

The making of a Nazi Saint

“The receptive powers of the masses are very limited, and their understanding is feeble. On the other hand, they quickly forget. Such being the case, all effective propaganda must be confined to a few bare essentials and these must be expressed as far as possible in stereotyped formulas. These slogans should be persistently repeated until the very last individual has come to grasp the idea that has been put forward.”

[Adolf Hitler in ‘Mein Kampf’]



Photo. In 1939 this statue was erected in Bielefeld, in front of the apartment house where Horst Wessel was born. I appears to be a colorized photo and I’m not convinced that the statue was actually golden.

NOWADAYS, HORST LUDWIG GEORG ERICH WESSEL is unquestionably best known for a song; ‘Die Fahne Hoch’, to which he scribbled the lyrics in 1929. It was intended to be a battle tune for the S.A. troops under his command, but eventually attained a much larger audience. Furnished with a catchy tune and propagated by the Nazi propaganda machine it became the NSDAP Party Hymn; after 1933 obligatory at all gatherings and second only to the

National Anthem. For posterity it ranks as the vocal embodiment of the infamous Third Reich, and today, the lyrics and the tune are banned from public performance in Germany and Austria.

”Die Fahne hoch die Reihen fest geschlossen
S. A. marschiert mit ruhig festem Schritt
Kam’raden die Rotfront und Reaktion erschossen
Marschier’n im Geist in unsern Reihen mit“

The life and death of the man Horst Wessel was in reality nothing spectacular or out of the ordinary for the time, place and circumstances, and himself he was no extraordinary or deeply interesting individual. Had he died from pneumonia or been run over by a truck, the world would never have heard of him.

AS IT WAS, however, the circumstances surrounding his death held sufficient dramatic elements for the Nazi propaganda machine to work with, elements that could be tweaked and twisted into usefulness; the handsome Humboldt law-student and son of a Berlin pastor, who, out of sheer conviction, sided with the struggling working class; the young maiden, whore-turned-Madonna, who sought safety and solace at the side of the upright, NSDAP freedom-fighter. The communist pimp, a well-known criminal, who assaulted the young couple in their apartment, and the subsequent execution-style shooting; all of them aspects that could be molded into a clash between good and evil; between right and wrong; between Nazism and Communism.

More than enough to create the myth that became Horst Wessel, the demigod; a ‘Nazi Saint’.



Photo: Horst Wessel, leading a platoon of S.A. men at the 1929 Nuremberg Rally. Colorized.

Berlin in the 1920s

The backdrop for the incident was Berlin in the interwar years. At that time, the German metropolis was the third-largest municipality in the world, and had attained a reputation as a ‘vibrant’ city, known for a leading role in science, film, architecture and, not least; its burlesque nightlife, enjoyed by the well-offs and affluent tourists. However, Berlin was also a divided city with its working class communities in the eastern part struggling with poverty, unemployment and political unrest in a hand-to-mouth existence in the aftermath of the Great War.

Working class Berlin was squarely in the hands of the ‘Reds’; after Moscow, it was the largest Communist stronghold anywhere in the world, sporting 250.000 party members and 4000 active political cells. The KPD, Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, controlled twenty-five newspapers and had a vast network of informers, all financed by the Soviet Union. Berlin was truly ‘Red Berlin’.

“On 7 November 1926 the twenty-nine-year-old Goebbels stepped from the train at the Anhalter Bahnhof. Small, frail, insecure, he looked anything but a conquering hero. Goebbels made his way to the Nazi head office, which proved to be nothing more than a dingy little room in a cellar in the Potsdamer Strasse. The Nazi Party was virtually unknown in Berlin.”

[Ritchie, p. 384]

Göbbels had been tasked by Hitler to win over Berlin for the Nazi ideology; a rather ambitious goal, the balance of forces taken into consideration. At his arrival, the Nazis could muster a modest 200 members, organized in the ‘Sports Club of Greater Berlin’, in reality a wing of the S.A. [Sturm Abteilung], founded the year before. His first priority was thus to boost party membership and the best way to do this was to present the NSDAP through speeches and lectures in student fraternities, youth clubs and where working class men met; the beer halls. He quickly assembled a large group of disgruntled workers and radical young students around him, cultivating them into the Nazi ideology.

