

Leni riefenstahl- nazi sympathiser or creator of art?

[People](#), [Adolf Hitler](#)



The controversy surrounding Leni Riefenstahl's films has been an ongoing historical debate since the outbreak of World War II. Labelled as 'purely and simply Nazi propaganda' Riefenstahl's work was the cornerstone of Nazi Germany's media regime. Riefenstahl argues however that her intent was simply to produce art. Whilst the films' value as promoting the Nazi regime is undeniable it can be questioned whether or not they are entirely propaganda or if they hold more, artistic value. Born in Berlin August 1902 to Alfred and Bertha Riefenstahl, Leni was raised in a comfortable middleclass family. Her father was a controlling and authoritarian figure and tried to discourage her growing passion for dancing. When he discovered she had secretly been attending classes at the Grimm-Reiter school for dance he threatened to divorce her mother and made arrangements for Leni to attend a boarding school in the Heinz Mountains. Eventually he accepted his daughter's wishes and arranged lessons with a Russian Ballet teacher as well as at the Jutta Klant School for expressive dance. Riefenstahl's dancing career soon took off with her first solo in 1923 at age 21. This caught the attention of famous theatre manager and producer Max Reinhardt and signing with him she quickly became an acclaimed dancer across Europe. However a dancing accident in Prague in 1924 ended her career. She then pursued a career in acting and soon became the lead female role in Arnold Fanck's 'Berg' films. She starred in numerous films, including 'The Holy Mountain' 1926, 'The Big Jump' 1927, 'The White Hell of Pitz Palu' 1929, and 'Storm over Mount Blanc' 1930. Riefenstahl soon took to creating her own films, and in 1930 she began working on 'The Blue Light' which she directed, co-produced, starred in and edited. Released in 1932 'The Blue Light' was technically fantastic

and incorporated new outstanding filming techniques. Steven Bach comments however that it was somewhat of a disappointment to Riefenstahl as it did not raise her to international fame nor 'catapult her into a new orbit among actresses' (1) regardless, it did ensure for her the attention and admiration of Adolf Hitler who was an ardent fan. Riefenstahl on the other hand was still entirely ignorant of Hitler and the Nazi party. As Hinton discerns 'Leni Riefenstahl was totally unaware of and disinterested in German political affairs before 1932.' (2) They were first brought to her attention when she returned to Berlin after touring with 'The Blue Light' and was urged by a friend to attend a Nazi rally at which Hitler would be speaking. She, like millions of others, was attracted to his social ideals and promises to fix the financial instability and crippling unemployment in Germany and felt he 'radiated something very powerful.' (3) This mutual admiration led to a relationship between Riefenstahl, Hitler and numerous other Nazi members, such as Minister for Propaganda Josef Goebbels. Despite this she declined initial offers to make films for the Nazi Party on the grounds it would limit her artistic independence; reinforcing the comment that Riefenstahl at least believed she was producing art. However, the project she had been working on was cancelled and, needing money, Leni Riefenstahl finally agreed to Hitler's insistence and filmed the 1933 Nuremberg Rally, 'Victory of Faith'. She was entirely displeased with the result of the film 'what I saw was only an imperfect fragment, not a motion picture.' (4) The film was rather chaotic and used poor quality footage, although as Rainer Rother comments the film had reached all of Germany, not only Nazi followers and 'the nation in its entirety had entered Hitler's

