioning. The naming of Carinhall after Göring's first wife and the construction of a crypt on the estate imbued the property with symbolic and mythic significance, reinforcing his familial standing within Nazi society and bolstering his self-

presentation as a patriarchal and aristocratic figure (Urbach, 2015, p. 183). His dominance in the art market was facilitated through coercion, underpinning his reputation as both a cultural and political enforcer. These characteristics were tested during his efforts to acquire the statue.

Struggles over the statue

Göring's persistent efforts to acquire the statue were repeatedly thwarted by diplomatic and institutional barriers that reflected the complexities of wartime art looting. Despite his power and influence, he faced obstacles such as bureaucratic red tape, competing interests from other collectors, and the diplomatic sensitivity surrounding certain artworks. The Louvre purchased the statue in 1902; art is central to French national identity, and the theft of the statue was not just material but a violation of France's cultural sovereignty. The transfer of artworks to Germany aimed to weaken France's cultural status while expanding that of Nazi Germany (Chanel, 2018, p. 137-8). The seizure of the statue was reluctantly organised as an art exchange between Germany and France; however, France correctly predicted that items they were promised would never be produced. This suspicion led to their delaying the handoff until 1944, after exhausting all available resources (Chanel, 2018, p. 219).

These delays not only hindered his ambitions but also highlighted the broader challenges the Nazis encountered in their efforts to control Europe's cultural heritage. The persistent difficulties in obtaining the statue highlighted the limitations faced by even senior Nazi officials amid legal, logistical, and political obstacles. Göring's persistence indicates the statue held a higher significance beyond mere symbolism.

Military and political roles

Göring held a prominent position within the Nazi hierarchy, wielding considerable military and political power. In 1935, he was appointed Reich Minister of Aviation and became Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe, a role he maintained throughout World War II (Evans, 2005, p. 634). His control over the Luftwaffe made him second only to Hitler in prestige, particularly during the early years of the war (Shirer, 1960, p. 259). Göring also played a key role in the establishment of the Hermann Göring Division, which originated as a police unit but was gradually militarised into a full panzer division by 1943 (Mitcham, 2007, p. 55). These roles collectively underscore Göring's central influence and position to guide looting operations. He supplied the ERR with resources for transport, military escorts and other operational support they could not get elsewhere and would not have functioned as effectively without (Alford, 2014, p. 51). Their consistent involvement with cultural looting created an environment where the Panzer Division became infamous for its involvement in widespread theft in occupied territories, especially in Italy and Eastern Europe, often requisitioning valuables under the guise of military necessity (Mitcham, 2007, p. 156). Given Göring's leadership of the Reich's economic 4-Year Plan and his role in cultural theft, the division's looting activities aligned closely with his broader efforts to enrich the Reich and himself through systematic looting. However, his fostering of this behaviour backfired when his division looted crates from Monte Cassino that included *The Madonna and Child* painting.

The Monte Cassino affair

Italy's art deposits across Naples were closest to the emerging war zones; they were sent to Monte Cassino Abbey, renowned for its rich library, religious art, and cultural heritage, and its remote and thought to be untouchable location on a mountain top (Nicholas, 1980, p. 232).

Bernardino Luini was an important Renaissance painter active in Northern Italy, and his works are valued as part of Italy's rich artistic heritage. The painting reflects Italy's deep tradition of religious art, embodying centuries of devotion, creative achievement, and cultural identity. Losing such works through wartime pillaging represented a significant cultural loss for Italy, depriving the nation of its historical treasures (Nicholas, 1980, p. 11-3). As Allied forces approached, Italian authorities rerouted the artworks to the Vatican for safeguarding, and the Panzer Division was tasked with their transport. During the transfer, they acquired 15 cases of art to be sent to Carinhall as a surprise for Göring's 50th birthday (Hapgood and Richardson, 2002, p. 117-8).

This operation risked violating the 1939 Pact of Steel, which explicitly banned unauthorised transfers of cultural property between Axis powers (Alford, 2014, p. 101). However, Göring was able to escape consequences through his influence and connections. The panzer officers covered their tracks, stating the crates had been evacuated to safety in Orvieto, then to the Vatican (Hapgood and Richardson, 2002, p. 117-8). The cases were sent to Carinhall. Upon discovery, Göring ordered the painting and other items to be part of a temporary exhibit before being stashed in the Krufurst shelter for a year until they were transferred to the Reich chancellery for inclusion in the Linz Museum (Alford, 2014, p. 125).

Influence in the Nazi hierarchy

Göring emerged as the regime's most trusted deputy, consistently publicly endorsing and promoting its policies and ideological framework. He visibly exhibited his power and wealth, particularly through the assemblage of an extensive and esteemed art collection that rivalled and, in certain respects, surpassed that of Hitler. Within the Nazi hierarchy, Göring was arguably the sole figure whose influence approached that of Hitler. His art collection, distinguished by its range, quality, and value, provoked considerable admiration (Nicholas, 1980, p. 28-30). His position granted him comprehensive access to regime resources, which he exploited to facilitate looting operations. He delegated his Paris collector, Lohse, a document as leverage in employing military, state, and party organisations to obtain art (Alford, 2014, p. 31).

His high position in the party meant he was a key figure in foreign policy. Concerning art, he led numerous negotiations of trades and deals with other powers. In 1942, Göring negotiated directly with Vichy Prime Minister Laval the terms of an exchange between German and French museums. The statue was the first item requested as part of a "voluntary cultural exchange" with several visits and appraisals held at the Jeu de Paume to legitimise the process; nevertheless, French officials at the museum interpreted the order as an elaborate scheme to continue looting the country of its prized cultural possessions (Chanel, 2018, p. 169-70). The Panzer Division was directly involved in the 1943 evacuation of Monte Cassino's cultural assets. They organised convoys using division trucks to transport invaluable library volumes and artworks, including Luini's painting, from the abbey to safety at the Vatican. This operation publicised the collaboration between the German Archaeological Institute and Italian Cultural Agencies, featuring official handover ceremonies intended to project the Nazis' role as cultural protectors and to diminish allegations of looting (Hapgood and Richardson, 2002, p. 117-8).

