

SEMIOTIC ASPECTS AND PSYCHOPHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF TOTALITARIAN SYMBOLS: NAZI AND COMMUNIST FLAGS

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The Semantic Metamorphosis of Symbols

1.1 Red Flag

A plain red flag or standard, to which designs were sometimes added, was until recently shown by some Arab sultanates in the tradition of the early Islamic Khariji movement, and was in Europe since Roman and early mediaeval times a symbol of monarchic sovereignty standing for the legitimate rulers supreme authority over life and death, such as since Charlemagne the «Oriflamme» of French kings and the «Blutbanner» of German emperors. During the French Revolution the red flag became a symbol of the «sovereignty of the people» in rebellion against royalty and aristocrats.

In the course of the 19th century it was adopted by socialist movements as the signal of international class struggle. The red flag of proletarian revolution appeared first in Paris in 1832². In 1848 red flags were flown by radical revolutionaries in France and Germany. When the 1st International was founded in 1864, Friedrich Engels proclaimed the red flag the banner of the world proletariat. The short-lived Commune of Paris of 1871 made the red flag an official government symbol for the first time. In Russia, the red flag was first shown in 1876 by the revolutionary society «Earth and Freedom». During the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, red flags soon became identified with the Bolsheviks. German communist propaganda literature, on the authority of Engels' «Bauernkrieg», extended the history of the red flag as a symbol of revolutionary class struggle back to the peasant wars of early 16th century Germany (however, the most common symbol of the peasant revolt was the «Bundsuh» banner). The rebellious peasants were romanticised in both Communist and Nazi literature and lyrics.

Red was also the dominant colour element in the Nazi flag, from 1935 to 1945 the official national flag of the German Reich. Adolf Hitler was deeply impressed by the «sea of red flags, red bands and red flowers» he saw at a Marxist mass rally in Berlin 1919. He wrote: «I myself could feel and understand how easily the man in the street succumbs to the suggestive spell of such a grandiose spectacle»³. This early experience may well have inspired Hitler to later consider red as prominent colour in the Nazi flag. The dominant red flag background was equally important to the psycho-physiological efficacy of Nazi propaganda and of the «agitprop» (agitation and propaganda) of the Communists.

1.2 Red Star

The star has since Sumerian times been associated with celestial powers. In Judaeo-Christian tradition it has eschatological significance as an attribute of prophets and of the Messiah (Star of Bethlehem); it is also indicative of sainthood, e.g. the red star of St. Dominicus. This ancient religious symbol was adopted by the Bolsheviks in 1917 and soon afterwards by the

international Communist movement. The red star became official state and army emblem in many Communist countries. In Communist symbolism, the five points of the red star, just as the «five fingers above myself» in the salute of Communist youth movements, referred to the five continents of the world in which Marxism-Leninism would finally triumph. The interpretation of the red star in Communist poetry and art as «Star of the Earth, Star of Life» (Johannes R. Becher, Communist poet laureate and culture minister of the GDR), as «the star beaming towards mankind's salvation as in a classless society», points to the eschatological nature of Communism⁴.

1.3 Hammer and Sickle

The hammer has in many cultures been associated with divine power, especially as an attribute of thunder gods, e.g. Thor in Norse mythology. The sickle had in antiquity the connotation of mortality as instrument of Death the Reaper; in Christian tradition it symbolises the Day of Judgement. Although hammer and sickle in official Communist interpretation and according to the Soviet constitution represent the «emblems of peaceful labour» as the union of workers and peasants, Communist propaganda illustrations have sometimes depicted hammer and sickle as weapons directed against «class enemies», counterrevolutionaries or other hate figures. As Communist emblems these tools have therefore retained, perhaps not without intention, some of the threatening aspects they previously possessed in the hands of gods of thunder and final judgement, inspiring fear at least on an unconscious level.

