

# TEACHER'S GUIDE

# Triumph of the Will

Prepared by

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# TRIUMPH OF THE WILL

**“I want to exploit film as an instrument of propaganda.”**

Dr. Joseph Goebbels, Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda

**“It is possible by means of shrewd and unremitting propaganda to make people believe that heaven is hell—and hell heaven.”**

Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*

**“The Fuhrer above all! Above the tremendous symphony of crowds, marching columns, meetings, commemorations, marches and congresses: his words on the present—for the future.”**

Leni Riefenstahl, 1935

**“...(T)here rises above the basic motif of this victorious title (*Triumph of the Will*) a film from the German present—a triumphal procession of the knowledge, courage, and strength to fight and to win for our German people. “A heroic film of fact: in the will of the Fuhrer his people triumph.”**

Leni Riefenstahl, 1935

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# BACKGROUND

When the Nazis took control of the German government in 1933, they immediately began to “coordinate” all communications media to meet the aims of the National Socialist movement. Newspapers, radio, and films immediately came under the strict control of Joseph Goebbels, Propaganda Minister. It is estimated that the German film industry produced approximately 1,300 films during the twelve years under National Socialism. The German cinema-going public stayed away in droves from most of the films specifically produced for propaganda purposes. Only one of these films (ironically one not under Goebbels’ jurisdiction) received rave reviews from its inception. Leni Riefenstahl’s (August 22, 1902– ) *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*), an extraordinary film celebrating Hitler’s omnipotent leadership and his adulation by an adoring German people, is this marked exception. *Triumph of the Will* is the Nazi film that most people have either heard about or seen. Its goal was to document the 8th Party Rally in Nuremberg, September 5–10, 1934, and it won many prestigious film critics’ awards in 1936 when it was first shown. It is considered both a documentary masterpiece and a masterpiece of film propaganda.

Two versions of *Triumph of the Will* are in existence. The original version is approximately two hours in length (110 minutes) This can become tiresome and boring after a while. However the much abbreviated version loses much of the original’s sweep and grandeur. (The videotape in this kit is the original 110 minute version.)

*Triumph of the Will* is actually Leni Riefenstahl’s second documentary of a Nuremberg party rally. In September of 1933 she was appointed by Hitler to film the 7th Party Rally. That film, *Victory of Faith* (*Sieg des Glaubens*), has been lost. Speculation exists that it was ordered destroyed by Nazi party leaders after the bloodbath of June 30, 1934, known as “The Night of Long Knives.” Many of the individuals murdered on Hitler’s orders (e.g. Ernst Roehm, head of the SA, Sturmabteilung) were portrayed in the film.

An immediate conflict broke out between Goebbels and Riefenstahl over the making of this film. Goebbels felt that it should have been made under his department’s direction and not independently contracted to Riefenstahl. However, since Hitler personally gave the commission to Riefenstahl, based on her previous acting successes, Goebbels was powerless to prevent its production. In fact it was Hitler himself who assigned the specific title to the finished film. It is ironic that in the Nazi male-dominated society, the most successful film should have been both directed and written by a woman.

**1934, the year of the 8th Party Rally in Nuremberg, was a very significant year for the fledgling Nazi state.**

JUNE 30—*The Night of the Long Knives*—Roehm and the SA are eliminated as a power source. Hitler is supreme.

AUGUST 2—President Hindenberg dies.

AUGUST 19—National referendum in which Hitler is confirmed as Furrer and Chancellor of the Reich, Head of State, and Supreme Commander of the Army. 90% voted approval of Hitler’s usurpation of complete power.

These successes culminated and were celebrated in a massive and impressive ceremonial rally in Nuremberg in September. *Triumph of the Will* is an amazingly successful attempt to demonstrate to the world the new strength of the Nazi party, the unity of the people, and the magnitude of German power.

# HITLER'S VIEW OF PROPAGANDA

Under Hitler education came under strict state control. Hitler felt that book-learning was dangerous. The primary emphasis of education was to be in the area of health and physical education. The second aim of education was to be the development of character traits such as obedience, loyalty, strength of will, self-control, capacity for sacrifice, and pride in responsibility.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION: How does *Triumph of the Will* convey these ideals? (Note specifically the camping scene and the various oath scenes.)**

The film makes little use of speeches, and instead stresses those elements which work on the psychological and physical emotions. Reading Hitler's *Mein Kampf* reveals his ideas regarding the effective use of propaganda:

"The task of propaganda is not to make an objective study of the truth... but to convince the masses."

Hitler stressed the importance of concentration and repetition of a single point. He saw the great potential for propaganda when it was "aimed always and primarily at the emotions, and very little at men's alleged reason.

"The greater the mass of men to be reached, the lower its intellectual level must be."