Economic and symbolic roles

Göring was economically essential to the Nazi regime due to his central role in both state-led economic planning and the systematic looting of occupied territories. As head of the 4-Year Plan, he controlled key aspects of Germany's war economy, driving rearmament and industrial expansion. Göring also oversaw the economic exploitation of conquered regions, orchestrating the large-scale seizure of resources, artworks, and Jewish property through the Enemy Property Control. His leadership in the Aryanization of Jewish businesses and coordination of art looting operations further enriched the regime and himself personally. Through these actions, Göring helped finance the Nazi war machine, art bureaus and a Europe-wide network of dealers (Bel, 2010, p. 34-43).

Göring's power and status were reflected not only in his formal roles within the Nazi hierarchy but also through deliberate self-representation and symbolic alignment with the regime's ideological and military aims. As Reichsmarschall and head of the Luftwaffe, Göring cultivated an image of grandeur and authority, often positioning himself as a cultural patron, military hero, and loyal executor of Hitler's vision (Evans, 2005, p. 16). His visibility in public ceremonies, lavish personal lifestyle, and appropriation of cultural artefacts underscored both his ambition and his significance to the functioning of key Nazi institutions (Alford, 2014, p. 42-3). He actively served to reinforce his centrality to the regime, legitimising his influence over military, economic, and cultural affairs while projecting an image of charismatic leadership aligned with Nazi ideals.

Conclusion

Göring's art collection epitomised the convergence of personal ambition, ideological enforcement, and state power within Nazi cultural practices. His orchestration of looting operations, combined with the development of Carinhall as a private palace of art, served both as a public declaration of loyalty to Nazi aesthetics and as a means of enriching his personal prestige and influence. While publicly aligning with Hitler's cultural programme, championing Aryan aesthetics and purging "degenerate" art, Göring's private collecting was opportunistic and self-serving, often prioritising reputation, personal taste, and financial gain over ideological consistency. Unlike Hitler, whose collecting practices were tethered to mythic narratives of destiny, Göring used objects to consolidate power through spectacle, status, and competition within the Nazi hierarchy.

Through strategic deployment of state organisations, coercion, and manipulation of the international art market, Göring assembled one of the largest private collections in Europe, frequently at the expense of Jewish victims and occupied nations. His dual roles, as enforcer of Nazi policy and as a private collector, positioned him uniquely, simultaneously advancing Hitler's goals while competing with them. Carinhall, developed as a rival to Hitler's planned Linz Museum, exemplified his desire to secure a lasting legacy within the Nazi cultural hierarchy.

Göring's activities reveal the deeply emotive dimensions of possession: envy, rivalry, and the performance of cultural authority were as integral to his collecting as any ideological commitment. The artworks he amassed functioned as markers of status, taste, and calculated efforts to shape his perception within the Nazi elite and in history. Ultimately, his looting was not merely a symptom of Nazi barbarism but a highly symbolic and performative tool of

power projection. By manipulating cultural assets, Göring elevated his authority, reinforced state propaganda, and contributed to the regime's broader racial and ideological aims, while also exposing the contradictions between ideology and indulgence, public service and private gain within the Nazi leadership.

Chapter 3 - Heinrich Himmler and Religious Items

Heinrich Himmler was a key figure in Nazi Germany; he joined the German Workers' Party in 1919 and quickly rose through the ranks due to his loyalty to Hitler. Himmler became the head of the SS, a paramilitary group created to protect Hitler. Under his leadership, the SS grew in power and influence. Himmler played a crucial role in carrying out the Holocaust, aiming for a racially pure society by exterminating millions in concentration camps. His ability to justify his cruel actions as part of his vision for racial purity reveals a disturbing side to his personality and beliefs (Manvell and Fraenkel, 2007, p. 1-10).

Himmler's relationship with Hitler

Himmler projected unwavering loyalty and ideological alignment within the Nazi Party. Historian Peter Longerich highlights Himmler's close personal and political bond with Hitler, grounded in shared beliefs on racial purity, anti-Semitism, and nationalism (Longerich, 2011). As Hitler consolidated power, he increasingly delegated authority over internal security and racial policy to Himmler, as detailed by Richard J. Evans (Evans, 2005). This transfer of responsibility signified not only Hitler's trust in Himmler but also elevated Himmler to a series of powerful positions within the regime.

The depths of Hitler's trust in Himmler and his role in advancing Nazi ideology through symbolic artefacts are what capture my interest. Beyond acquiring such objects, Himmler played a central role in formulating the propaganda that legitimised and disseminated Nazi cultural and racial ideology. Evidence from both primary and secondary sources indicates that Himmler orchestrated his relationship with Hitler to strengthen his position within the party. As this relationship deepened, so too did Himmler's influence, both within the party hierarchy and over Hitler himself. He outmanoeuvred rivals by consistently aligning with Hitler's symbolic ideals, a dynamic explored by Joachim Fest (Fest, 2011). However, as the war progressed and the fortunes of the regime declined, Himmler increasingly prioritised his survival over loyalty to Hitler, a transition analysed by Longerich.

The Spear of Destiny

Image left: The Spear of Destiny.

Edsel, R.M. (2006). *Rescuing Da Vinci: Hitler and the Nazis Stole Europe's Great Art: America and Her Allies Recovered It*. Dallas: Laurel Pub.

On Hitler's orders, Himmler led the SS in seizing the Spear of Destiny from Vienna's Hofburg Palace (Roland, 2019, p. 111). The relic, long linked to emperors such as Charlemagne and Otto I, symbolised divine kingship and German imperial continuity (Roland, 2019, p. 49–50). See Appendix A for item description. Recovering it advanced Hitler's symbolic goals while

strengthening Himmler's bond with him and his role as custodian of the regime's cultural narrative.