service.’ (5) It was the first time Hitler had been presented on such a wide scale to the people and he was able to realise the benefit of using Riefenstahl’s filming talent to abuse this new media. Hitler was so pleased with ‘Victory of Faith’ that he asked Leni Riefenstahl to make a feature length film of the 1934 party rally. She however was preoccupied with directing the film ‘Tiefland’ so suggested fellow pioneering film maker Walter Ruttmann, a point which is crucial to the argument that Riefenstahl was focused solely on producing art. Ruttmann possessed an opposing political stance to that of the Nazis and was more lenient towards communism; therefore this recommendation suggests Riefenstahl’s ignorance towards politics and her emphasis on art. Ironically Ruttmann’s take on ‘Triumph of the Will’ began with a dramatic prologue showing events in the rise of the Nazi party from Hitler’s point of view- from Versailles and the economic collapse to Hitler’s ascent, and thus carrying on to the Nuremberg rally. It most definitely would have been considered propaganda. When Riefenstahl took charge she rejected practically everything he had done remarking- ‘it was chaos...I couldn’t use a meter.’ (6) ‘Triumph of the Will’ is the main source of controversy amongst historians in regard to Riefenstahl and her work, whether, as Riefenstahl claims, it was a work of art, or if it was ‘purely and simply Nazi propaganda’. The key aspect of the film which is debated upon is the promotion of the Fuhrer Cult. Critics argue that Hitler is being depicted as god-like; Bach comments that the opening titles use ‘quasi-religious language.’ (7) Whilst the opening scenes of Hitler’s aeroplane descending from the clouds have been described as a ‘propagandist depiction of Hitler arriving as a god from the heavens’ (8) Conversely,

Riefenstahl supporters argue that she was merely using the techniques known to her from her previous work. Cloud sequences were common place in ' Berg' films and they became a regular practice in her works. Critics suggest that Hitler is being presented as the saviour of Germany- he is the lead role in the film, and his people are only present to show their ardent love for him. The close ups of the participants' faces at the rally showing their devotion and passion to Nazism and Hitler have been accused of being staged and created to emphasise the power of the Nazi party. In opposition it is argued that Riefenstahl did not create the atmosphere; the people really did love the Fuhrer- she simply filmed it. As Hinton maintains ' the fanaticism was already there; it was not created for the film. The film recorded existing reality. It should not be judged guilty merely because of what it legitimately records.' (9) Another controversial factor is the relationship between the filming and the planning of the rally. As Susan Sontag discerns, " The Rally was planned not only as a spectacular mass meeting, but as a spectacular propaganda film." (10) She and other critics suggest that the 1934 rally was planned for the film not the other way round and that Riefenstahl, being the director of the film played a large role in the planning of the rally. Riefenstahl argues however that her role was separated entirely from the development of the rally and when questioned by Ray Muller on her involvement she replied ' don't make me laugh... I wasn't even a party member.' (11) This argument is reaffirmed by the rally's principal coordinator, Albert Speer, who records in his memoirs that the rally was prepared '...quite independently of its cinematic possibilities.' (12) To look at ' Triumph of the Will' as ' purely and simply Nazi propaganda' is to limit the artistic influence it had on the

film industry. 'Triumph' was innovative in many different aspects; most importantly it was the first documentary which effectively incorporated movement. Riefenstahl used new equipment with telephoto lenses to achieve extreme close ups, as well as new techniques including a wide array of unique camera angles and positions. Riefenstahl argues that it 'cannot possibly be propaganda' (13) when considering the awards it has won, especially the 1937 Gold Medal at the Paris World's Fair. Whilst these awards may not be as steadfast as Riefenstahl believes, they certainly suggest that her work contained substantial artistic skill, and for an opposing nation to recognise this clearly proposes its significance cinematically. Riefenstahl is also condemned for being a Nazi sympathiser for her work on the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. Her four hour long film titled "Olympia" is separated into two segments- 'Festival of the People' and 'Festival of Beauty'. The first links ancient Greece to modern Germany and includes only classical events such as discus, javelin and track. Whilst the second segment incorporates contemporary features of the Olympics and shows events such as swimming, diving and pole-vaulting. It was financed wholly by Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry, clearly suggesting his influence on the overall product and reaffirming the film's Nazi propaganda purposes. The film places great emphasis on the importance of physical strength and talent- characteristics obviously teeming at an Olympic Games. This emphasis is considered by some as highlighting a fascist aesthetic and thus is promoting Nazi culture. The chief theme of the film is the body beautiful and stress is placed upon the beauty of the Aryan body. Rainer Rother makes the point that the 'fascist aspects of Riefenstahl's films do not necessarily conform to the