Hitler suggested various psychological tricks for the effectiveness of propaganda:

"Never try to convert a crowd to your point of view in the morning sun. Instead dim lights are useful—especially the evening when people are tired, their powers of resistance are low, and their 'complete emotional capitulation' is easy to achieve."

Hitler believed in the powers of mass suggestion, and always supported the use of massive and spectacular demonstrations in order to get others to join either physically or vicariously. He stated it as follows:

"...the gigantic mass demonstrations, these parades of hundreds of thousands of men, which burned into the small wretched individual the proud conviction that, paltry worm as he was, he was nevertheless a part of a great dragon, beneath whose burning breath that hated bourgeois world would someday go up in fire and flame and the proletarian dictatorship would celebrate its ultimate final victory."

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Which of these techniques are used in the film? Read the quotes to students, and ask them to look for and find examples in the film of these principles being applied.**

Siegfried Kracauer in his book *Caligari to Hitler* characterizes *Triumph of the Will* as such:

“At Nuremberg... steps were taken to influence the physical and psychological conditions of all participants. Throughout the whole convention, masses already open to suggestion were swept along by a continuous, well-organized movement that could not but dominate them... Symbols chosen for their stimulative power helped in the total mobilization: the city was a sea of waving swastika banners; the flames of the bonfires and torches illuminated the nights; the streets and squares uninterruptedly echoed with the exciting rhythm of march music.”

How could the individual stand up to such emotional stimuli? Here we see the powerful effect of a masterful propaganda film.

# THE USE OF IMAGERY

## HITLER AS MESSIAH

In the film’s prologue Hitler descends from the clouds like a Messiah to the masses awaiting salvation. His plane lands to the flashing on the screen of party propaganda slogans: “On September 5, 1934, twenty years after the outbreak of the Great War, sixteen years after the beginning of the German people’s humiliation, nineteen months after the beginning of Germany’s rebirth, Adolf Hitler flew again to Nuremberg.” The official Nazi party newspaper, *Völkischer Beobachter*, describes the film’s mission as the portrayal of the “order, unity, and determination of the National Socialist movement.” Throughout the film the emphasis is on the monumental. It captures the enthusiasm of the German people for Hitler. The film is like an epic.

The image of Hitler is the most important in *Triumph of the Will*. He is the only real individual of importance who emerges. The rest of the cast lacks individuality. Almost a Messiah image is created about Hitler’s person. During one specific scene in the film (the Labor Service parade) the “sun disappeared behind the clouds. But the moment the Führer arrives, its rays break through the clouds: Hitler weather.”

### DISCUSSION QUESTION: What does this symbolism mean?

The text of the film consists of policy speeches made by Hitler and others, plus various oaths of loyalty from various support groups. (See the outline of the script which follows for translations into English.) Hitler “poses as the prophet of a new religion, as the grand master of a mystical order, as an animal trainer who has disciplined his beasts of prey and is inspecting them before he lets them out into the world.” Portrayed in *Triumph of the Will* is the process of “transforming the individual into a soulless, anonymous part of the great mass, blindly following their Führer.”

## MUSIC: A WAGNERIAN OPERA

Music plays a most important part in the film, since much of the film is without dialogue. Most of the musical score was written by Herbert Windt (1894–1965) who was a most successful classical and film composer. If you listen carefully to the music, you notice that the *Horst Wessel Song* is given prominence throughout. During the Third Reich, the *Horst Wessel Song* became a national anthem second only to *Deutschland uber Alles*. Horst Wessel was a Nazi bully boy and pimp killed in a street brawl with the Communists prior to the Nazis' taking power. One of the stanzas has the following sung:

“When Jewish blood spurts from the knife, Then everything will be fine!”

Also used throughout are themes from Richard Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg* (The Mastersinger of Nuremberg), a heroic opera. Wagner wrote many operas that employ myths from Germany's past, replete with heroic doings of gods and supermen. This use of Wagner's music had two related purposes: 1) The German people were very familiar with the heritage behind Wagner's subjects. This music tended to identify Hitler with the triumphant mythic greatness of Germany's past, and 2) Wagner's achievements as a world renowned composer showed off the great talents of the German people in such aspects of civilization as great art and music.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: What reaction does the student have to the music? Are the selections effective? What moods are conveyed through music which cannot be effectively conveyed through narrative? (Students may also be familiar with a famous use of Wagnerian music in film; the helicopter attack scene in *Apocalypse Now*. How does this use of music compare?)**

## CROWD APPROVAL

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Nazi propaganda films is the wild enthusiasm of the crowds expressing approval and support for National Socialism. Notice when the camera singles out an individual face or person from the crowd—that face will show fanaticism bordering on hysteria. Goebbels referred to this element as the “shining flame” of mass hysteria.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION: As a viewer of the film, whether a citizen of Germany during the 1930s under the Nazis or as a student today, what “emotional feelings” do you experience viewing these crowd scenes with individuals showing such enthusiasm?**

## GERMANY'S DESTINY FOR GREATNESS

The film shows constant movement. The 30 cameras that Riefenstahl used constantly scanned faces, uniforms, salutes, brigades, etc. to transport the viewer into an unreal world. She dressed all of her crew in SA (Storm Trooper) uniforms so that they would be able to blend into the massive crowds. Even Nuremberg's ancient architecture was brought into the excitement of the party rally. Hitler was always concerned with historical continuity and with associating himself with Germany's historic greatness.