Nürnberg and the *High Altar of Saint Mary*

Image left and right: The High Altar of Saint Mary.

Edsel, R.M. (2006). *Rescuing Da Vinci: Hitler and the Nazis Stole Europe's Great Art: America and Her Allies Recovered It*. Dallas: Laurel Pub.

Himmler's influence extended to other key cultural projects. Albert Speer collaborated closely with Hitler on numerous cultural and architectural projects, including the redevelopment of Nürnberg as the symbolic cultural capital of the Reich (Weikart, 2016, p. 188). Included in these plans was the conversion of Saint Lorenz into a National Cathedral. In 1940, Himmler acquired the *High Altar of Saint Mary,* created by German artist Veit Stoss, through the *Ahnenerbe*, an SS research organisation founded in 1935 to research the roots and cultural practices of the Aryan race. See Appendix E for item description. Where Hitler relied on regalia and Göring on the ERR, Himmler created his own institutional tool to trace artefacts of ideological value to Hitler (Edsel, 2006, p. 108-9). His recommendation to install the altar within the National Cathedral was ultimately approved by Hitler, dominating proposals from Göring and Joseph Goebbels (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 154). While the cathedral was under construction, Himmler ensured the safety of the altar in a bunker beneath Nürnberg castle, where it was later discovered by Allied forces in 1945. These actions illustrate Himmler's commitment to advancing Hitler's ideological vision through symbolic artefacts (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 26).

Authority and Treachery

Despite ridicule, Nazi elites acknowledged Himmler's influence (Goldensohn, 2005, p. 115). Fellow officers viewed Himmler as power-hungry, cunning, and ambitious for Hitler's position (Goldensohn, 2005). As head of multiple policing and intelligence agencies, including the SS, Gestapo, and SD, Himmler wielded considerable authority, enabling both the enforcement of Hitler's ideological and political directives and the opportunity to engage in acts of treachery. His involvement in Operation Valkyrie directly threatened Hitler's life, and the initiation of secret negotiations with Sweden regarding control of concentration camps led to doubts about his loyalty (Goldensohn, 2005, p. 420-2). Himmler's betrayal stemmed from ambition, shifting politics, and the looming Nazi defeat. Historians argue that Himmler's loyalty hinged on self-preservation and power. His priorities shifted significantly as Germany faced a decisive turn in the war. Towards the end of the conflict, Himmler pursued peace negotiations with the Allies,

envisioning a role in a post-Hitler order and disregarding Hitler's uncompromising stance against surrender (Shirer, 1960, p. 60-5).

Race and culture

Researchers have identified Himmler's racial and cultural beliefs as central to Nazi policy and the SS's expansion. Richard Breitman traces his shift from nationalism to orchestrating genocide through policy (Breitman, 1992). Michael Burleigh emphasises his role in shaping Nazi racial doctrine via SS offices like the Race and Settlement Office (Burleigh, 2001). Heather Pringle highlights his use of the *Ahnenerbe* to legitimise Aryan supremacy, while Mark Mazower details how his vision of a racially ordered empire was pursued through population programs (Pringle, 2006; Mazower, 2009). By analysing these objects in conjunction with the organisations Himmler used to acquire them, this study demonstrates how he exploited institutional power to carry out racially motivated degradation targeting Polish and Viennese populations. This focus aligns with my interest in examining aspects of Himmler's racial ideology that are often overlooked in historical scholarship that is predominantly centred on the Holocaust and antisemitism.

Himmler publicly aligned with Nazi racial and cultural doctrine, yet his actions suggest additional motivations that paralleled Hitler's directives. The spear, housed in Vienna, was regarded as both a national and spiritual relic, symbolising the city's historical connection to the Holy Roman Empire and Christian Europe (Wilson, 2020, p. 238–40). For Hitler, recovering the spear reasserted a purified German cultural history. Himmler, however, used it as a tool to undermine Vienna's cross-cultural society, home to Jewish, Slavic, and Roma communities. The Nazis sought to reclaim such artefacts as instruments of cultural domination, denying access to groups deemed unworthy (Weinberg, 1994, p. 31–47).

The Spear and the Altar

The spear, linked to Saint Longinus, believed to have originated in 1st-century Rome, was formerly housed in Nürnberg before being moved to Vienna in 1796 to prevent its capture by Napoleon (Roland, 2019, p. 49–53). Although Emperor Sigismund's 1424 edict designated Nürnberg as its guardian, Vienna retained it after the Holy Roman Empire's collapse, reflecting shifting power dynamics and contested cultural authority (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 31, 94–95). Himmler manipulated historical decrees and racial ideologies to justify the forced transfer after Austria's annexation, presenting his interpretation to the German public as fact (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 116). A similar pattern occurred with Veit Stoss' 15th-century altarpiece in Kraków. Although created by a German sculptor, it was commissioned by Polish patrons and embedded with Polish religious and cultural symbolism, notably its depiction of the Virgin Mary, a figure central to Polish identity (Baxandall, 1980, p. 85–97). Himmler seized it for a celebration of Stoss' birthday, framing it as a reclaiming of Germanic heritage (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 154). While this act aligned with Hitler's cultural program, it also reflected Himmler's broader racial agenda. This suppression of Polish heritage sought to weaken national identity and suppress resistance, embodied by the Armia Krajowa (The Home Army) (Garliński, 1975, p. 219–30).

Assault on Polish Identity

The Nazi leadership's racial ideology shaped their treatment of heritage and culture. Hitler aimed to restore German culture through the recovery of artworks with supposed Germanic

origins (Edsel, 2006, p. 10). Following the invasion of Poland, state policies authorised the seizure of church property, museum collections, and private holdings (Alford, 2014, p. 45). Polish national symbols, including monuments to poet Adam Mickiewicz and composer Frédéric Chopin, were destroyed (Edsel, 2006, p. 92–93). The goal was to suppress Polish cultural resurgence and enforce German dominance. Himmler, via the *Ahnenerbe*, was tasked with collecting historical material to legitimise Nazi claims in Poland and undermine its nationalism (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 106). In December 1939, he ordered widespread confiscations from museums, archives, and private homes, with findings disseminated through Nazi propaganda outlets under its Minister Joseph Goebbels (Kurlander, 2017, p. 236).

