Festival of Smoke

A review of Leni Riefenstahl's memoir of her filmmaking career and her relationship with Hitler.

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Soon after the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, an incident occurred in the town of Konskie in which a number of Poles were massacred by German soldiers in reprisal for Polish partisan attacks on Germans. Photographs were taken, one showing the bodies of the murdered Poles lying on the ground. Also present in Konskie that day was a uniformed woman in charge of a German "documentary" film crew. She was Leni Riefenstahl, then thirty-seven years old and well known as Hitler's favored filmmaker. A photograph was taken of her too.

These photographs taken at Konskie haunted Riefenstahl after the war when she was accused of being an eye-witness to Nazi atrocities. Although a German denazification tribunal cleared her of this charge, she was so tainted by her association with Hitler and other Nazi leaders that she found it impossible to resume her career as a filmmaker. *Tiefland*, which she had been working on intermittently during the war and released finally in 1954, was her last film. She survived the difficult postwar years through one expedient after another and went on to make a brief splash as a stills photographer of certain African tribes. In 1987, aged 85, she published her memoirs in Germany. These were translated and published in Britain in 1992 under the title *The Sieve of Time*. They have now been published in the United States as *Leni Riefenstahl: A Memoir*.

In these pages Riefenstahl explains why she was in Konskie that day in September 1939 and how the photograph of her came to be taken. It is one of many instances where she has found it necessary to justify, correct, refute, or excuse something about her past. But she gives no hint that she is aware of the irony that she, whose reputation among cinéastes rests on so-called "documentaries," should find herself trapped by a visual document. In part her book is an attempt to score off what she terms her "enemies," writers like Susan Sontag who have identified Nazi aesthetic themes in the photographs of her post-Hitler career. Alert readers are unlikely to find her explanations convincing.

Riefenstahl's book is very long and repeats much of what she has told about herself before in one form or another. Its narrative follows the arc of her long and turbulent life from its petit-bourgeois beginnings in the Kaiser's Germany (she was born in 1902) to its long downhill love affair with Africa (she says she'd like to settle in Africa among the simple mud huts and naked people, but the rains and mosquitoes make it impossible). As active in the latter half of her life as in her prime, she has survived through single-minded concentration on her own interests and through remarkable physical stamina. In her youth she was photogenic, with a good face and figure, and many men were attracted to her. But it does not seem that people liked her, apart from Hitler, nor will most readers find her self-portrait appealing.

The relationship with Hitler is the centerpiece of her book. Spread out over some two hundred pages, this is the fullest account Riefenstahl has yet given of it. She takes us from the day she first met Hitler in early 1932 to the final moments of the war when, at the very end of April 1945, trying to hide herself away in Austria, she heard of his death ("A chaos of emotions raged in me. I threw myself on the bed and wept all night.") In the course of these pages Riefenstahl introduces us to the top Nazis and her work on the films that made her famous. It is this section of the book that the publishers must hope will attract readers.

Riefenstahl began her life in public as a dancer. When a knee injury threatened her future in this field, she turned to films. She was attracted to mountain films, a genre made popular in Germany by Arnold Fanck. In 1926 she appeared in her first film, *The Holy Mountain*, under Fanck's direction. Several others followed. Having learned from Fanck how films were made she then turned herself to directing. In 1932 she released *The Blue Light*, her first film as a director, a fable set in the Italian Dolomites.

Fanck, it seems, required performances upon rocks and ski slopes, the more dangerous the better, but not acting. Riefenstahl's "dancing" in *The Holy Mountain* is awful beyond belief. If it is true that Hitler found this dance the most beautiful thing he ever saw in a film, as she reports him saying, we can understand how the artistic tastes of these two drew them together. *The Blue Light* is nearly as awful. But Hitler, Riefenstahl says, admired this film too. It was another bond between them.

According to Riefenstahl, it was she who initiated contact with Hitler. Soon after completing *The Blue Light*, she found herself attending a rally at which Hitler spoke, during one of the election campaigns that marked the last year of the Weimar Republic. So smitten was she by his performance, she wrote to him. Hitler at once invited her to meet him at Wilhelmshaven, on the North Sea coast.