**DISCUSSION QUESTION:** How does Riefenstahl portray and use the bridges, churches, buildings, gables, steeples and guild buildings not only as backdrops but as an integral part of the rally?

## OUTLINE OF LENI RIEFENSTAHL'S SCRIPT FOR *TRIUMPH OF THE WILL* (1935)

*Triumph of the Will* begins like most Wagnerian operas—a prolonged orchestral overture setting the mood of the work. There is a slow fade up of the German eagle, and the title of the film in German—Triumph des Wiltens.

There follows a series of captions (also in German):

“On 5 September 1934, 20 years after the outbreak of the War (World War I)

“16 years after the beginning of German suffering (the Versailles Treaty)

“19 months after the beginning of Germany's rebirth” (Hitler's appointment as Chancellor on January 30, 1933)

Hitler appears—flying in an airplane—through the white clouds as if a Savior has arrived at Nuremberg. The final title appears:

“Adolf Hitler flew again to Nuremberg to review the columns of his faithful followers.”

We see Nuremberg from the air. The *Horst Wessel* Nazi anthem is heard as the shadow of Hitler's plane passes over a long line of marching men. The plane lands and we see an army of men giving the Nazi salute. Hitler is driven through the historic streets of Nuremberg with the adoring crowd greeting him. The car stops and Hitler is given flowers by a young mother and her child. There are many shots of the crowd paying homage to Hitler. Hitler stands on the balcony of the hotel to greet his supporters—the camera lingers on their uniforms, insignias, and boots.

Evening. A period of tranquility bridging the hysterical excitement of the “savior's” arrival and the opening session of the rally the following day. In a scene reminiscent of the torchlight processions on January 30, 1933, when Hitler became Chancellor, Hitler is given a brass band concert. Various signs are ignited: “Sieg Heil!”—eagles and swastikas.

We next see Nuremberg at dawn. The music in the background is from Richard Wagner's *Die Meistereinger von Nurnberg*. The city is awakening. We see the camp where the hundreds of thousands of faithful are quartered. We see the camaraderie of the camp: men stripped to the waist, shaving, washing, combing their hair; mass feeding; wrestling matches; laughing boys, etc. The emphasis is on German youth. There is a procession of followers in various folk costumes. Shown also is bountiful harvests of fruits and flowers. More Wagnerian music as Hitler goes to the Congress Hall amid shouts of "Sieg Heil!"

The opening speech is made by Rudolf Hess, the Deputy Fuhrer. He begins with a tribute to the recently deceased President von Hindenberg. "We remember the Field Marshal as the first soldier of the Great War and thus also remember our dead comrades." He greets the various foreign representatives and concludes his speech with: "My Fuhrer... you are Germany. When you act, the nation acts. When you judge, the people judge. Our gratitude is our pledge to stand by you for better or for worse, come what may! Thanks to your leadership, Germany will achieve her goal of being a homeland, a homeland for all the Germans in the world. You were our guarantee of victory; you are now our guarantee of peace. Heil Hitler! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!"

Hess's speech of leadership, loyalty, unity, strength, and Germanness is followed by short extracts of speeches by other dignitaries. This has the purpose of introducing the new leaders of Germany to the people after the bloody purge known as *The Night of Long Knives*:

Adolf Wagner, Gauleiter (District Leader) for Upper Bavaria

Alfred Rosenberg, Nazi philosopher

Otto Dietrich, head of the Reich Press and Secretary to Goebbels

Fritz Todt, Reich Minister for Armament and Munitions, who started the Autobahn construction

Fritz Reinhardt, leader of the Nazi Party's school for orators

Walter Darre, Minister for Agriculture

Julius Streicher, Gauleiter of Franconia and editor of the pornographic *Der Sturmer*—he talks about racial purity

Hans Frank, Minister of Justice, Hitler's personal lawyer

Joseph Goebbels, Propaganda Minister, and

Konstantin Hierl, leader of the Labor Service.