The *Ahnenerbe* and the Myth of Aryan Lineage

The *Ahnenerbe's* work epitomised the regime's cultural appropriation of occupied territories. Himmler's belief in a mythic Aryan lineage connected to all of Europe underpinned both his archaeological initiatives and SS recruitment policies, which required proof of Aryan ancestry (Roland, 2019, p. 238). Expeditions sought evidence of Aryan origins in foreign cultures to be utilised in propaganda (Kurlander, 2017, p. 203). The recovery of artefacts such as the spear served not only Hitler's symbolic vision but also Himmler's racial convictions and historical revisionism. Looting was not opportunistic but calculated to reinforce Nazi ideology, propagate historical myths, and demonstrate Himmler's loyalty to Hitler.

Religion

Himmler rejected Christianity and sought to institutionalise Germanic paganism within the SS. Scholars such as Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke highlight his use of myth and ritual to craft a pseudo-religious framework that aligned with Nazi racial goals (Goodrick-Clarke, 1985). Karla Poewe discusses how Himmler promoted alternative spiritual movements to undermine the churches and reshape German belief systems (Poewe, 2006). Himmler's manipulation of religious objects to embody and propagate his ideological convictions attracts my attention. Particularly concerning his hostility toward Christianity as opposed to Judaism. Recent scholarship now views his religious vision as central to his broader ideological project of creating a racially and spiritually pure society.

Organised religion posed a direct ideological threat to the Nazi regime, undermining their racial and authoritarian policies. The existence of a higher moral authority challenged Nazi efforts to establish total ideological control. For religion to endure, it needed to be state-managed. Nazi command over religion included reinterpreting narratives surrounding relics to serve propaganda aims.

Suppression of the Churches

Clergy resistance was silenced through imprisonment, weakening their influence as spiritual leaders. Wartime destruction further limited access to worship. The regime openly declared that it would only restore churches of artistic significance after the war (Weikart, 2016, p. 151-2). His actions against the church were a demonstration of his authority and influence that worked to eliminate its presence in Germany. He played a pivotal role in acquiring and manipulating religious artefacts, and his security forces were responsible for suppressing any resistance from church entities. On the other hand, by eliminating Western religions, he sought

to promote neo-paganism, a religion he followed and endorsed as more in line with the values of returning to pre-Christian, traditional Germanic beliefs (Conway, 1997, p. 111).

Religious Practices of Nazi Leaders

Many high-ranking Nazis practised religion, varying from Catholicism and Protestantism to Paganism and Pantheism. The public statements made by these leaders favoured a Nordic-Germanic faith that excluded Catholic traditions, Judaism, and Marxist thought (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 116). Hitler expressed strong opposition to organised religions, stating that one must choose between being German and being Christian, but cannot be both (Roland, 2019, p. 214). This animosity stemmed from his belief that faith undermines his views on Aryan supremacy (Conway, 1997, p. 328). Despite this disdain, Hitler was mindful of the fact that the majority of Germans belonged to either Roman Catholic or Protestant churches, so he sought to manipulate rather than outright abolish religion (Conway, 1997, p. xiii). Himmler initially urged a cautious approach to Christianity as the Nazis consolidated their power (Steigmann-Gall, 2003, p. 150). The Nazis wanted to control religion by manipulating symbols, worship locations, and religious narratives. Hitler and Himmler were inspired by Viennese prophets who interpreted ancient Scandinavian texts about a superior Aryan race, which formed the basis for their political religion (Yenne, 2010, p. 1-2). Religious symbolism was co-opted to foster emotional allegiance to Nazism (Weikart, 2016, p. 16).

The Reich Church and German Christianity

To further their control over religion, the Nazis forced the Protestant churches to unite under a pro-Nazi Reich church, which blended Nazi ideology with Protestant theology (Lowe, 2013, p. 102). This culminated in the establishment of a new national religion known as German Christianity, under the leadership of Reich Bishop Müller. Hitler used various tactics, including threats to withdraw state funding, to ensure the churches accepted his ideas on race and blood as undeniable truths (Weikart, 2016, p. 129-32). The planned National Cathedral in Nürnberg, complete with the altarpiece, was intended as the centre for this state religion due to its proximity to the rally grounds and the new cultural heart of Germany, marking the object as more significant than its interpretation. These efforts culminated in a state-controlled religious framework aligned with Nazi ideology.

Himmler's Religious War

Aligned with Goebbels, Alfred Rosenberg, leader of the Party's foreign-affairs division, Martin Bormann, who led the Nazi Party Chancellery and served as Hitler's private secretary, and other senior officials, Himmler aimed to eliminate Christianity and the church (Weikart, 2016, p. 117-8). Christian values of equality clashed with Nazi ideology and were seen as corrosive to German tradition. Himmler utilised his enforcement agencies to suppress and silence any resistance emerging from religious organisations, including the church, Jewish communities, and conservative factions. Himmler denounced Christianity as a historical weakness to Germany, calling it "the greatest pestilence…we must eliminate" (Roland, 2019, p. 216-217). Orders were issued to SS and close associates to replace Christmas with Winter Solstice festivals, reviving pre-Christian customs (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 192-3).

