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Fashion Under the Swastika: An Analysis of Women's Fashion During the Third Reich

Ayrika Johnson

University of Northern Colorado, john8612@bears.unco.edu

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Despite perceptions of fashion and clothing as superfluous elements of history, they reflect social, cultural, and political values of specific eras. History in Nazi Germany frequently focuses on military, politics, or the Holocaust as central studies. However, one can also view Nazi Germany through the lens of fashion and clothing to understand the Nazi culture, economics, and efforts to tie fashion into notions of race and women's roles. To demonstrate the importance of fashion in the Third Reich, this essay looks at three key factors: ideals of German womanhood, critiques of the New German Women, and possibilities of international fashion threats to the German economy. By analyzing sources such as magazine ads, fashion pages, and speeches made by Nazi officials, the role of fashion in the Third Reich is revealed.

In 1938, the connection between fashion and Nazi Germany was distinctly recognized. After Nazi troops marched into Austria in March of 1938, soldiers were greeted by speeches and sweeping declarations of gratitude, even in fashion magazines, rather than bullets or bombs. For example, in April 1938, an Austrian magazine devoted to traditional dress published an article, "Hail Pan-Germany." It paid specific attention to the country's interest in the "German traditional costume system" and celebrated the fact that festivals of German dress would allow the Austrians to "become [part] of the whole German people."¹ The article also proclaimed that unification with Germany and renewed interest in traditional folk attire were part of a larger national project² that centered around the *völkisch* movement and celebration of one's historic roots. Through this celebration, Germans would not only remember the simpler past, but outsiders like Austria would also be encouraged to join the Nazis through the promise of a simpler lifestyle.

¹ "Heil Alldeutschland!" *Österr. Gebirgs- und Volkstrachten-Zeitung* (April 1938): 26, <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/trachten.htm>.

² "Heil Alldeutschland!" *Österr*, 26.

To join this *völkisch* movement and easy lifestyle, “Hail Pan Germany!” explained that Austrians could don traditional German costumes and therefore become part of the Nazi culture. Clothing was a means of participating in the culture and society of a larger German empire. But what was this traditional German costume for women? Often, it is thought of as a simple wool dress with a white apron over top; such dresses provided a sense of practicality and harkened back to the era of peasantry in the German principalities. In actuality, the *Tracht* dress, or *dirndl*, was very different from what people imagine it to be. It was a dress with a tight bodice, puffed sleeves, a full skirt that reached either to the ankles or the floor, a headpiece, and either a shawl, scarf, jacket, collar, or apron wrapped around the bodice.³ According to the Austrian article, such traditional dress was not just a government-endorsed image of what Germans should purchase; it was considered part of the cultural and social fabric of Nazi Germany. The *Tracht* dress was the traditional *Volk* costume, the outfit that proved one’s relationship to the Third Reich by garment alone. In a way, there seemed to be a prevailing expectation for a racially pure woman to own at least one *dirndl*. The Nazis wanted people to return to their racial or *völkisch* roots, whether through outings in the woods or wearing the long dress and apron. They hoped that racially pure Germans would take up the loom and not only add *Tracht* dresses to their wardrobes, but also actually weave the cloth itself to avoid buying non-German clothing.⁴

Indeed, the Nazis insisted on propagating Germany as a new fashion empire, something they would use as both an economic and a cultural tool. Before and especially after WWI, German women preferred foreign and specifically Parisian fashion over German fashion. The competition between German and French fashion was of concern even in the Weimar Republic.

³ Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic? Fashioning Women in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2004), 110.

⁴ Sigrid Jacobeit, “Clothing in Nazi Germany,” in *Marxist Historiography in Transformation: East German Social History in the 1980s*, ed. George Iggers, trans. Bruce Little (New York, NY: Berg Publishers, 1991), 232.

For example, in 1923, the Association of the German Fashion Industry argued against the purchase of Parisian designs for the sole reason that “the French are doing absolutely everything conceivable to ruin [the German economy].”⁵ This anger towards France was shaped after Germany failed to pay back part of its reparations from WWI in a timely manner, thus leading to the French occupation of the Rhineland in January of 1923. Similar to the strained economic situation in 1923, ten years later in the midst of the Great Depression, the fashion industry needed support from a political party to push their economic goals to the people. While it is unclear if Hitler met with fashion industry leaders, historians do know that he met with prominent business leaders and promised major economic reforms in the depression in return for political support.