1.4 Swastika

The swastika (Sanskrit: «sign of good luck»), or «hooked cross», can be rendered in a static form, i.e. with all arms in horizontal or vertical position, either right-handed or left-handed. It can also be rendered in a quasi-moving tilted form, i.e. with a 45 degree inclination of the arms from the horizontal or vertical position, in heraldic terms a «crux gammata coupée en saltire». The swastika is one of the oldest symbols of mankind and has been found by archaeologists and historians as religious-philosophical symbol in nearly every culture, including those of semitic races⁵. It is also one of the pre-eminent symbols of Hinduism, associated with several gods of the Hindu pantheon⁶. To Buddhists the swastika is also a venerated symbol, standing for the heart and the doctrine of the Buddha. Throughout Asia the swastika is held in esteem as an auspicious sign of good augury in spiritual, health and economic matters. For this reason the swastika has recently been adopted as an election emblem in Nepal by none other than the Communist Party, in conjunction with hammer and sickle. Without intended racist connotation the swastika has served as military aircraft insignia for Finland and Latvia; a swastika flag flew over the Tule Republic of the Cuna Amerindians in Panama ca. 1925–1930 (Don Healy, flag collection). The Austrian born psychoanalyst, antifascist and later also anticommunist Wilhelm Reich tried to document the swastika as universal symbol of sexual union and therefore strongly affecting the unconscious⁷.

In the swastika's several thousand years of existence as a symbol it was not until the end of the 19th and

beginning of the 20th century that it was assigned the meaning of representing the postulated superiority of so-called Nordic-Germanic or «Aryan» races over the rest of mankind. This new meaning was given to the swastika not by actual Scandinavian or Indo-Aryan people but by preachers of pan-Germanic, antisemitic, and «völkisch» ideas. These notions had been propagated by Comte de Gobineau and Houston S. Chamberlain in Western Europe and became fashionable among marginal intellectuals in Germany and Austria at the turn of the century. German and Austrian «ariosophists» used the swastika as the hallmark of their racism, usually in a static right-handed form⁸.

Among the many preachers of semi-occult pan-Germanic lore of that era, some promulgated a clearly proto-Nazi ideology in their sectarian groups and in their writings. Among those who popularised the swastika as a so-called «Aryan» symbol were some who exerted considerable influence on later Nazi ideologues: Guido von List (1848-1919), founder of the «High Armanen Order»; Joerg Lanz «von Liebenfels» (1874-1954), apostate Cistercian monk, publisher of the racist «Ostara» magazine and originator of the Ario-Christian «New Templar Order»; Theodor Fritsch (1852-1932), editor of the antisemitic paper «Der Hammer» and main figure in the secretive Germanic Order lodges; «Baron» Rudolf von Sebottendorf, alias Adam Alfred Glauer (1875-1945), naturalised Ottoman subject, organiser of the ultra-nationalist «Thule Society» which adopted as emblem a Germanic round shield with static curved-hook swastika, superimposed on a vertical sword. Sebottendorf's claim in 1933 of having directly inspired Nazi ideas and symbols appears historically justified but was less than welcome to the new «Führer». The «Baron» relates in his soon suppressed book that in 1919 the «Thule Society» headquarters in Munich, also visited by later Nazi leaders including Hitler, were adorned with swastikas; the rostrum was draped with a red flag captured from the Bavarian «Räte (Soviet) Republik» into which a swastika on a white field had been sewn by a female Thule member⁹.

As symbol of nationalist reaction against leftist revolution, a static right-handed swastika emblem was worn by some German «Freikorps» 1919-1920, notably by the «Brigade Erhardt» (on steel helmets) and by the «Freikorps Rossbach» (on the regimental standard). The White Guards of the «Mad Baron» von Ungern-Sternberg, a member of the «Thule Society» who ruled in Mongolia 1919/20, also featured the swastika on their uniforms and it appeared on Mongolian postage stamps of the era - as a Buddhist or a proto-Nazi symbol?

In Germany at that time members of the «Thule Society» and ex «Freikorps» officers introduced the swastika emblem to the «Party of German Socialists» (Deutsch-Sozialistische Partei) and to the «German Workers' Party» (Deutsche Arbeiter-Partei), which merged in 1920 - from then on known as «National Socialist German Workers' Party», NSDAP, or Nazi Party. The Nazi Party monopolised the once universal sun symbol of mankind and proclaimed it to stand for the «mission of struggle for the victory of Aryan man» and as the «symbol of organic Germanic truth»¹⁰. To back up the claims of their leaders, Nazi historians produced «evidence» of the «Nordic-Indogermanic» origin of the swastika.

The Configurational Metamorphosis of Symbols

2.1 Hammer and Sickle

The final adoption of hammer and sickle in its present configuration by Communism came at a relatively late stage of the Bolshevik revolution. Hammer and sickle were preceded by hammer and plough. The peasant's plough superimposed on the worker's hammer, both inserted in the five-pointed red star, was the first emblem of the Red Army until 1922¹¹ when it was replaced by a red star with hammer and sickle, by order of the Revolutionary Military Council of 13 April 1922. The hammer and plough emblem, with or without star, adorned flags of the Red Army units and ships in the early years of the Russian civil war [Fig. 1]. The red star with hammer and plough was also the official emblem of the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919¹². From the point of view of graphic presentation and visual recognition, the hammer and plough combination was not well suited to serve as a propaganda signal.