Hitler is now shown addressing the Labor Force with their spades. The ceremony is staged like a religious service, the men chanting in unison: "We stand here, we are ready. Now we are all working together. In the bogs. In the quarries. In the sandpits... We are building roads. From village to village, from town to town. We provide the farmer with new acreage. Fields and forests, acres of bread—for Germany!" Next follows a ceremony of remembrance of those who fell in World War I. Then the flags are dipped as the Nazis remember those party members who lost their lives fighting for the new Third Reich. Hitler concludes this part of the rally with a long speech, saying: "You are Germany and I know that, just as you are serving Germany in loyal devotion; Germany sees today, in proud joy, its sons marching in your ranks."

Night again. We are shown an SA (Sturmabteilung—Storm Troopers) rally. Bonfire. Fireworks. Men carrying flaming torches. Mystery and bloodbrotherhood. The new SA leader, replacing the murdered Ernst Roehm, Viktor Lutze, gives a speech reaffirming the loyalty of the SA to the leadership of Hitler.

Day. Hitler Youth is shown. Scene opens with a blast from a trumpet and a roll of the drums. Boys not in the parade strain on tip-toe to see Hitler. Leader of the Hitler Youth, Baldur von Schirach, speaks: "This hour makes us proud and happy. We know no difference of class." Schirach turns to Hitler and says: "Loyalty. We'll be loyal to you for ever and ever." Hitler starts another speech: "My German Youth!" We want to be a united nation and you, my youth, are to become this nation... We wish the people to be obedient and you must practice obedience.



We wish this people to be peace-loving but also brave, and it must be prepared for war. You must therefore be prepared for war, and at the same time courageous. We know that Germany lives before us, Germany marches with us, and Germany follows behind us." Youth cheer and sing *Horst Wessel Song*.

Short interlude of cavalry. There follows an outdoor rally held in the early evening. 180,000 party members are assembled with 250,000 spectators. Sea of Nazi flags. Hitler is photographed from below to give his person importance, while the crowd merges into an indistinguishable mass. Hitler gives another speech: "It is not the state that commands us, but we that command the state. It is not the state that has created us, but we who are creating the state for ourselves. The movement exists like a rock. So long as any one of us can breathe, our movement will never be destroyed. We will never give up what we have built with so much sacrifice!"

Once more *Triumph of the Will* moves from night to day. We now see an outdoor memorial service on the Liutpold Arena. The music played is slow and solemn, evoking Wagner's *Siegfried Funeral March* from *Die Gotterdammerung*. We are shown a vast assembly of massed ranks, the ultimate submergence of the individual in the crowd. Three minute figures—Hitler, Himmler (head of the SS), and Lutze (new head of the SA)—make their way up the middle of this gargantuan arena. This display shows the unity of the party after the bloody purge of June 30, 1934. Lutze addresses the Fuhrer before the SS and SA: "We know nothing but the need to execute the orders of the Fuhrer." Hitler stands, a lone figure on the rostrum, silhouetted against the sky. He gives a long speech: "Men of the SA and SS—a few months ago a black shadow arose over the movement. And the SA has as little to do with this shadow as any other institution in the party. They deceive themselves who think that even a single crack has appeared in the edifice of our united movement. It stands firm just like this formation here—unbroken... In times past you have proved your loyalty to me a thousand times, and it cannot and will not be different in times to come. So I greet you as my old, faithful men of the SA and SS. Sieg Heil!"

Next follows the ceremony of the blood banner. It commemorates the flag carried during the abortive putsch of November 1923. This flag, supposedly stained with the blood of Nazi martyrs, is touched to new flags—a Nazi baptism. By this gesture the continuity of the Nazi movement is underscored. Hitler is presented as a "Christ-figure," because in a sense he is now raising the dead. Music of the *Horst Wessel Song* is heard.

Now follows the longest scene of the film—18 minutes of tedious military march-past. Hitler stands on a dais in the street. To music of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg* the troops march by. We see the city, Nazi banners, various German leaders (e.g. Goering) and endless troops of armed and labor services from all parts of the country.

Closing sessions of the rally. In the Congress Hall, decorated with flowers, banners, and swastikas, and dominated by a vast eagle, Hitler gives his longest speech. He is evidently roused, excited with the sheer pleasure in his power to stir so much applause and enthusiasm. He says that all the best racial Germans have joined the movement. Now he is here forever. He is determined to keep the leadership and never let it go. "Only the best National Socialists are party members... It is our wish and will that this state and Reich shall endure in the millenia to come... The youth is ours. The highest aim of nationalism is strength and toughness. We carry on our shoulders the State and the People... Long live the National Socialist movement! Long live Germany!"

The Congress is over. Hess makes his extraordinary remark: "The Party is Hitler, but Hitler is Germany, just as Germany is Hitler." The film ends with a column of men marching toward the screen, superimposed upon a fluttering swastika banner, to the accompaniment of the *Horst Wessel Song*. "Germany's future is assured, guaranteed by the man who has given it the ideology, the organization, the strength; and by the savior who has brought it faith and resurrection!"

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