

The Nazi Christmas

Many of the activities and traditions of Christmas celebrated in Europe originate in the area of the continent that eventually became known as Germany. It is not surprising therefore that Christmas had a particularly strong following among German people.

When the Nazis came to power in 1933 they began a campaign to reshape Christmas in order to minimise the religious aspects of the festive season. After all, Jesus was a Jew.

By 1939 Hitler's attempts at creating a national church had failed; however attempts to redefine the celebration of Christmas had more success. The Nazis overall aim was to use their ideology and propaganda to align the festival with national socialist anti-semitic values.

At this time Germany was a devoutly Christian country, so the Nazis knew it would be impossible to eradicate the religious aspects of Christmas entirely. The situation was made more difficult for them by the fact that many of the traditions of Christmas were created in Germany, for example the Christmas tree and advent calendar.

Before the war started the Nazis simply tried to take over Christmas as a party ritual, inserting Nazi imagery into things such as nativity scenes and Christmas parties. They supplemented this by giving huge welfare payments to the less able through the cold winter months.

By 1939, realising the German people were content to celebrate Christmas as a religious festival, their tactics had changed. Instead they tried to emphasise the German pagan past and how it had evolved into Christmas rituals. In doing so they created their version of how the German tribes (Aryans) had used racially-pure rituals in order to celebrate the winter solstice. The Nazis attempted to move the celebration to the date of the winter solstice, by organising large community performances and bonfires on this date, and they even tried to redefine St Nicholas as Wotan the ancient German God.

The war saw the Nazis intensifying their new interpretation of Christmas. They rewrote the lyrics of Silent Night to remove all mention of religion. They distributed advent calendars to German children, filled with

propaganda and militaristic imagery. They even tried to rewrite Handel's Messiah. Housewives were encouraged to bake swastika-shaped biscuits and, in setting up the Christmas tree, families were encouraged to replace the familiar star that sat on top with a sunburst that looked less like the Star of David. Hence any attempts at celebrating with traditional Christian-based festivities were viewed as a protest against Nazism. Thus singing a particular carol could be viewed as an act of political dissent.

Not surprisingly, as the war progressed and living conditions for German civilians deteriorated, many gave up celebrating Christmas at all. A situation that was not helped by the intensified Allied bombing of cities and increasing food and fuel shortages. Indeed in Berlin by 1944 many residents made the macabre joke of giving something practical for Christmas... a coffin.

The living conditions for most German civilians deteriorated steadily from 1943 onwards, preventing many from celebrating Christmas with any meaning or enthusiasm. Yet despite their attempts to take over a largely religious festival one Nazi tradition did survive the end of the war. Despite being banned in 1945, Exalted Night, the Nazi version of Silent Night, continued to be sung by some German families right through the 1950s. Even today it is sung by some neo-Nazi groups.