In June 1918 an initial design of the state seal of the Russian Soviet Republic featuring hammer and sickle with an upright sword [Fig. 2], also a rather complex and static device, was according to the eyewitness Bontch-Bruyevich selected by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin as too militaristic. Lenin's letter of 26 July 1918 to the German revolutionary Clara Zetkin contains an offprint of this design, it was later published by Dr. Ottfried Neubecker¹³. Various combinations of hammer and sickle were then in use on Soviet flags. Two of the earlier designs of hammer and sickle survived in the emblems of the Georgian and Uzbek Soviet Republics. The final configuration of hammer and sickle for the flag of the Soviet Union was found by combining the two tools in the form of almost a circle, a modification of Dubasov's design accepted for the state arms of the USSR in 1923. The rounded hammer and sickle device created a dynamic impression and was subsequently introduced by several Communist parties outside the Soviet Union who had displayed other forms of hammer and sickle before.

2.2 Swastika

The first public hoisting of a swastika flag as racist «Aryan» symbol took place on Christmas Day 1907 at Werfenstein Castle in Austria. Although aesthetically attractive, the yellow flag with a red static swastika surrounded by four blue fleurs-de-lys which stood for elitist racial purity, was hardly the model of a stimulating signal to be used in modern political mass propaganda nor was that the intention of the secretive «New Templar Order» whose founder, the former Cistercian monk Lanz «von Liebenfels», had designed this flag and hoisted it on his newly acquired castle ruin¹⁴. The «völkisch» swastika was sometimes displayed by radical German nationalists on the imperial black-white-red flag, a rather clumsy device for a propaganda signal. Hitler had already as a young man known «Aryan» swastika-symbols from his avid reading of racist pamphlets such as Lanz' «Ostara» magazine. Later Hitler was an enthusiastic witness of the «Brigade Erhardt» marching through Munich in 1919 and through Berlin in 1920 with their battle song «Swastika on the helmet, black-white-red band». He also had close contacts with Thule members

who in 1919 displayed the swastika emblem, calling it the future symbol of Germany. In February 1920 the Austrian Nazi leader Dr. Walter Riehl designed a party flag with a black swastika on white background¹⁵.

All these swastika emblems lacked the unique combination of colour and form elements of the final Nazi flag for which Hitler claimed authorship in «Mein Kampf». But Hitler did not create this flag; it was first designed by Dr. Friedrich Krohn, a dentist from Starnberg near Munich who had already in May 1919 submitted a memoir to the German Workers Party (DAP) suggesting the swastika as symbol of national socialism. On 20 May 1920 Krohn unfolded the design which became the Nazi flag at the foundation meeting of the Starnberg branch of the party and on 21 May 1920 it was adopted as official flag of the Nazi party by the executive committee in Munich, also with Hitler's vote. In summer 1920 Hitler depicted the new flag in his sketch of a future Nazi storm trooper [Fig. 3] who looks very much like a soldier of the «Brigade Erhardt»¹⁶. As in Hitler's drawing, most Nazi flags of 1920–22 featured a standing swastika. The static swastika continued on the SA and SS standards which were introduced in 1922, patterned after the Italian fascist model, and on the «tradition flags» of some SS units. In the official Nazi flag the static swastika was replaced by a tilted version. The dynamic tilting of the swastika [Fig. 4] may be credited to Hitler (O. Neubecker, personal communication) or perhaps to Alfred Rosenberg and his Russian emigration contacts who were certainly familiar with rouble bills issued under the Kerensky government 1917 showing a «republicanised» Russian double eagle and a tilted right-handed swastika.

Psycho-physiological Properties and Effects

Since the work of Emile Durkheim¹⁷ we know that symbols have no intrinsic meaning as was assumed before him in the 19th century, that the meaning of symbols can only be understood in their social and cultural context. Durkheim showed that an emblem is intended to express the unity of the society or social group which chose that emblem as a symbol of itself; the emblem is an expression of the sentiment the social group holds of itself and at the same time the emblem also serves to create this sentiment. However, some emblems are better suited than others to serve this intended social purpose because of their psycho-physiological properties based on colour and configuration

3.1 Relevant Anatomical and Physiological Information

Recent research revealed that the «visual» part of the brain consists of four distinct vision areas, corresponding to four parallel systems concerned with different attributes of vision: two for form, one for motion and one for colour. It will be noted that while all four vision systems of the brain are concerned with the general perception of light, only one system is concerned with wavelength, i.e. colour.