HORST WESSEL BECAME ONE OF THOSE. In this group he found a brotherhood of like-minded and he swiftly grew into a great admirer of Göbbels. In 1927, he exultantly wrote in his diary;

*“This man's rhetoric and his ability to organize are unique. There is no situation he cannot deal with. The party members follow him with great love. The storm troopers will let themselves be hewn to pieces for him. Göbbels, that is like Hitler himself. Göbbels, well that is **our** Göbbels.”*

**“In the age of the masses, one needs to conquer the street,
for history is made in the street’**

With this outfit, Göbbels set out to conquer the streets of Red Berlin, initially modelling his S.A. men into a rugged fighting squad equal to – or better than – the communist ‘Rotfrontkämpferbund’ [Red Front Combatant’s League]. Beer house brawls, beatings, fighting in the streets, shootings and even occasional murders would soon be the order of the day as the battle raged between the S.A. and the communists, for Göbbels

always with a keen eye to the attention his crusade against the Bolshevik menace created, with the man in the street and in the media.

Göbbels' propaganda 'pièce de résistance' of these early days was a bold appearance in the communist heartland; the working-class district of Wedding. Here, on February 11, 1927, a Nazi Rally had been proclaimed on posters throughout Berlin. It was to take place in the 'Pharussäle' in Müllerstrasse, a sacred communist venue. As Göbbels had anticipated, communists immediately attacked the meeting, and a veritable battle unfolded. Hand-to-hand combat, employing brass knuckles, clubs, iron rods and heavy chains. The battle continued outside the hall with casualties on both sides¹, but, outgunning the 'Red' forces in manpower and brutality, the S.A. eventually won the day.



Photo: Pharus Bierhalle at the Müllerstrasse in Wedding. A large hall – Pharussäle – capable of accommodating 2000+ people was in the back building.

Göbbels was elated. The Nazis were given excellent coverage in the Berlin press where the 'Battle at Pharus Hall' was presented as a bloody communist onslaught on innocent Nazis who only wanted to hold a peaceful political meeting. In Göbbels' view, it was "a very good beginning!"

[It is helpful here to remember that all this hullabaloo and the success extreme parties left and right could muster at the time, must be seen on the backdrop of the financial situation in Germany; the crisis in the farming community, leading to bankruptcies and forced sales of land; the escalating unemployment within industry, reaching some 3 million in January 1929, topped off by the Wall Street crash in October, leading to hyperinflation and doubling the number of unemployed workers.

Street violence in Berlin was rampant and the Prussian police seemed powerless to stop what was beginning to look like a veritable civil war. In the eyes of many Germans, democracy had failed and the call for a 'strong man' was prevalent through all walks of life.

This was the environment in which Göbbels was fishing for proselytes.]

Horst Wessel, the man...

Horst Wessel came from a respectable bourgeois family, his father was a priest in the Westphalian town of Bielefeld. In 1913, as Horst was six years old, the family moved to Berlin and settled in Jüdenstraße, the father, Ludwig Wessel, taking the pulpit at the Nikolaikirche.

Wessel Senior was himself a militaristic anti-Semite who subscribed wholesale to the stab-in-the-back mythos propagated in right-wing circles after World War One and, with a deep contempt for the Weimar Republic, he conveyed his radical worldview to his children who would all become active Nazis.

Attending several elementary schools and gymnasiums, Horst had started law studies in April 1926 at Humboldt University. Since the tender age of sixteen he had frequented different groups on the extreme right, spawned from the human debris of war; the German soldiers returning from the trenches – undefeated on the battlefield, but, in their view, betrayed by left-wing politicians; finding themselves lost in civilian life, unemployed, unwanted and with little hope for the future. Wessel joined the highly anti-Semitic ‘Consul Organization’ and the paramilitary ‘Schwarze Reichswehr’, not really finding his place. In December 1926 he joined the SA, describing in his diary his encounter with the NSDAP ideology as an ‘awakening’. Eventually he dropped out of the university, taking casual jobs and devoting most of his time to Party work.