The *dirndl* was one way the Nazis believed they could bolster their international fashion reputation. At this time, conservative dresses were not uncommon in Western fashion magazines, but they were not as stylish to other Western countries in the mid-30s to 40s as they were to Nazi Germany. Because many Western countries followed the style of tighter dresses with raised hemlines, the *Tracht* dress stood alone as a fashion statement with its long hemline and wrist-length sleeves. The fact that Germany came to mind when Westerners thought of modest dresses shows the country was trying to become known for some piece of fashion, especially in a world that was already overrun by French, American, and English fashion trends.

Paris was famous for having the same fashion prestige in the 1920s and 1930s that it enjoys today. It was where designers got their clothing ideas and then returned home to incorporate Parisian styles into their domestic fashions. Even before the Third Reich, the German fashion industry encouraged Germans to purchase domestic styles and boycott French goods. For

⁵ Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, eds., “Boycott of French Fashion Goods,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 658.

instance, in 1923, the Union of German Fashion Industry urged its people to buy locally to keep money out of French pockets. It argued that “an import of foreign ready-to-wear clothing, which costs 2,000 to 3,000 German marks, robs a German worker of his income for an entire year.”⁶

Later, the Nazi government also tried to encourage women to buy local rather than foreign goods. They insisted that abominable acts performed by the French meant that the Germans should resist their fashion. This was not just a question of economics, but morals. To refuse support of the German fashion industry meant consumers “relinquished their right to demand to be respected as a German.”⁷

Another argument launched against French fashions noted how trends changed constantly. German magazine editors and fashion designers believed they did not need to follow the French whores or succumb to the Jewish designers who oversold their wears. What Germans needed were traditional and reliable garments that were concerned only with being “solid, durable clothing for the ‘dignified’ woman” and were not “as changeable as the seasons, as mercurial as a hydrometer, [and] always searching for the kind of piquant surprise that only coquettes could find attractive.”⁸ By understanding the German desire to create its own fashion empire, historians can make connections to the politics and economics of Nazi Germany. While this French boycott may have begun as a search for greater funds for the German economy, it also served a political and racial goal. Buying German fashion demonstrated one’s nationality and loyalty to the Third Reich.

Fashion illustrated the kind of women Nazi Germany considered to be the “ideal.” After 1918, Germany’s fashion industry intentionally diverged away from American, English, and French fashion. This was in reaction against the modern “New Woman,” who was in Germany

⁶ Guenther, *Nazi Chic?*, 147.

⁷ Kaes, Jay, and Dimendberg, eds., “Boycott of French Fashion Goods,” 658.

⁸ Jacobeit, “Clothing in Nazi Germany,” 231.

viewed as wearing “odious fashions, the excesses of which [were] transplanted [to Germany] from America” and associated with the weak German democracy.⁹ The “New Woman” was too loose for conservative German culture, too outlandish as a womanly figure, and most of all, a foreign abomination as a female. German critics tried to discourage the American “vampish” look circulating in foreign magazines, considering it no longer fashionable for “their” German women due to cultural differences between Germany and other nations.¹⁰ Here historians begin to see the intersection of pure German culture and economic concerns. The heavy cosmetics favored by the “New Woman” required her to purchase foreign products to achieve the appearance, which was ultimately not a German look. Because the trend did not start in Germany, and because it went against the domestic image Nazi Germany was trying to promote for their women, the “vampish” look could not be considered acceptable for women within Nazi Germany. Essentially, the Nazis tried to hammer home the idea that German women were practical and clean and not overdramatic and poisonous like American actresses.¹¹ The Nazi government’s primary concern was creating its own fashion trends for its people rather than letting them follow international trends. German women did not need to emulate the appearances of foreign actresses dressed in foreign styles; they could be comfortable following the ideal female fashion and simple makeup outlined by the Nazi fashion critics that would act as a rejection to international style trends. It was not the morals of these foreign women that were at stake in the government’s backlash on American actresses, but the identity and culture of Nazi women themselves. Because foreign women were outside Nazi Germany, the goal was not to

⁹ Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, eds., “Enough is Enough! Against the Masculinization of Women,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 659.

¹⁰ Guenther, *Nazi Chic?*, 100.

¹¹ Guenther, 100.

help them, but to maintain the purity already being tested by Germans and save themselves from what they had seen emulated in foreign magazines and advertisements.