3.2 The Colour Red

The colour red which provides the dominant background for Communist and Nazi flags, has several uni-

que physiological and psychological characteristics. Red is the colour of blood and fire, its immediate recognition has survival value; consequently red is the first colour to which infants react and which they recognise. Red is therefore ideally suited for signal purposes and animal blood may have been the earliest sign paint used by man¹⁸. According to the positive and negative aspects of blood and fire the perception of their colour, red, will elicit ambivalent emotions in humans but its immediate effect on the central nervous system is one of stimulation, excitation and arousal with transient increase of blood pressure and pulse rate. To the observer red objects appear closer than objects of other colours at the same distance. Under red light, things appear longer and bigger. Red illuminated weights are judged as heavier than weights under blue-green light. One can say that «red is to the human eye the most salient of colour experiences»¹⁹.

It is therefore understandable that all languages which have basic colour terms beyond mere signifiers for «black» (dark hues) and «white» (light hues), have a term for red even if they have no terms for any other colour, as is known from the «World Colour Survey» inaugurated by Berlin and Kay. Their ethnographic-linguistic research suggests a positive correlation between the technological development and complexity of a culture and the complexity of its colour vocabulary, reflecting an evolutionary law²⁰. It is also not surprising that the terms white, black and red are the most ancient colour names in the development of human languages, as these colours have always been associated with the primordial human experience of daylight, nocturnal darkness, blood and fire.

3.3 Perceptual Effects of Configuration and Context

The final forms of both swastika and hammer and sickle created a configuration which maximises the signal value of these symbols according to the principles of visual perceptual organisation, as discovered by «Gestalt Psychologie»²¹. Specifically the «Gestalt» principles of «Praegnanz» and of «Closure» apply to the configuration of both emblems. The results of experimental research can be summed up in the sentence that visual stimuli are perceived in a pattern of organised configuration («Gestalt») which is not necessarily identical with the external figure causing the visual stimulation. The emergence of «Gestalt» patterns in perception is dominated by the overriding principle of «Praegnanz», also known as the «law of good Gestalt», which states that the emerging percept will be as praegnant or «good» as the stimulus figure permits; it will be of the greatest possible symmetry, unity, regularity, simplicity, inclusiveness and continuity.

Derived from the main «Gestalt» principle of «Praegnanz» is the principle of «Closure» which states that irregular and open wholes are apt to be perceived as closed, so that a circular shaped figure with small gaps tends to be seen as a complete circle. If the observed figure, in spite of the proximity of its parts, deviates from the configuration of a «good Gestalt» to a degree that precludes perceptual closure, the visual stimulus will have the effect of fixating the observers attention by creating mental tension through neuronal exci-

tation in the brain. This is precisely what happens to the observer of the two totalitarian emblems in their final form. The visual stimulation effected by the tilted swastika and by the rounded hammer and sickle provokes perceptual closure and creates an impression of dynamic motion [Fig. 4]. However, the gaps in these nearly circular shaped, quasi rotating figures are too great to be suppressed by the observers perceptual apparatus. The emblems become a source of tension to the observer who feels compelled to focus attention on them, not unlike the hypnotised subject on the hypnotist and his induction device. Carl Gustav Jung remarked of the tilted swastika in the Nazi flag that its apparent motion creates a «whirling circle of sinister connotation», an «appeal to the unconscious and its abysses»²².

The impact of the two symbols is further enhanced by the «context effect» of the brightness contrast when the emblems – white disk with Swastika, yellow Hammer and Sickle – are placed on the red background field of the flag. Due to the relational nature of visual perception, the perceived brightness of a stimulus figure is determined not only by its own physical luminance but also by that of the background stimulus. The colours used in both totalitarian flags are in the terminology of Pasch²³ «unmodified basic colours of high expressiveness», and the lightest colour shades perceived by humans – white or yellow, respectively – were chosen to contrast with the red flag background.