**“He ... picked out bullies and rowdies,
all of them young fellows
with a natural leaning to violence.”**

Wessel has been described as having a weak constitution, suffering from a deformed arm after a riding accident in his youth, so it is unlikely he would have been able to excel in the street fighting the SA code called for. However, intelligent [above SA average, anyway]; a fairly good speaker² and organizer with an ability to rouse the downtrodden, unemployed and poorly educated men of interwar Berlin, he gained a reputation as an able recruiter.

**“...the group of men sheltering behind their uniforms,
their weapons and their decorations...”**

Offering his prospects a ‘fighting brotherhood’, where ignorance, low self-esteem and humble social status was compensated by bigotry, swank uniforms, marches and street brawls, Wessel was successful and soon climbed the Party ladder. In 1929 he became S.A. Leader for Friedrichshain; a otherwise blood-red communist district, where his gang of thugs [Sturm 5] gained a reputation for being particularly vicious.

Liquidation and death

In 1930 Wessel lived with a seamstress and former prostitute, twenty-four year old Erna Jänicke³ whom he allegedly tried to get off the street, as a subtenant in a third floor apartment in Grosse Frankfurter Strasse 62. The room was rented from a widow who supplemented her modest income as a hat-maker this way, one Elisabeth Salm, whose recently deceased [1929] husband had been a communist.



bp bildarchiv preussischer kulturbesitz

Photo: Grosse Frankfurter Strasse/Frankfurter Allee 1945. The street was devastated during the Battle for Berlin and razed to the ground postwar. Rebuilt as Stalin Allee, later Karl-Marx-Allee, nothing remains today. Credit: Preussische Kulturbesitz

THE HOTHEADED WESSEL had several brawls with his equally determined landlady over his roommate, and over unpaid rent, and Ms Salm had unsuccessfully tried to have the police remove the couple. After yet another argument in the evening of January 14, she sought assistance from her late husband's cronies, congregating at a local KPD drinking hole 'Der Bär' [the Bear] in Dragonerstrasse. Initially indifferent to her lamentations, the comrades came to attention when they learned that the wrongdoer was indeed Horst Wessel; a sought-after target for their wrath, even appearing on communist 'Wanted' posters.

"Beat the fascists wherever you find them"

A posse of thugs came to look for Wessel at his address with the [alleged] intention of giving him a good, proletarian trashing and forcibly evict him from the flat, but, as the word was that the SA leader was packing a gun, they had allied themselves with an on-the-fringe member of the communist party, one Albrecht 'Ali' Höhler; an unemployed cabinetmaker, multiple offender and notorious jailbird.

When Wessel answered the door, Höhler almost immediately shot him point-blank in the face with a heavy 9 mm pistol, a Luger P08.

[At the hospital, Dr Leonard Conti diagnosed: Shot in the mouth around the upper jaw, somewhat to the left. Lateral branch of the left carotid artery torn. Where the bullet is lodged unknown as yet, apparently in the cervical vertebrae and not in the brain; tongue three-quarters, uvula entirely gone, palate badly destroyed, upper front teeth (one or two) shot away.]

“Fortunately for Göbbels he took weeks to die””

Wessel was bleeding profusely, but during surgery at Friedrichshain Hospital the hemorrhage was successfully stemmed, while the surgeons were unable to locate and thus remove the bullet. A six week hospitalization followed and Wessel, whom Göbbels visited, initially did show some signs of recovery. Eventually though, on February 23, he succumbed to blood poisoning.

The killer



Photo: Police mug-shot. Any affiliation with Höhler, Wessel’s assassin, was flatly denied by the KPD [although he had been a Party member since 1924].

Albeit the KPD slogan called for action against the fascists wherever they were; by shooting an opponent in his own home, Höhler had apparently stepped over a threshold. As was allegedly the case with Chicago’s gangsters, a quiet understanding existed between the extremist groups in Berlin that the homes were sacred ground; hostilities and violence was reserved for the street clashes!