Riefenstahl's description of this first meeting sets the tone for what follows. It's as if she is imagining herself in a film with Hitler as her co-star and her book the draft of its screenplay.

Hitler takes a break from his campaigning to walk with her on the beach. They talk about films. Hitler persuades her to stay for dinner: "I seldom get a chance to speak to a real artist." They walk some more on the beach, and he speaks passionately about his mission to save Germany.

> We walked silently, side by side until, after a long silence, he halted, looked at me, slowly put his arms around me, and drew me to him. I had certainly not wished for such a development. He stared at me in some excitement but when he noticed my lack of response he instantly let go and turned away. Then I saw him raise his hands beseechingly: "How can I love a woman until I have completed my task?" Bewildered, I made no reply and, still without exchanging a word, we walked back to the inn; there, somewhat distantly, he said, "Good night." I felt that I had offended him and regretted that I had come in the first place.

Her regrets notwithstanding, Riefenstahl lost no opportunity to exploit this all-important connection. When Hitler became Chancellor, he asked her to make films for the Nazi cause. Riefenstahl has always made a point of stressing that her obligations in this matter were to Hitler personally, as if this made a difference to her moral situation. Though she tried to resist Hitler, in the end she could not refuse to do as he asked. (Riefenstahl throughout portrays herself as the reluctant victim of circumstances; when things go wrong for her, it is always someone else's fault.) Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda chief, was now in charge of all media activity in Germany, including film. In Riefenstahl's scenario, he made life as difficult as he could for her, while losing no opportunity to try to seduce her.

In short order, Riefenstahl then made three films in a row featuring Hitler's Nazi rallies at Nuremberg, those of 1933, 1934, and 1935. They were given the same titles as the rallies

themselves, respectively *Victory of Faith*, *Triumph of the Will*, and *Day of Freedom*: *Our Wehrmacht*. Hitler gave a reception for each one in turn. In 1936, Riefenstahl was contracted to film the Olympic Games, due to be held that year in Berlin. The assignment was backed by the Nazi government and it occupied her until the spring of 1938, when she released her film in two parts: *Olympia: Festival of Nations*, and *Olympia: Festival of Beauty*. Hitler again attended its premiere, a gala affair which was held, at Riefenstahl's suggestion, on his 49th birthday. She then toured Europe with the film, turning it into a propaganda triumph for the Nazi government. When she came to the United States, however, she found her films boycotted.

Of these four films that Riefenstahl made under Hitler's auspices, the first has apparently disappeared. The others, however, are available in video format in the United States and two of them, *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia*, are highly regarded in some film circles. To view them afresh after reading Riefenstahl's book makes one doubly alert to the fraudulent nature of the narrative she's now published. The films were of course designed as propaganda for Hitler's government and they betray this motivation in the most obvious manner. In her book, however, as in the many interviews she's given since the war, Riefenstahl sets out to portray herself as a pure documentary film maker, one who was ignorant of politics and had to fight to preserve her integrity as an artist. Regrettably, many in academia and the media have aided and abetted her in this fiction.

We may surmise that to picture herself as one who, yes, was captivated by Hitler's magnetic personality and so "had no choice" but to submit to his will, but who knew nothing of what the other Nazis were up to, was an alibi suggested to Riefenstahl by another Hitler favorite, Albert Speer, his war-time Minister of Armaments. As the designer of the Nuremberg tableaux that Riefenstahl captured on film, Speer was Riefenstahl's close collaborator in the production of *Victory of Faith*, and *Triumph of the Will*. His hand was also to be seen in the props and staging of the Olympic Games in Berlin.

Speer escaped the gallows at the Nuremberg war crimes tribunal by inventing what the German historian Matthias Schmidt has called "the most cunning apologia by any leading figure of the Third Reich." He presented himself as a non-political technocrat, at heart a decent man, who in an honest spirit of contrition accepted his part in Hitler's government, but who was ignorant of the atrocities that others committed. Building on this self-portrait in his writings and thanks to a successful television mini-series based on them, Speer's popular image was elevated from the Chamber of Horrors, where it rightly belonged, to the Hall of Fame. Was it from Speer, one wonders, that Riefenstahl got the idea of devising a similar script to account for her own carryings-on in the Third Reich, perhaps hoping for a mini-series of her own?