The Aryan Jesus

By distorting the narrative of the spear through *Ahnenerbe's* research, Himmler aimed to corrupt Christianity, claiming it as German in origin by casting doubt on a relic pivotal to its foundation. The religious significance of the spear is its connection to Christ's crucifixion, making it a potent political-religious artefact, blending Christian theology with governance (Grabowski, 2018, p. 223-30). The legend of the spear was manipulated to portray Jesus and Saint Longinus as Aryan. Nazi scholars reinterpreted Jesus' genealogy and birthplace to claim an Aryan lineage. To assert Jesus's racial purity, Nazi scholars claimed Aryans predated Jews in Galilee and revised the location of his birth accordingly, declaring that he was born in Bethlehem near Nazareth in Galilee, rather than in Bethlehem of Judea (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 116). The traditional narrative of Saint Longinus, as depicted in *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, associates him with a Germanic heritage, noting his role as an Aryan soldier involved in Christ's crucifixion, and emphasises that the first convert to Christianity was German, claiming its origins. The Nazis reinterpreted the Passion narrative, aligning Jesus and Longinus as Aryan figures and asserting Longinus's intervention to rescue Jesus from Jewish persecution (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 85). Seeking to validate these claims, Himmler dispatched *Ahnenerbe* archaeological expeditions to the Middle East and Turkey in pursuit of evidence to support Jesus's purported Aryan lineage and the location of Saint Longinus's tomb (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 198). Himmler focused on the interpretation of the Passion rather than the object itself. The manipulation of the spear's origins reflects his attempt to fuse Aryan ideology with Christian history, undermining the faith in the process.

The Occult

Scholarly examinations of Himmler's engagement with occultism indicate a multifaceted relationship. Far from being mere secondary effects, occult beliefs played a real, if not dominant, role in shaping the identity and actions of Himmler's leadership. Works by Peter Padfield reveal how Himmler used pseudo-science, mythology, and mysticism, such as the *Ahnenerbe* Institute and Wewelsburg Castle, to develop an ideological framework rooted in myth for promoting Aryan supremacy and SS exclusivity (Padfield, 1990).

While some researchers, like Bradley F. Smith, argue that these beliefs were both sincere and politically strategic, others caution against overstating their influence (Smith, 1974). This viewpoint informs my analysis, considering the symbolic meaning of these objects and exploring their layered interpretations by Himmler to determine his occultist beliefs as opposed to implementing a deliberate political strategy.

Practices and Political Legitimacy

Himmler's occult interests played a significant role in shaping the ideological and symbolic foundations of the SS, integrating occult elements into propaganda to support Nazi racial ideology. Himmler adopted various occult practices, including horoscopes, astrology, astronomy, and magic. His attraction to the occult was both personal and political, serving to legitimise Nazi ideology through mysticism. Most Nazi elites saw his public interest in occultism as harmful to the regime's relationship with the church (Roland, 2019, p. 237). Others saw it as confirmation of Himmler's weakness of character to believe in something obscene to them (Goldensohn, 2005, p. 418).

Myth, Symbolism and Neo-Paganism

Himmler linked ancient myths and folklore to his belief in Aryan superiority. His adoption of symbols and rituals inspired by mystical traditions, particularly from ancient Germanic cultures, reflected his perception that these traditions underscored a historical justification for German national identity. (Kurlander, 2015, p. 498-511). Himmler's worldview merged nationalist ideology with mythological and spiritual elements.

Through neo-paganism, Himmler sought to replace Christianity with a reconstructed Germanic tradition due to its incompatibility with the Aryan ideal of German culture. Himmler delved into folklore, ancient rituals, and mystical elements of German history, directing the *Ahnenerbe* to explore sacred relics, witchcraft, and medieval religious practices (Kurlander, 2017, p. x). He integrated ancient Germanic symbols into daily life, as he believed they embodied racial and spiritual power, a connection to a legendary and untainted Aryan past. For instance, the SS runes, two lightning bolt-shaped symbols, became a significant emblem, functioning as a visual marker of SS identity and ideological unity (Roland, 2019, p. 231).

Sacred Geometry

The spear also held great importance to Himmler due to its shape. His interest in runic magic, pagan rituals, and sacred geometry meant he saw the spear as a tool for unlocking ancestral power or accessing hidden knowledge, with the *Tyr* construct signifying magical attributes and the bond between the heavens and earth (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 189).

This symbolism of the spear resurfaced in Hitler and Speer's plans for Nürnberg, where the refurbishments planned for the parade ground and castle complex buildings were designed to resemble the shape of a spear. Himmler was instrumental in acquiring artefacts for the proposed cultural and ideological centre in Nürnberg. The parade ground, a symbolic centre for Nazi ideological expression, would stand alongside the new German National Cathedral, merging elements of religion, adoration, and the perceived connection between the Aryan's and the divine entity they believed to be descended from (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 109-110). In this aspect, the symbolism associated with the spear is more important than the object itself.

Blood Relics and Mystical Power

Himmler's interest in the occult was partially driven by the conviction that its practices could bolster the strength of the German populace (Goldensohn, 2005, p. 418). In occult philosophy, objects tied to sacred blood, death, or divine suffering are believed to hold immense power. Because the spear allegedly pierced Christ's side, and in some legends the Holy Grail was used to catch Christ's blood during the crucifixion, it becomes a "blood relic", a focal point of mystical contemplation and ritual potential (Roland, 2019, p. 218). The central occult belief surrounding the spear is that "he who possesses the spear holds the destiny of the world." This idea transforms the spear from a Christian relic into a magical talisman, similar to the Holy Grail or Excalibur. Occultists view the spear as containing latent spiritual energy, capable of influencing events, granting victory, or bringing doom. Himmler sought this relic as a means to validate the Nazi government and epitomise its alleged divine entitlement to govern (Roland, 2019, p. 49-53). He believed that if the Nazis were to acquire such relics, it would grant them a mystical authority, reinforcing their doctrine of Aryan supremacy. When the Allies uncovered Himmler's vault beneath Nürnberg castle, they found numerous relics linked to the blood of saints and religious figures. Among these were silver pieces from the True Cross (the cross in

the crucifixion), a relic box holding blood-soaked soil attributed to the martyred Saint Stephen, A casket holding robe threads from the apostle John and chain links said to have bound Saint Paul, and a sacred receptacle housing a bone of Saint Maurice (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 79). When referring to blood relics, the objects themselves seem to hold the most significance to Himmler.