Wessel’s murderer briefly fled to Prague, but, discarded by the KPD who denied all affiliation; penniless and unable to support himself in an unfamiliar environment, Höhler soon returned to Berlin, where he was arrested in early February; charged with the murder and convicted to six years in prison.⁴

Not surprisingly, the newspapers dealt with the incident from different political perspectives. The communist ‘Die Rote Fahne’ was quick on the trigger to describe Wessel as a pimp, killed in a brawl with like-minded riff-

raff, and denying any knowledge of or connection with the shooting or the shooter.

The Nazi-affiliated 'Berliner Arbeiter-Zeitung' blatantly called the incident a 'Red murder' and lamented the 'Wild West' conditions that now, apparently, reigned in Berlin. 'Der Angriff', NSDAP's own daily controlled by Göbbels, stated that the shooting of Berlin's 'most active Sturmführer' was a deliberate communist assassination and threatened retaliation; the perpetrators would be exterminated 'like rats or bugs'.

"...in the loyalty of Göbbels he [Hitler] had complete confidence; moreover, the lame little fanatic was bubbling with ideas which were useful to him. Finally, Göbbels' talents as a rowdy journalist – he now had a Berlin newspaper of his own, Der Angriff, to spout off in – and as a rabble-rousing orator were invaluable to the Party."

[Ritchie]

Horst Wessel, the myth...

Wessel was no stranger to Göbbels and he had in fact at one time sent him to Vienna to 'study' NSDAP tactics. He had been deeply impressed when, in August 1927, Horst Wessel led some fifty SA men in a march from Berlin to the annual party rally in Nuremberg [some 425 km], and saw a great potential in the zealous young Nazi. After the assassination attempt, he visited the hospitalized Wessel several times, hardly out of compassion for the dying man, but because he immediately saw the huge propaganda potential in the story of a young, devoted lad, cut down in the spring of his life by evil communists. He reported in 'agonizing detail' in the Nazi press every step of Wessel's decline.



Photo: Horst Wessel's sickbed, apparently after his demise. Credit: WW2 Gravestone

“Berlin needs spectacle like a fish needs water”

Now, with Wessel barely cold in his bed, ‘our Göbbels’ seized an opportunity for ‘spectacle’ and arranged a grandiose funeral for the deceased SA-man. The Berlin police refused to issue a permit for a mass demonstration in uniforms and Swastika’s, but the word went out through Party channels to get as many SA men and Nazi sympathizers on the streets as possible. Göbbels, ever the lying weasel in his public statements, yet fairly factual in his personal diary, wrote that the funeral was attended by some 30,000 people.

