

Two anthems

Business



The song *We Shall Overcome*, famously performed by Joan Baez, eventually served as the de-facto anthem of the Civil Rights Movement.

The song *Horst-Wessel-Lied* also served as an anthem, but for a much darker cause, the Nazi Party. *Horst-Wessel Lied*, written by Horst Wessel himself, was made the co-national anthem of Germany from 1933-1945. These songs were published within a decade and a half of each other. In this essay I will analyze and compare these songs through the lyrics, the instrumentals, and the political climate of the decades in which the songs were composed. By doing so, I will show the peaceful nature of *We Shall Overcome* contrasted with the militaristic tones of *Horst-Wessel-Lied*, and display how the pieces reflect the political ideologies for which they were written. *Horst-Wessel-Lied* reflects fascist ideology, while *We Shall Overcome* mirrors the peaceful energy and determination that fueled the Civil Rights Movement.

Horst-Wessel-Lied was publicly recognized on May 19th, 1933 as a national symbol of Germany. The lyrics of the song are obvious in their Nazi support, with the third line of the third verse being “ Soon Hitler’s banners will fly over all street” (Wessel, *Horst-Wessel-Lied*). This line represents fascist ideology because it has a singular leader representing the state. An all male group of soldiers chant the song’s lyrics in the recording; the sound of footfall and the group’s reference to their formation in “ ranks” provides the listener with the vision of them chanting while marching into battle. The chanting provides a militaristic tone, making it clear that the song’s message is less about a joyous, peaceful day but rather one filled with Nazi domination. The lyrics of the song *We Shall Overcome*, while spreading ideas about change, do not carry the warlike undercurrent that *Horst-Wessel-Lied* provides.

Instead the lyrics speak of pacifist methods that can accomplish social and political change, saying not only “ We shall overcome” but also “ We shall live in peace” (Baez, We Shall Overcome). The lyrics play a huge role in delivering the message of the song, highlighting the goal of overcoming racism by employing peaceful methods. This message is parallel to that of Doctor Martin Luther King Junior’s, who used civil disobedience to acquire equal rights. The musical instruments also provide insight into the nature of the two movements. In Horst-Wessel-Lied, the combination of the horn and drums illustrate a picture of a march in one’s mind. The beating of the drums contributes to the militaristic nature of the song in multiple ways.

The drums provide a heavy, powerful sound to the anthem, and without this cadence the anthem’s impact on the listener would be greatly diminished.

The drums conjure an image of Nazi soldiers marching in rhythm to the authoritative beat. This image, combined with the sounds that the horn and drums produce, reveals the aggressive nature of the Nazi party. In contrast, Joan Baez’s legendary performance of We Shall Overcome took place on August 28th, 1963 at the March on Washington. Her use of acoustic guitar provides a serene melody to the song, as she leans heavily upon the chords of G, C, D, and E-minor.

These chords do not provide dissonant or cruel tones but rather harmonious and beautiful sounds. Accompanied by Baez’s outstanding voice, the message of both the movement and the song blend to create a clear statement of a grand mission. The song is equally about achieving civil rights for African Americans as it is about love, harmony, and peace. If the acoustic guitar were to be replaced with the drums and horn from the Horst-Wessel-
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Lied, the song would be transformed into a much more radical and potentially violent piece. The political climate in which these songs were produced also contextualize their relationship to the existing ideologies and subsequent adaptation as theme songs.

Horst Wessel was the commander of the SA in the Friedrichshain district of Berlin. Wessel wrote Horst-Wessel-Lied in 1929, and four years later when Hitler rose to power and became Chancellor of Germany, it became a national sensation. Should Hitler's rise to prominence have been delayed, or had he failed, the song would not have made nearly as much of an impact. As Hitler and his fascist regime grew increasingly powerful, the song's popularity spread throughout Germany. We Shall Overcome followed a similar pattern. Although Joan Baez did not write the song, she famously performed it at the March on Washington, which occurred on August 28, 1963.

As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, the song became the movement's anthem. The song also resonated with the women's movement because Joan Baez was a woman, fighting for equal rights as well as African Americans. However, the song was debated before it was adopted as the anthem; there was some controversy around Baez's performance, since some believed that an African American and not someone of Caucasian descent should sing an anthem for a movement that centered on African Americans. We Shall Overcome was, however, eventually considered to be the anthem of the Civil Rights movement, and is still sung today. The individuals who sang the lyrics, the lyrics themselves, the instrumentals, and

the political climates in which Horst-Wessel-Lied and We Shall Overcome were created determined their lasting infamy and fame, respectively.

Horst-Wessel-Lied→ is a song filled with militant tones and fascist influences. It predicts of a future that is the Nazi's version of Utopia, a Utopia where "Hitler's banners will flutter above the barricades" (Wessel, Horst-Wessel-Lied). We Shall Overcome is a much sweeter song, its peaceful tone established by its lyrics and the guitar that accompanies Joan Baez's voice. Recordings of these anthems allow insight into not only the songwriters and performers, but also provide a glimpse of the political movements each represents.