German fashion in the Third Reich was closely tied to the Nazis' idea of womanhood. Women were to be mothers and housewives, proud of the biological features that allowed for a woman to do her duty. Through fashion, she was expected to subtly accentuate the features that made her feminine. For this reason, the Weimar Republic rejected the notion of the "New Woman" at its height in the late 20s. In 1925, many critics attacked what they saw as the masculinization of women. As seen in the article "Enough is Enough! Against the Masculinization of Women," many disliked the trend and found it "unnatural... the look [of a woman dressed in men's clothing] is detested by every real boy or man."¹² No longer was it just one husband or father or son who disliked a woman's fashion decisions, but every man felt displeasure in seeing a woman dressed like himself. The Nazis thus built upon preconceived and accepted desires for a more conservative style for women. Although Hitler did not concern himself with fashion, he too preferred women to look more feminine. He did not see the purpose in regulating a woman's wardrobe because he saw no harm in a woman looking fashionable. "Is it really something so horrible when she looks pretty? Let's be honest, we all like to see it," he told his advisors in April of 1937 at the Nazi Ordensburg Vogelsang estate.¹³ It was the collective opinion upon women's fashion that forced the masculine female image to be culturally detested and the domestic female ideal to become the socially appropriate look of the time.

Women's magazines at this time, such as the *NS Frauen Warte*, featured pages illustrating what was considered the fashionable dress of the era. As shown by Appendix A, the women in the ad wore the latest ensembles for 1941-42, the most distinct feature of which was

¹² Kaes, Jay, and Dimendberg, eds., "Enough is Enough! Against the Masculinization of Women," 659.

¹³ Guenther, *Nazi Chic?*, 141.

the cinched-in waist and broad chest region.¹⁴ Noteworthy for the period is the acceptability of urban women having fashionable attire, even while femininity is the focus of the piece. Their garments had to reflect the biological physicality that made them mothers and housewives by clearly defining the curves of their womanly bodies. Another example of this feminine detail in the public eye is through propaganda posters like the one in Appendix B.¹⁵ “Hilf auch Du mit” features three women walking side by side, obviously adding to the war effort as farmer, nurse, and factory worker. Yet even without feminine patterns on their dresses, all three garments reflect the same biological femininity expressed in the magazine ad. Each of the three women features a waist that is clearly defined by either a belt or the waistband of the skirt. They wear full skirts that highlight the birthing hips of a proud woman. Despite the serious nature of the poster, it was still important to depict women as curvaceous and domestic rather than practical and in trousers. Ultimately, no matter the class or profession, a woman was expected to always remind the viewer of her true function in the Third Reich: a mother.

The Nazis also focused on women and their use of cosmetics. Not only were cosmetics typically purchased on the international market, thus making them a threat to the home economy, but they were also seen as sentiments of other countries’ cultures. In an effort to preserve their own culture and independent version of femininity, many Nazis argued for the creation of the “natural” look.¹⁶ Because Nazi women were hypothetically grounded in a *völkisch* appearance and wanted to accentuate their biological femininity, critics believed makeup detracted from this *völkisch* purity. One Nazi magazine promoted the idea that “the javelin and the springboard are

¹⁴ “These Help You to Save Ration Points,” *NS-Frauen-Warte*, illustration, undated circa 1941, University of Heidelberg website, accessed October 8, 2017.

¹⁵ “Hilf auch Du mit,” 1939-1945, UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library.

¹⁶ Guenther, *Nazi Chic?*, 99.

more useful than lipstick in promoting health.”¹⁷ This example shows the belief that makeup was unnecessary for a woman who practiced physical fitness. The cover from the *Frauen-Warte* magazine (Appendix C) reinforces this idea. The two women shown on the cover did not wear lipstick, mascara, blush, eye shadow, or anything to accentuate their features through cosmetics.¹⁸ They are plain, and yet in this they broadcast the ideal beauty standard placed on German women. Another propaganda poster, entitled “The Roadway is Not a Playground,” also shows this lack of makeup.¹⁹ Appendix D features the mother of a child wearing no makeup as she sweeps her son to safety. Her eyes are not darkened by eye shadow or mascara; her lips are not colored by anything more than their nature hue, and her cheeks, despite the stressful situation, show no sign of the application of rouge. The lack of cosmetics on these women indicate the very ideal by which Nazi women supposedly abided: natural beauty that neither followed international trends nor forced a woman to buy foreign beauty products.

But what happens when a woman does not wear cosmetics but is still considered imperfect? An example is available in *Die Dame*, a fashion magazine prevalent throughout Nazi Germany. One of the magazine’s ads features a description of a woman’s difficulty in balancing natural beauty with Nazi beauty ideals.