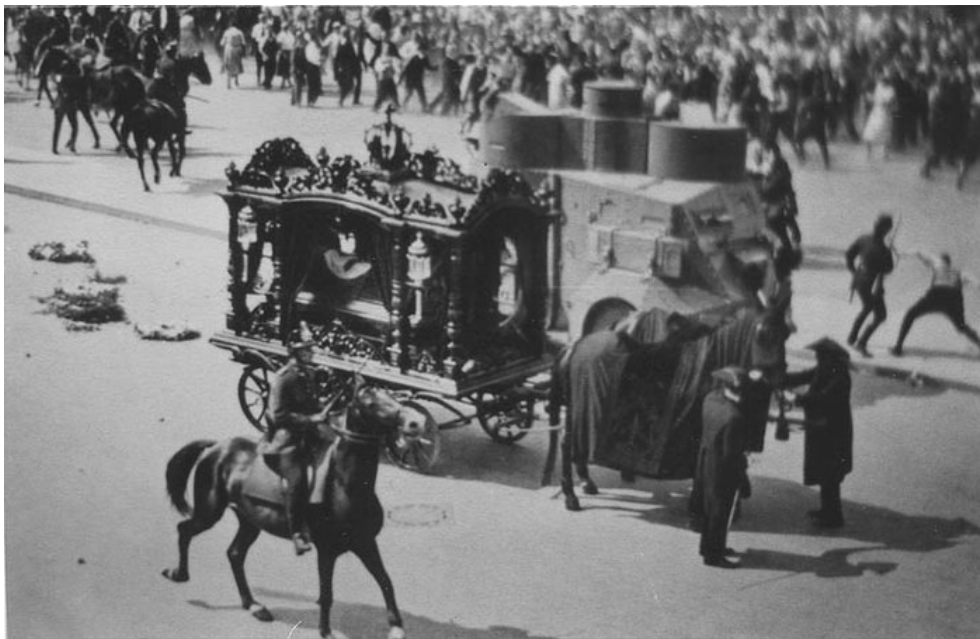


Photo: The hearse carried Horst Wessel along the route: Judenstraße 51/52 [the Wessel family home] > Hoher Steinweg > Neuer Markt > Kaiser-Wilhelm-Strasse > Bülowplatz > Pankstraße > Liniestraße > Prenslauer Tor to St. Nikolai Cemetary.

COMMENT: You may have seen this photo in other articles about the funeral, alleging it to be the hearse carrying Horst Wessel to his grave and the tumultuous riots that supposedly occurred (note the extensive street fighting in the background). Actually it is a still from the 1933 propaganda film ‘Hans Westmar’, depicting the life of Horst Wessel. [Siemens, p. 121]

As the swastika bedecked coffin was lowered into the grave, the mourners, comprising Nazi bigwigs such as Hermann Göring and Prince August Wilhelm of Prussia, sang the ‘Horst Wessel’ tune and the event was recorded for posterity (and later *Wochenschau*) by the NSDAP. Göbbels held the eulogy, comparing Wessel to Jesus Christ as a man, setting an example for others, giving his life as a sacrifice for the cause, stating; *“Through sacrifice to redemption... through struggle to victory.”* Göbbels went on to say: *“And when the SA assembles for the great roll call, when every man's name is called, the Führer will also call your name, Comrade Wessel! Wherever Germany is, there you are as well, Horst Wessel!”*



Photo: SA men lowering Wessel's coffin. Just hours before, SA troopers had been busy removing graffiti from the cemetery walls, reading: "To Wessel the pimp a final Heil Hitler".
Credit: Bundesarchiv

WESSEL'S MEMORIAL SERVICE would thus become the textbook example, defining how dying for the Nazi ideology and become a 'blood witness' was the highest attainable goal for an SA man and how the funeral should be the deceased man's last contribution to further the movements objectives.

The KPD did, however, what they could to disrupt the event. Along the route, the hearse was followed by communists carrying banners saying 'Wessel the Pimp'; insults - and some rocks - were hurled at the procession. The 'Internationale' was sung. Here and there isolated brawls broke out between communists and the SA, but no major clashes occurred as later portrayed in the 1933 propaganda film.



Photo: Change of street sign, May 26, 1933. Postwar renamed to Liebknecht Plats and in 1947 taking its name after Rosa Luxemburg.

The former 'Bülowplatz' was renamed to 'Horst Wessel Platz' in 1933 [today Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz] and it would not be the only accolade; a training ship was named after him; a fighter squadron proudly renamed their unit and an Honor Guard of the SA protected his grave at the Nikolai Friedhof. Wessel continued to be idealized to the point of worship and held as an example for the youth throughout the Nazi period of reign, and the song he had scribbled became a second National Anthem.

“Horst Wessel did a great deal more for the Nazi image as a dead pimp than he had ever done as a live Party member.”

The quote by author Alan Wykes pretty much sums it up; Wessel was effectively canonized by the High Priest of the Nazi religion; he even had the above mentioned film made about his life and deeds, though not to Göbbels liking, as he found it deprived of the necessary 'artistic qualities'. The film in his view was bourgeois, lacked genuine National Socialist revolutionary spirit and emphasized Wessel's Christian background too much! Göbbels put his foot down and banned the film in its present shape. In his opinion, *“...the figure of Horst Wessel as portrayed in the film did not approach the character of the man in reality!”* [Either way you look at it, that was probably a fairly accurate statement].



1933 movie poster

Allegedly it took a substantial number of cuts, retakes and rearrangements before Joseph Göbbels was – at least reasonably – satisfied and agreed to release the film. The main character was renamed 'Hans Westmar' and no direct reference to events in Wessel's (somewhat tumultuous) life was made, nor to the existence of the inconvenient prostitute, Erna Jänicke. Instead it was now heroic narrative where 'the cult of Horst Wessel embodied all the elements most central to Göbbels' propaganda'. Pompous, stirring music was added and a Nazi blockbuster was born.