Speer flits in and out of Riefenstahl's narrative and is portrayed by her always as a friend and ally right up to the end of the war. Within days of his release from Spandau prison in 1966, where he served the twenty-year sentence handed down by the allied court, Speer wrote to Riefenstahl suggesting they meet. Later, they spent five weeks walking together in the Dolomites, the location of many of Riefenstahl's mountain films. In these airy surroundings the two survivors of the debacle of Hitler's Germany talk about the past. It is typical of Riefenstahl's memoirs that we learn nothing of substance about these conversations. The set and the actors are there, but the scene is trivialized.

As a literary performance, then, it must be said that Riefenstahl's book is on a par with her dancing. Her style, like Speer's, tends always toward melodrama and cheap sentiment. It exemplifies that form of kitsch that the Israeli historian, Saul Friedländer, has found both in Nazi art generally and in many post war attempts to recapture its spirit. The passage quoted above in which Riefenstahl describes her first meeting with Hitler is a typical example of this style. But it is the same whether she writes of her lovers, or of her wartime marriage to an army officer, or of the inner Nazi circle. Hitler is the dictator of Germany, holding absolute power in his own person, preparing to unleash upon the world the most terrible forces of destruction. But his actions, on which the fate of millions depends, fade into the background to be replaced by moments of quiet intimacy with a talented young woman, Leni Riefenstahl. The Führer and she are fellow artists, she woos him with films in which he stars famously, he gives her lilacs, roses, a Meissen alarm clock. She visits him in the Reich Chancellery; they go on picnics; she's invited to lunch, "the only woman at the big luncheon table." In Berlin, he comes by her apartment; in Munich, she visits his apartment. On occasions she's invited to the Berghof, his mountain eerie, which inspires him to talk about religion. Christmas often finds Hitler feeling lonely. Riefenstahl comes round for a private chat.

> Trying to change the subject, I asked Hitler, "How did you spend Christmas Eve?" There was sadness in his voice: "I had my chauffeur drive me around aimlessly, along highways and through villages, until I became tired." I looked at him, amazed. "I do that every Christmas Eve." After a pause: "I have no family and I am lonely."
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> "Why don't you get married?"
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> "Because it would be irresponsible of me to bind a woman in marriage."

It's all a smokescreen, the stuff of supermarket tabloids. But suddenly the smoke clears, we've arrived at September 1939 and Riefenstahl is in the Reichstag listening to Hitler announce the outbreak of war. She at once offers herself for "combat reporting." Within days of the Nazi attack on Poland, she has organized her film crew, obtained uniforms from the army, and rushed to the front line. Commanding generals, knowing who is her protector, point her forward to Konskie. There she is photographed and the incident occurs which causes her difficulty after the war. Riefenstahl says this incident made her abandon all wish to serve the war effort in her capacity as filmmaker. Nevertheless, she flies in a military plane from Konskie to Danzig where she sits on Hitler's left at a celebratory luncheon given for senior officers. Soon after she flies to Warsaw where her film crew records Hitler's review of the Wehrmacht's victory parade.

What does Riefenstahl expect her readers to make of this episode? Does she really think it has no more moral significance than the name-dropping, gossip, and B-movie dialogue that fill most of her book? How could she be so close to the front line, so close to Hitler in his triumphal march across Europe, if she were not an ardent supporter of the Nazi cause? But the smokescreen quickly descends again. In *Tiefland*, a sappy story that was a popular opera in Berlin in the twenties, Riefenstahl found another idealized image of Hitler. Working on this project provided her with a cover for whatever else she and her companies were doing for the war effort. By the time of her last meeting with Hitler, at the Berghof in 1944, she says, "I no longer believed in a German victory." It was time to invent a different future for herself.

Riefenstahl's book, like her films, depicts the moral universe in which many Germans lived and worked in the Nazi era. If it were not for the symbiotic relationship between Hitler,

herself, and her films, it's hard to believe her memoirs would attract a publisher. But the relationship certainly existed, if not exactly in the form she now presents it, and her films still circulate. Her book complements them. It is authentic at least in this respect: in it we hear again the voice of an unrepentant Hitlerite. His fault was only that he lost the war.

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