Himmler associated blood as a central theme that unified Christian mystics with their pagan ancestors, drawing parallels to his alleged involvement in blood rituals involving a replica of the spear and allegedly displaying a vial of blood on his desk at Wewelsburg Castle along with the replica (Kirkpatrick, 2014, p. 188). He saw blood as a sacred racial force, symbolising ancestry and identity (Staudenmaier, 2009, p. 47-55). This indicates the symbolism of the relic is more important than the object itself. Some interpretations argue that the systematic mass killings during the Holocaust, particularly by the *Einsatzgruppen* and SS death squads, took on a ritualised dimension under Himmler (Kurlander, 2017, p. 251).

Conclusion

Himmler's engagement with religious relics, archaeological artefacts, and occult objects reveals a distinctive fusion of ideology, mysticism, and personal ambition within the Nazi leadership. Through the SS, he instrumentalised material culture to construct a mythic Aryan prehistory and legitimise the organisation as both a racial movement and a spiritual order. Unlike Hitler's imperial symbolism or Göring's pursuit of prestige, Himmler's collecting practices were characterised by pseudo-scientific and rare aspirations that sought to transform myth into institutional authority. These artefacts embodied more than ideological proof: they materialised Himmler's personal vision of history and his emotive longing to anoint the SS as an order of destiny.

His influence within the regime was built not only on his administrative power over the SS, Gestapo, and SD but also through his strategic deployment of symbolic artefacts, religious manipulation, and occult practices to reinforce Hitler's vision and enhance his own status. By retrieving culturally and religiously significant objects such as the spear and the altar, and by sponsoring the *Ahnenerbe's* pseudo-archaeological expeditions, Himmler positioned himself as both an upholder of a Germanic past and architect of a racially and spiritually purified future. His appropriation of relics, rituals, and neo-pagan belief systems reveals a calculated effort to rewrite history and faith in the service of Nazi ideology, while also advancing a personal project of self-promotion. Through such symbolic gestures, he embedded himself at the ideological and spiritual heart of Nazism, often outmanoeuvring rivals such as Goebbels and Göring.

Yet the trajectory of Himmler's power underscores the fragility of this symbolic structure. As the war turned against Germany, the foundations of loyalty and conviction he had cultivated began to unravel. His secret peace negotiations and eventual betrayal of Hitler revealed that his allegiance, like his manipulation of myth and faith, was ultimately rooted in self-preservation. Thus, while his mobilisation of material culture demonstrates how objects could serve as vehicles for propaganda, spiritual authority, and personal belief, his late-stage disloyalty exposes the limits of ideology when confronted with personal ambition. In this sense, Himmler's legacy is not simply that of a loyal servant of Nazism but of a calculated opportunist who weaponised belief, heritage, and myth to shape and attempt to survive the ideological empire he helped build.

Conclusion

The Active Role of Material Culture

This dissertation has argued that cultural objects in Nazi Germany were not passive trophies but active tools of power. By examining Hitler, Göring, and Himmler, it has been shown how looted artefacts helped construct authority, shape ideology, and project legitimacy. These objects reveal the entanglement of political, personal, and emotional concerns, exposing the regime's reliance on spectacle as well as the fragility beneath its claims to permanence.

By embedding the cultural within the political, this study set out to and contributed to reframing the understanding of the Third Reich. Nazi power did not rest solely on armies and policies but also on the use of material culture that staged unity, expressed rivalry, and mediated memory. Artefacts were active participants in the construction and performance of authority, operating simultaneously at the level of personal identity and collective ideology.

Hitler and the Construction of Authority through Artefacts

Hitler's engagement with imperial regalia and noble funerary remains demonstrates how artefacts functioned as tools for constructing authority. By appropriating symbols of German history, he sought to present himself and the Third Reich as the inheritors of a legendary national heritage. Objects provided a concrete medium through which abstract notions of destiny, racial superiority, and historical inevitability could be made visible to the public, enhancing the symbolic weight of his leadership.

Yet these gestures contained contradictions. Hitler elevated aristocratic symbols while simultaneously undermining the aristocracy. He appropriated Vienna's treasures even as he sought to erase its cultural legacy. Such opportunism shows that Nazi cultural politics were less about continuity than about manipulating history for political ends. His selective use of symbols exposed the fragility of his claims to legitimacy: authority rested on spectacle, appropriation, and performance rather than principle.

The paradox of Hitler's use of objects illustrates the duality of Nazi cultural politics: artefacts projected permanence but revealed insecurity. The promotion and deliberate interpretation of carefully chosen objects elevated him above rivals, yet their very selectiveness highlighted the temporary nature of the myths he inhabited. His engagement with material culture demonstrates that objects functioned simultaneously as instruments of personal glorification and tools for shaping collective belief systems, embedding the cultural dimension at the heart of political power.

Göring's Art Collections: Personal Ambition and Ideological Display

Göring's extensive art collection exemplifies how material culture could operate simultaneously as propaganda, social currency, and a medium for personal enrichment. Carinhall, his grand estate, was not merely a display of cultural refinement but a stage upon which he promoted ideological commitment, asserted dominance within the Nazi hierarchy, and cultivated networks of influence. Objects in his collection signalled both the regime's cultural ambitions and the opportunities for personal gain provided by looting and appropriation.

The dual-purpose nature of his collecting illustrates the complex interplay between personal ambition and state ideology. While looting afforded Göring wealth and prestige, it also provoked resentment from rivals and highlighted the corruptibility of power built through objects. Carinhall became a liability: its scale attracted scrutiny, and as the war turned, the very collections that had elevated Göring exposed him to both internal and external criticism. The scale of Göring's plunder drew the attention of rival Nazis and provoked resentment within the leadership. Internationally, his collection became emblematic of Nazi cultural crimes, ensuring that what had once symbolised refinement and status instead marked him as corrupt and opportunistic. The Allied bombing of Carinhall underscored the fragility of Göring's authority constructed through material culture; what had symbolised refinement and power ultimately marked him as opportunistic and corrupt.