Do you really think that I naturally look so fresh? You are mistaken! I, also, am often fatigued and then look pale and tired. But I always have two unfailing helpers in hand with which I can instantaneously look fresh and youthful again, and these are Khasana cheek color and Khasana lipstick. Surely, you don’t even notice that I have used these beauty aids. And that is the main thing: we do not want to be called paintings.²⁰

¹⁷ George L. Mosse, “The Blond Craze,” in *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural, and Social Life in the Third Reich*, trans. Salvator Attanasio (New York, NY: The Universal Library, 1966), 43.

¹⁸ Magazine Cover, *NS-Frauen-Warte*, April 1941, University of Heidelberg website, accessed October 8, 2017.

¹⁹ “Die Fahrbahn ist kein Spielplatz!” 1939-1945, UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library, <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/28722/bk0007t7n3k/?brand=oac4>.

²⁰ Guenther, *Nazi Chic*, 104.

What this ad highlights to the reader is the idea that women may have to enhance their appearance through makeup. While it was not what the Nazi regime encouraged, it was more important for a woman to be beautiful than to show exhaustion or stress through her appearance. And if she had to wear makeup, she should buy German products. These German cosmetics were already designed for subtlety, so their purchase would not only help the economy, but also accomplish the desired natural beauty. A woman had to be attractive without appearing painted.

One now understands in greater detail how clothing and makeup became part of the social, cultural, economic, and political fabric of the Third Reich. The decision to isolate German fashion was ultimately unsuccessful, but the fact that it was attempted shows the Nazis' desire to create a domestic fashion industry for German products. The integration of mothers into fashion broadcast their great importance to German cultural identity; they were in Hitler's mind the very foundation of his country. The debate about makeup shows perhaps most clearly the separation between expectations and reality for Nazis concerning women; what they wanted from their wives, mothers, and sisters was not possible without the aid of a little polishing that could only be provided through cosmetics. The significance of fashion in Nazi Germany is best explained through Hans-Georg von Studnitz, a worker in the German Foreign Office Press and Information Section during WWII. He says, "works about fashion are cut-outs, segments of cultural history. But clothes tell much more. They are the curtain behind which hide social conditions, spiritual developments, and political power shifts."²¹

²¹ Guenther, 9.

Appendix

A

NS-Frauen-Warte: die einzige parteiamtliche Frauenzeitschrift
10.1941-1942

Seite 42

Sie helfen, Tünte spüren

Abb. A

9041 B

9042 K

9043 S

42

Abb. A. Nach innen abgenähte Säumdchen halten die Weite an den Dorberärmeln bei aus Wolltrock und Jersey gearbeiteten Bluse ein, die Krüger Schwärzchen, Geförderung: etwa 1 m Wolltrock (für die Dorberärmel) und 1,50 m Jersey, je 140 cm breit. Schnitt IV. Rückf. für 88 cm Oberweite. Kein Brustabschnitt erhältlich. **9041 B** Meiere Ceferie III. Winter, Blauschwarz, arbeitete sich aus 3 Stoffen von je 40/90 cm Größe viele hübsche Bluse, die Winter mit tiefermalen über einem leichten Kleid getragen. Schnitt V. Rückf. für 88 cm. Bunte Beyer-Schnitte (100 Dfg.) für 88 und 96 cm Oberweite erhältlich. **9042 K** Diefen hatten Jodenfeld (100 Dfg.) für 88 und 96 cm Oberweite gearbeitet wurde. Frau S. Buch in Lauenburg verwendete zum Dierbehrernd bei Betreff, die Jede konnte eine gute Scherzgefeiten aus dem Jodett zugehört werden. Die Brudtische des Anzugs wurde jugendlich und mit Wolltrocke be-

legt, an der anderen Seite eine Wolke durch Zelle martiert. Wolltrocke betanbet Jede, Armei und unteren Rockraum, Geförderung: etwa 2,15 m Stoff von 140 cm Breite. Schnitt IV. Dorberf. für 92 cm. Bunte Beyer-Schnitte für 92 und 100 cm Oberweite (90 Dfg.). **9042 K** Aus einem alten Sommeranzug fertigte ich Frau S. Butting, Scherzmauch, dieses tolle Kleid. Da der Anzug verflochten war, wurde es buntfärbig gefärbt. Die bei neuen Schnittteile dem Anzugstoff aufzuliegen (100, zeigt die Überlicht. Durch viele Aufschläge und einen weichen Krüger, die nur eingehaltet werden, erhält das Kleid ein freundlicheres Aussehen. Geförderung: etwa 2,50 m Stoff, 130 cm breit, über 3,50 m Stoff, 90 cm breit. Schnitt III. Rückf. für 96 cm. Bunte Beyer-Schnitte für 96 und 104 cm Oberweite (90 Dfg.).