definition of fascist art, as above all, a utopian aesthetics' (14) he questions whether the images, whilst rejoicing strength, suggest an ease which contradicts the Nazi view of struggle. Obviously the Nazi party would have been enthusiastic to have such an opportunity to portray Germany in a positive light to the rest of the world- as a peaceful, well-run country. Nazism and Hitler are celebrated in the prologue and the opening ceremony as well images of entire stadiums raised in the Nazi salute throughout the film. On top of this, regular German victories are shown throughout the film, boosting patriotism and encouraging the Nazi belief in nationalism. Such images are difficult to deny as being propaganda. Although again, 'Olympia' is to this day considered to be one of the most outstanding sporting films ever made. It pioneered many techniques and equipment used in sporting cinema and thus also has great artistic value rather than being purely propaganda. Riefenstahl was the first to shoot divers and swimmers from under the water, using special cameras and slow-motion footage to create a more exciting film. She also created new techniques such as filming from pits so as to view pole-vaulters against the sky, and putting cameras on tracks to keep up with the pace of the runners. Riefenstahl also argues that her insistence to include black athletes, such as Jesse Owens, against the will of both Hitler and Goebbels outlines her desire not for propaganda but to produce a work of art. The inclusion of foreign victors also highlights the film's purpose as an artistic representation of a world-wide event. During WWII Riefenstahl only made minor productions and mostly remained uninvolved in Nazi films. When the war ended Riefenstahl was convicted of being a Nazi sympathiser and was shunned from the cinematic industry. Unable to refrain from

creating art Riefenstahl found a passion for photography. This passion coincided with a love for Africa and its people. In 1962 she travelled to Sudan on an anthropological expedition to study the Nuba people. This was the first of many journeys to work with the Nuba between 1962 and 1977- some trips lasting almost a year. The photographs she took during this time are considered by historians such as Sontag and Wilhelm Bittorf as fascist and racist. According to Sontag Riefenstahl's work is 'merely a continuation of her Nazi work.' (15) Whilst Bittorf argues that Riefenstahl's work in Africa promotes the same body beauty ideals as 'Olympia'. To some she was a tool in the Nazi movement, working alongside Minister for Propaganda Goebbels to promote the fascist ideals of the Nazi regime. They argue her use of innovative techniques were to ensure outstanding responses from the masses, furthering their zeal and passion for Hitler and his party. Critics such as Sontag and Kracauer argue that Riefenstahl's films remain 'deliberately conceived instruments of political propaganda.' (16) Sontag believes that Riefenstahl's Nazi beliefs were so engrained in her work that they continued to show even after WWII with her work in Africa. Riefenstahl however, maintains that her intentions were only ever to produce art and whilst this may be the truth it is difficult to deny the propaganda tendencies of her films. To label it as 'purely and simply Nazi propaganda' however, is unnecessarily extreme as it degrades the impact they had upon cinema and their possibilities as films alone. (1) Bach, Leni: The Life and Work of Leni Riefenstahl, p78 (2) David Hinton 'The films of Leni Riefenstahl' p41 (3) The Terrible Wonderful Life of Leni Riefenstahl (4) Riefenstahl's memoirs p150 (5) Rainer Rother, Leni Riefenstahl: The Seduction of Genius p53 (6)

Riefenstahl's memoirs p54 (7) Bach p136 (8) Siegfried Kracaur ' From Caligore to Hitler' p41 (9) Hinton p63 (10) Susan Sontag ' Fascinating Fascism' (11) ' The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl' (12) Albert Speer ' Inside the third Reich' p104 (13) ' The Wonderful Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl' (14) Rother p85 (15) Sontag ' Fascinating Fascism' (16) Kracaur p41