“The interesting part of his life lies after his death.”

In the following years, the shooting, death and burial of Horst Wessel became seminal dates in the Nazi calendar. School children were taught about the martyr to a degree where *“...every child know Horst Wessel as a heroic, saintly figure of light, a godlike hero hated by the enemies of the Nazis, a man who sacrificed his life in the battle against evil. His song, they are told, is one of the greatest creations of the German spirit. And they sing it lustily.”* [Erika Mann]



Photo: The SA commemorates at Wessel's grave, February 23, 1938. After 1945, the Nikolai cemetery lay in East Berlin and Soviet authorities ordered the monument destroyed and the site leveled. Photo credit: AKA Images

“Tell a lie often enough and it will be believed”

Until his death by an assassin, Horst Wessel was but a mortal man - and not even a very remarkable one. What he became post mortem was due to circumstances and machinations beyond his control. The interesting part of his life thus lies after his passing, as the ‘Wessel incident’ was exploited to serve the Nazi cause. How this process unfolded, presenting the victory of form-over-substance-approach, which we can also observe in today’s politics, is the real story; a warning from history.

Today

Following the defeat of Nazism an evil spell lifted, and Germany returned to the road of democracy, which had been so abruptly curbed in 1933. The Horst Wessel myth quickly faded and the man is scarcely known to the vast majority of Germans today. The song he wrote and which millions sung enthusiastically is now banned from public performance; consigned to the history books along with the swastikas, the shoulder straps, the jackboots and the goose stepping.

As to his grave in Pankow [Section 1, Row 11, Grave 2], what actually happened, as far as I can discover, was that initially, sometime in the 1950s, the name Horst Wessel was chiseled out. Over the years, the gravesite was subject to desecration, apparently from left-wing sympathizers, until finally, not so long ago, the remains of the headstone were removed by authorities. Still today, die-hards allegedly visit the cemetery in search of the ‘hero’s’ grave and petitions from private individuals to reinstate the headstone has been filed as late as 1989.

They have all been turned down...

Sources

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Der Spiegel; **Horst Wessel - Idealist oder Zuhälter?**, © 1980
Wikipedia, Spartacus Educational, Axis History Forum

Links

When I first started out researching this subject back in 2020 [the article has been brought in abbreviated form as a facebook 'Note'], I found that the 'Giftzweg' eventually developed his funeral eulogy into a wholesale propaganda speech. There was at that time a YouTube video of the speech and further a small clip of original footage from the funeral procession.

As so much else controversial material on YouTube or facebook, both have mysteriously vanished since 'wokeism' and the inevitable subsequent historical ignorance has prevailed.

Ingeborg Wessel: 'Mein Bruder Horst' (free PDF download):

<https://bit.ly/3JCoEAQ>

The movie 'Hans Westmar' [1:23:21] can be watched here:

<https://archive.org/details/HansWestmar1933ATributeToHorstWessel>

Horst Wessel tune lyrics: <https://alphahistory.com/nazigermany/the-horst-wessel-song-lyrics/>

Family grave: <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/22156/horst-wessel>

¹ Some 80+ communists were injured while the S.A. allegedly got off with 10-12 casualties.

² Wessel was recognized by Göbbels as an effective, rabbleroxing street speaker. In the first 11 months of 1929 he i.e. spoke at 56 separate NSDAP events

³ Wessel had met Jänicke at Café Mexiko near Alexanderplatz, a hang-out for petty criminals and ladies of 'easy virtue', and shackled up with her in November 1929. Allegedly, there was talk of engagement and even marriage. In communist propaganda, however, Horst Wessel would later be described as Erna's pimp. It is not known what happened to her afterwards, she apparently did not get any help from the NSDAP and simply vanishes out of history.

⁴ In 1933, after the Nazis came to power, he was taken from his cell on Gestapo orders, driven a few kilometers outside Berlin and killed by the S.A.