Die naturgroßen Schnitte befinden sich auf dem beiliegenden Beyer-Schnittbogen.

B



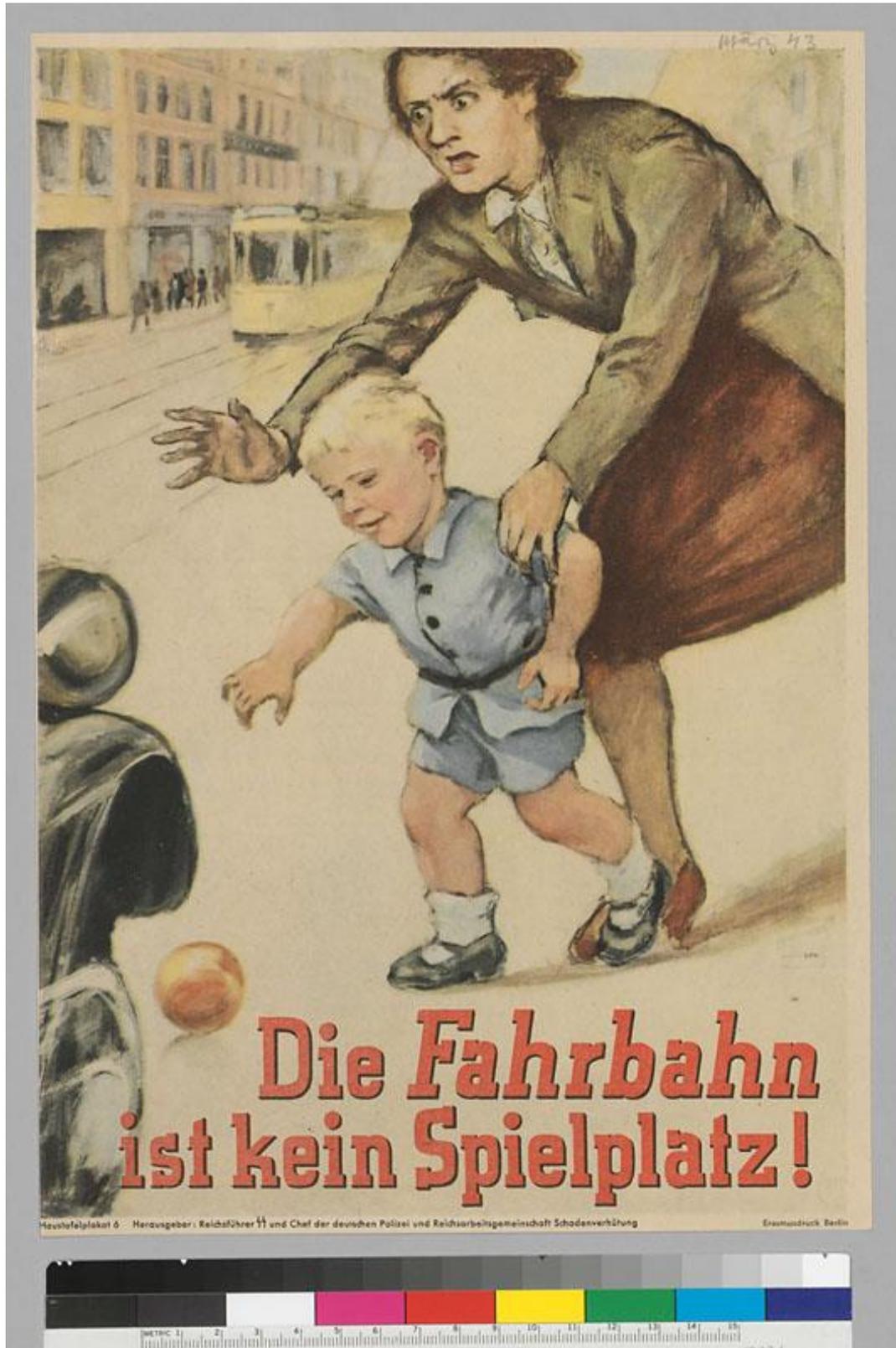
C

NS-Frauen-Warte: die einzige parteiamtliche Frauenzeitschrift
10.1941-1942

Seite 48a



D



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