



A design by the Frankfurter Modeamt, a state-sponsored fashion school. Courtesy of Luise and Volker-Joachim Stern, Berlin.



Only the German elite could afford such an elegant suit. Courtesy of Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstbibliothek. On the right, a "Cinderella" shoe. Courtesy of Luise and Volker-Joachim Stern, Berlin.



A "proper" German woman in the traditional dirndl dress. Courtesy of Callwey Verlag, München.

# NAZI CHIC?

Dr. Irene Guenther unravels the sinister relationship between fashion and fascism

**N**azi propaganda posters trumpeted the “ideal” German woman — the Aryan mother wearing a modest peasant dress, a smile beaming from her freshly scrubbed, cosmetic-free face.

In reality, the wives of commanders wore haute couture sewn by Jewish prisoner-seamstresses and bought American makeup. German women who didn’t have such connections sewed their clothes using patterns made by *Vogue* or purchased their garments from department stores that offered the same styles that were also popular in England, France and the United States.

“Most women wouldn’t have been caught dead in a dirndl dress,” says Dr. Irene Guenther, assistant professor of history. “It’s really clear that they weren’t buying into their government’s unrelenting propaganda.”

It’s just one of the many contradictions that characterized the Third Reich, where the Nazi Party tried unsuccessfully to use even women’s fashion as a tool of the state. In Adolf Hitler’s Germany, fashion wasn’t merely window dressing; it was a politically contentious issue.

Guenther explores Germany’s complicated relationship with fashion in her award-winning book, *Nazi Chic? Fashioning Women in the Third Reich*. She’s working on a follow-up book that is tentatively titled *Dressing Cold War Berlin: Fashion and Politics, 1945-1961*.

A cultural historian specializing in modern Germany, Guenther’s research ranges from post-World War I political art to fashion to the history of the swastika. “It’s all cultural,” she says. “It all has to do with the way

that culture is expressed by people and manipulated by governments — that tension really interests me.”

For *Nazi Chic*, Guenther explored a rarely studied aspect of the Nazi regime, which led her to discover previously unexamined historical documents that pertained to Nazi Germany’s fashion world. But despite such rich primary sources, Guenther

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had to battle academia’s prejudice against what has been called “the F word.” Too often, she says, fashion is dismissed as trivial fluff.

“I had to really fight for this topic,” she says. “Clothing speaks volumes to regimes about the importance of controlling culture and about the ways in which people try to express themselves through their appearance. While attitudes are clearly beginning to change, for a long time historians didn’t ‘get’ just how revealing the intersection of fashion and gender really is. I was interested in using fashion as a window into political and cultural issues in Nazi Germany, and what I found was quite remarkable.”

While the Nazi state had a clear position on art, music and film, its position on fashion was more ambiguous. Yet Nazi Party officials still saw

fashion as a way to promote official gender policies, instill national pride, and “promote a German economic and cultural victory on the fashion runways of Europe,” Guenther says.

Berlin already boasted a strong fashion industry throughout the 1920s and, in fact, made more money selling women’s clothing during those years than the more-

recognized Paris fashion industry. Nonetheless, in 1933, Nazi officials created the German Fashion Institute. “The Berlin women must become the best-dressed women in Europe,” Hitler declared only weeks after coming to power. One problem: Many of the country’s best designers were Jewish. They were purged from the fashion industry, but later some were forced back to the sewing machine while imprisoned in concentration camps.

The goal of the German Fashion Institute was to conquer France’s perceived superiority in the fashion arena. Even French fashion words, such as “chic” and “mannequin,” were banned from the German vocabulary. But despite the institute’s best efforts and most glamorous designs, German and non-German



Jewish girls from the Lodz ghetto embroidered German military uniforms, a precursor to the forced labor of the concentration camps. Courtesy of Erhard Löcker Verlag.



## WHAT'S IN A SYMBOL?

While riding the subway in London one day, the publishing director of Dr. Irene Guenther's first book noticed an Indian woman wearing a colorful sari. Tiny swastikas marched across the fabric. Her gut reaction was to lean forward and to whisper to the woman that wearing swastikas was inappropriate, at best.

At her publisher's urging, the unusual sight sparked Guenther's latest research project: a book on the cultural history of the swastika. While its connection to Nazi Germany has transformed it into a chilling emblem of evil and hate, the swastika meant something quite different to many cultures for thousands of years, and it's still a commonly used symbol of peace and prosperity in the non-Western world.

In the United States, the swastika motif can be found in pre-World War II architecture. But with the ascent of Adolf Hitler, the swastika suddenly became taboo. Even the Navajo, who had for centuries included the swastika in their art and decorative wares, decided they no longer could use it because of its negative political implications.

The swastika prompts cross-cultural clashes even today. When the European Union recently considered banning the swastika, it caused an outcry among Hindus, who consider it a sacred symbol.

No other political symbol is as instantly recognizable and as controversial as the swastika. "It's interesting to me that this symbol is so powerfully divisive," Guenther says, "and that its use by the Nazis for two decades has loaded it with negative connotations in the West at the same time that two-thirds of the world has viewed it for centuries as an acceptable and positive icon."

women preferred the cachet of French clothes simply because "buying French was the hip thing to do," Guenther says. German designs often sold to German women only after they were put under a French label; alternately, French fashion houses often bought beautifully German-designed and sewn garments and then sold them in their shops as French-made.

Wartime rations pushed the state-sponsored Aryan designers in Germany to think innovatively — using Plexiglas from airplane windshields to make "Cinderella" shoes, parachute material for dresses, and dyed fish skins to give a frock extra flair. The sophisticated outfits were modeled in fashion magazines, fashion shows in occupied countries and other propaganda venues as if there was no war, no mass murder and no genocide taking place.

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But as the war raged, such elegance was far from the reach of the average German woman. Because of massive shortages of cloth and shoes, women on the German home front unraveled burlap sacks to make underwear. Thrifty wives turned old military

uniforms into new dresses, even using embroidered flowers to camouflage the bullet holes.

Meanwhile, in the Auschwitz concentration camp, nearly two dozen prisoners labored to make fancy, custom-made gowns for the wives and mistresses of Nazi officers and SS guards. Materials often came from "Canada" — actually warehouses filled with the clothing and shoes confiscated from concentration camp inmates upon their arrival.

Ultimately, an exploration of Third Reich fashion reveals intriguing tales of cultural and economic nationalism, of hypocrisy and ambivalence, of contentious French-German relations in the realm of fashion, of vicious anti-Semitism as well as opposition, of female collaboration and resistance, and of Nazism's double countenance, Guenther says. "Fashioning women in the Third Reich," she concludes, "was a serious matter of the most complicated sort."