3.4 Neuro-psychological Utilisation of Symbols in Totalitarian Propaganda

The neuro-psychological utilisation of symbols in political propaganda was first described in 1939 by Serge Tchakhotine²⁴, a student of Ivan P. Pavlov. He pointed out Nazi methods of influencing the masses by conditioning techniques. Tchakhotine explained the Nazi achievement of total operational conformity of the nation («Gleichschaltung») by their effective application of Pavlovian conditioning in which Hitler's aggressive and threatening phrases are in the hearer's mind associated with the Nazi symbols which become their evocative signs. It is the specific effect on human perception caused by the particular configuration and context of the Nazi and the Communist flag that makes these two political symbols ideally suited for conditioning techniques. A suggestive message is constantly repeated in slogans, shouted in chorus and chanted by crowds acting in unison, always surrounded by the same visual symbol. Nazi and Communist rhetoric, poetry and song lyrics document the quasi-sacred role assigned to the flag in the totalitarian movements which aim at achieving complete identification of party, state, leader and followers with the symbol.

Totalitarian propaganda tends to work on people placed in an organised mass situation with sensory overload, affective and kinetic stimulation in marches, rallies and manifestations. In such a situation the individual becomes susceptible to suggestion and guided behaviour and may then enter a condition akin to altered states of consciousness achieved by psycho-physiological techniques of religious or political conversion or «brainwashing»²⁵. The totalitarian symbol becomes the conditioned stimulus guiding or even controlling

thought and behaviour. In totalitarian political systems reinforcement of the conditioned response is achieved by constant simultaneous exposure to party symbols and propaganda messages in orchestrated «demonstrations» and mass marches of which the Communist parades in Moscow and the Nazi «Reichsparteitag» in Nuremberg have become paradigms.

Conclusion

As socio-cultural phenomena, Communism and Nazism can be defined as non-transcendental messianic millenarian movements holding out utopian visions for their followers. The prophets of secular-chilastic Communism announced the coming of a terrestrial paradise, the «Classless Society»; those of nativistic and racist Nazism the rule of Aryan-Germanic supermen in a «Thousand Years Reich». The prediction of totalitarian eschatology was that the «chosen people» - the proletariat, or the «Aryan» master race - would in a final onslaught smash «The Enemy» - the «Imperialist Bourgeoisie» and its lackeys, or «International Jewry» and its allies - whose evil conspiracies were revealed to the believers. Both totalitarian movements were capable of controlling volition and behaviour of seemingly ordinary and rational people and to motivate them into committing extraordinary acts, on a scale never seen before, in the pursuit of ideological goals that were blatantly irrational and considered absurd by many independent thinkers.

It is submitted here that this was achieved with flag symbols to which an ideological meaning was arbitrarily assigned and which in their final configuration had perceptual properties that made them psycho-physiologically effective as conditioning stimuli when skilfully utilised by totalitarian propaganda.

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Notes

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²³ Georges Pasch, «Semiotic vexillology: the logical structure of flags», in: «The Flag Bulletin», no. 100, vol. XXII, no. 3-4, May-August 1983, pp. 141–157.
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left above: Fig. 1
 «Red Honour Flag of the Revolution», Colour of the 212th Regiment, Samara Ulyanowsk Redbanner Division, 1918. (From Gennadij N. Venevitimov, «Simvolj bojevoj slavy», Moskwa, Military Publishing House, 1990)

left below: Fig. 2
 Proposed design of a state seal of the Russian Soviet Republic, June 1918

right above: Fig. 3
 Hitler's sketch of a Nazi storm trooper, 1920

right below: Fig. 4
 Perceptual effect: «Gestalt» principle of «Closure», tilted swastika. (Drawing by Martica Jilek)

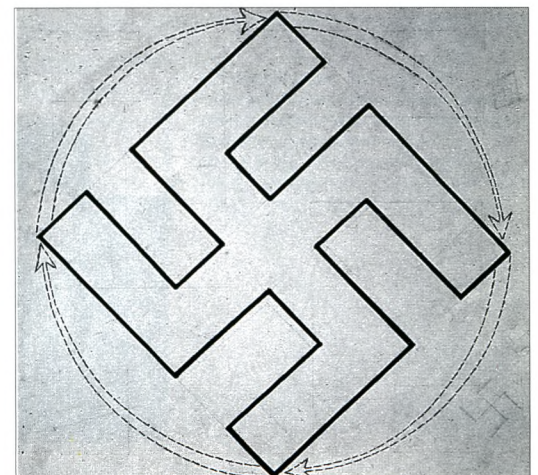


Abb. 3. Der Entwurf zum Staatssiegel der Russischen Sowjetrepublik, 1918.