Göring's collecting practices also reveal the emotional dimensions of material culture. His eagerness to outbid Hitler was motivated by rivalry and vanity as much as ideological commitment, turning art into a medium for negotiating status, self-legitimisation, and recognition within the Nazi elite. The interplay of personal ambition, ideological display, and social performance illustrates how material culture could never be reduced to ideology alone.

Himmler and the Symbolic Power of Relics

Himmler's fascination with relics, archaeology, and ritual brought a distinct mystical dimension to Nazi material culture. Objects associated with supposed Aryan origins or ancient Germanic traditions reinforced narratives of racial superiority and spiritual destiny. By commissioning excavations and appropriating artefacts, Himmler sought to transform ideology into physical ritualised practice. Castles such as Wewelsburg became sites where archaeology, mysticism, and politics fused, giving physical form to the SS's myths.

For Himmler, artefacts were central to legitimising authority and creating a distinct spiritual order, one that diverged from Hitler's imperial vision or Göring's cultural sophistication. Yet authority founded on fantasy proved hazardous. When confronted with military defeat, the ritual, myth, and artefacts that underpinned Himmler's worldview could not sustain his power. His eventual betrayal of Hitler highlighted the limits of symbolic politics: material culture could structure belief, but it could not substitute for survival or military reality.

Himmler's reliance on relics demonstrates both the potency and the fragility of material culture as a medium for ideological construction. Artefacts provided tangible proof of spiritual and racial narratives, but they also exposed the regime's reliance on spectacle and illusion. His practices illustrate how objects actively shaped ideology, bridging the gap between belief, ritual, and the concrete world of artefacts.

Case Studies of Personal Motivations and Emotional Dimensions of Collecting

Across these case studies, material culture operated on two levels. Publicly, it legitimised Nazi ideology, reinforced racial boundaries, and projected continuity with Europe's imperial legacy. Privately, it satisfied ambition, rivalry, and prestige within the Nazi elite. These dual roles reveal the contradictions of Nazi cultural policy, between ideology and indulgence, collective myth and personal gain. Hitler, Göring, and Himmler each invested personal meaning in objects, transforming them into agents of power and identity.

Göring's competitive acquisitions were motivated by personal rivalry with Hitler. Himmler's fascination with legends and relics reflected mystical obsession rather than state necessity. Hitler's appropriation of imperial regalia expressed self-image as much as political strategy. These examples reveal that collecting was a deeply personal practice, intertwined with political goals but also serving private ambitions and emotional needs.

The blurred line between public narrative and private desire underscores the complexity of Nazi cultural politics. Objects could simultaneously satisfy political objectives, convey authority, and sustain personal fantasies. Material culture, therefore, functions as a lens for understanding the emotional, social, and political qualities of leadership in the Third Reich.

Material Culture and the Construction of Nazi Identity

Artefacts functioned as markers of authority, taste, and social position within the Nazi regime. Through their careful selection, display, and ritualisation, objects reinforced hierarchies and created a material vocabulary for communicating power.

Hitler's use of regalia emphasised imperial continuity, Göring's artistic expertise projected refinement and worldly authority, and Himmler's relics sought to consecrate racial destiny. These strategies were not always compatible: luxury clashed with abstinent mysticism, and both diverged from Hitler's lavish imperial symbolism. Yet the shared reliance on objects underscores how central material culture was to Nazi self-fashioning, creating consistency even amid rivalry. Material culture was therefore both a medium of identity formation and a tool for negotiating tension within the elite.

The Enduring Legacy of Looted Artefacts

Looted artefacts continue to shape how the Third Reich is remembered. Their postwar paths, from treasures hidden in mines to dispersal across Europe, demonstrate that they became markers of anxiety and failure as much as symbols of ambition.

Today, these objects remain central to debates about restitution, ownership, and ethical display. Museums and archives grapple with the responsibilities of returning artefacts to the heirs of Holocaust victims, while high-profile discoveries such as the Gurlitt Collection highlight the circulation of looted works in private hands. Ongoing negotiations over objects held in the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and German state collections illustrate the unfinished business of cultural justice (Nicholas, 1980; Feliciano, 1997; Petropoulos, 2021).

These artefacts are not simply historical remnants; they are active participants in the ongoing negotiation of memory and identity, influencing contemporary cultural politics and collective remembrance.

Historiography Implications

This study challenges historiography that privileges policy, rhetoric, or military structures over cultural analysis. By foregrounding the agency of objects, it demonstrates that material culture was central to the enactment of ideology, performance of power, and construction of identity.

Situating Nazi material culture within art history, archaeology, and memory studies places it in an interdisciplinary context, aligning with historiography that emphasises culture, everyday

life, and symbolism in authoritarian regimes (Fritzsche, 2003; Pine, 2010). By integrating these methods, this dissertation provides a framework for analysing how power is performed and remembered, showing that objects are integral to understanding the lived realities of dictatorship.

Objects as Agents of Power and Memory

In conclusion, Hitler's regalia, Göring's collections, and Himmler's relics exemplify how objects could reinforce authority, sustain vanity, and preserve myths, yet also expose fragility and failure. Material culture was integral to Nazi ideology, shaping leadership, mediating perception, and performing power. Artefacts were active agents in constructing identity and negotiating memory, illuminating both destructive ambitions and deep insecurities.

Recognising the active role of objects also has broader implications. Across authoritarian regimes, material culture has frequently been mobilised to stabilise ideology and script authority. In Fascist Italy, for example, Mussolini appropriated Roman symbols, monuments, and architecture to create a sense of continuity with the glory of the ancient empire, legitimising his modern regime as the rightful heir of imperial power (Gentile, 1996). Similarly, in the Soviet Union, monumental art, statues, and public spaces were carefully designed to embody state ideology, glorify leadership, and shape collective memory (Forest and Johnson, 2002). In both cases, objects were not merely decorative or symbolic; they actively structured political perception, reinforced hierarchies, and communicated authority to citizens. This demonstrates that material culture is a dynamic agent in the construction, contestation, and preservation of power, far beyond the context of Nazi Germany.

By examining the interplay between materiality, ideology, and personal ambition, this dissertation shows that history is not only enacted through policy or force but also inscribed in the objects through which power is experienced and imagined. Material culture is indispensable for understanding the Third Reich and other authoritarian regimes more broadly, and the ongoing negotiation of memory and identity in the present.

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Appendix: Item descriptions

A. Holy Roman Empire Regalia: The **Imperial Crown**, an octagonal masterpiece of gold composed of eight hinged panels adorned with cloisonné enamel depictions of Christ, kings, and biblical scenes, alternating with richly jewelled sections set with sapphires, emeralds, and amethysts. Unlike later crowns, it lacked a circular form and sat more like a helmet upon the head, capped by a single arch rising over the top, symbolising Christ's sovereignty. The **Imperial Orb** was a polished golden sphere surmounted by a cross, representing universal Christian dominion. The **Imperial Cross** was a processional reliquary cross containing fragments believed to be from the True Cross (that Jesus was crucified on), its golden surface set with gemstones and decorated in the Ottonian style. The **Imperial Sword**, with its straight, broad blade and simple golden hilt, embodied the emperor's duty to protect the Church and enact justice; it was accompanied by a sheath wrapped in crimson fabric and gold embroidery. The Imperial Sceptre, slender and topped with a crystal orb, was a symbol of secular governance and wise rulership, paired with the Imperial Orb to complete the imagery of temporal and spiritual authority. The **Holy Lance** (Spear of Destiny), an iron spearhead encased in silver with a golden band, is believed to contain a nail from the Crucifixion, respected as a relic of Christ's Passion and a token of divine favour. Central to the attire was the lavish **coronation mantle**, a heavy, jewel-studded cloak of deep purple or gold silk, embroidered with biblical scenes, inscriptions, and imperial symbols. Beneath it, the emperor wore a long **tunic** and alb-like undergarments, echoing ceremonial vestments. The regalia also included richly decorated **gloves, buskins** (shoes), and a **stole** (shall of sorts), each embroidered with crosses or imperial motifs to emphasise divine sanction.

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B. Coffins of Operation Body Snatch: The coffin of **Frederick Wilhelm I** was a heavy, ornamental sarcophagus made of dark, time-patinated metal, its once-ornate gilding dulled by centuries, with massive handles and decorative mouldings that reflected the sober grandeur of the early 18th century. Beside it rested the coffin of his son, **Frederick the Great**, which was more elegant and slightly smaller in proportion, fashioned from bronze with classical lines, bearing the marks of Prussian craftsmanship and still retaining traces of heraldic ornamentation, though darkened with age. Set apart but within the same chamber was the coffin of **President Hindenburg**, markedly different in style and character. It was a monumental casket of polished oak, with broad and imposing surfaces, designed in the severe yet stately manner of the early 20th century. Large iron fittings secured the wood, and its sheer bulk conveyed both modern solidity and national reverence. All three coffins were draped or flanked by remnants of military flags and regalia.

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C. *La Belle Allemande statue* by Gregor Erhart: Crafted from limewood, *La Belle Allemande* is a life-sized sculpture of Mary Magdalene, depicted simply with her long hair covering her body. The statue is approximately 177 cm tall, 44 cm wide, showcasing a slender and graceful form that still appears very human. Mary Magdalene is portrayed in a subtle, relaxed bodily stance, with her weight slightly shifted and her hip gently thrust to create a sense of balance and realism in the Renaissance style. The sculpture, created by Erhart, was designed to be viewed from all angles and was originally hung in a church in Augsburg. Mary Magdalene's long, golden hair flows beautifully over her body, symbolising both her repentance and her ethereal beauty. The colours used by the sculptor emphasise her flesh and muscular structure, giving the statue a realistic and spiritual quality. Mary Magdalene's expression is peaceful and serene, reflecting a sense of inner devotion rather than physical seduction. The statue originally featured angels carved around her, symbolising her ascension to heaven.

Alford, K.D. (2014). *Hermann Göring and the Nazi Art Collection*. North Carolina: McFarland.

D. *The Madonna and Child* painting by Bernardino Luini: The Virgin Mary is portrayed as a young woman with a rounded face, delicate features, and eyes looking down with a sense of devotion. Her soft skin and kind expression are highlighted by a veil and flowing hair, painted in warm, golden-brown colours. She wears a deep blue underlayer with a red dress, draped in gentle folds that show both her dignity and humility. The baby Jesus stands peacefully on her lap and in her arms, depicted with a chubby, angelic body and curly, golden hair. His small hands reaching towards his mother symbolise innocence and divine presence. The background is simple with cropped depictions of a flower and a vase to keep the focus on the figures. Luini's use of delicate shading softens the edges, surrounding the figures in a gentle, glowing light that adds to the feeling of closeness and sacred tranquillity.

Edsel, R.M. (2013). *Saving Italy: The Race to Rescue a Nation's Treasures from the Nazis*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

E. *The High Altar of Saint Mary* by Veit Stoss: Rising in multiple tiers, the altar is framed by elaborate carvings and gold decorations that stretch upward, drawing the eye toward heaven. The central focus is the panels, adorned with sculpted figures of saints, apostles, and angels. At its heart, a prominent image of the Virgin Mary is enthroned, radiating dignity and maternal grace. Surrounding her, panels depict key scenes from her life, set against a backdrop of shimmering gold leaf. Candlesticks of impressive height are in symmetrical arrangement, their light reflecting off the golden surfaces to enhance the altar's brilliance. The entire structure, with its blend of sculpture, painting, and architectural finesse, embodies both devotion and artistry.

Burkhard, A. (1972). *The Kraków Altar of Veit Stoss*. Munich: F. Bruckmann.