

# Modern art in Germany and the Nazis, Part 1: Emil Nolde

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Two art exhibitions currently running in Berlin raise important questions about the relationship of certain modern artists to the Hitler regime in Germany.

The Hamburger Bahnhof contemporary art museum is holding an exhibition of paintings by Emil Nolde (1876-1956), *Emil Nolde—A German Legend. The Artist during the Nazi Regime*, which deals with the artist's relationship to the Nazis and their ideology.

The Brücke Museum takes up the same theme in *Escape into Art? The Brücke Painters in the Nazi Period*, concentrating on the artists Erich Heckel (1883-1970), Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1884-1976), Max Pechstein (1881-1950) and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938). In 1905, this collective founded the well-known artistic group Die Brücke (The Bridge).

This article deals with the Nolde exhibition, a second will deal with the Brücke painters.

## *Emil Nolde—A German Legend. The Artist during the Nazi Regime*

In 1937, Emil Nolde had more of his paintings confiscated and put on display at the notorious Nazi *Degenerate Art* exhibition—which included work by Cubists, Surrealists, Dadaists, Expressionists and others that the Hitler regime despised—than any other German artist. Hundreds of his works were destroyed and 1,052 were removed from museums. Despite this, Nolde remained a loyal supporter of Hitler until the downfall of the Nazi regime in 1945.

Nolde is regarded in Germany and internationally as one of the main representatives of classical modernism. His works hang in many museums and adorn countless art books. His paintings of flowers and landscapes have been reproduced in countless prints, and reproductions of his works hang in many living rooms.

The great popularity of Nolde's art is in no small measure bound up with the fact that he was denounced by the Nazis as a "degenerate" artist and, following the end of World War II, was elevated to the status of resistance figure. The excellent exhibition in the Hamburger Bahnhof museum provides a great deal of information concerning the contradictions in Nolde's biography, how they relate to the public perception of his art and how he should be evaluated historically.

Until recently, Nolde was mainly associated in the public eye with his mistreatment by the Hitler regime, but recent research has revealed the full extent of his anti-Semitism and embrace of Nazi ideology, which he and his followers sought to conceal after 1945.

The current exhibition follows the artistic career of Nolde and displays his paintings, watercolours and graphics together with letters and other documents given in historical context, describing his reaction as an artist and human being to the events and circumstances of the time. A two-

volume catalog has been published for the exhibition, documenting his artistic work accompanied by written testimonials. (1)

## Nolde's origins

Nolde was born Hans Emil Hansen in 1867 in the village of Nolde near Tønder (Northern Schleswig, today part of Denmark). His father was a farmer. As a child, Hans Emil was passionate about painting, a passion his parents did not share. In their opinion, he was to get a "proper" job as a craftsman or farmer. After completing a woodcarving apprenticeship in Flensburg, the young man became a teacher of commercial drawing and modelling in the Swiss town of St. Gallen. He also worked for a time as a carver in furniture factories in Karlsruhe, Munich and Berlin.

In 1898, he was rejected by the Munich Art Academy and instead received training in the arts at private painting schools. He traveled to Paris and attended the Académie Julian, where artists Paula Modersohn-Becker and Clara Westhoff also studied. In 1900, he moved into a studio in Copenhagen and, two years later, married a priest's daughter and actress, Ada Vilstrup. He changed his last name to his birthplace in Nolde, to stress his "Nordic" background.

During this period he painted his first religious images springing from "childhood memories and his own imagination." (2) One of them, *Pentecost*, which he submitted in 1910 for an exhibition of the Berlin Secession movement (an artists' group that had set itself up in 1898 against the dominant academic trend), was rejected by its president, the painter Max Liebermann. "If the picture is hung, I'll quit my post," Liebermann, who was Jewish, is alleged to have said. Nolde retaliated in an offensive manner and was expelled from the Secession movement.

The altercation and Nolde's increasingly poisonous anti-Semitism were instrumental in the break-up of the Secession movement. From that point on, Nolde raged incessantly against what he regarded as a Jewish-dominated art market and cultural environment that refused to recognise his talent.

Again and again, he saw himself as a victim, as a misunderstood genius and blamed Jewish art critics. Nolde and his wife broke off their friendship with the Jewish critic Rosa Schapire, who sponsored the Brücke artists and also greatly encouraged Nolde: "The fast-growing friendship between her and us soon collapsed again. Only ashes remain. Gone with the wind. In art it was my first conscious encounter with a human different from myself. ... Jews have a lot of intelligence and spirituality, but little soul and little creative talent," he wrote in his autobiography. (3)

The original editions of the first two volumes of his autobiography, *My Own Life* (1930) and *Years of Struggle* (1934), which cover the years 1867 to 1914, contain numerous nationalist, racist and anti-Semitic remarks.

## Expressionism

Nolde's work is associated with the artistic tendency known as Expressionism, although he himself rejected this term. Expressionist art and literature emerged in Germany in the first decades of the 20th century as a countermovement to Naturalism and Impressionism. The model to be followed was French Fauvism with its expressive colours. Its followers rejected any immediate imitation of nature in favour of an aggressive deformation of subject matter. Their works were often characterised by stark colours and contrasts, often drawing from so-called "primitive" African and Oceanic art.

The term was coined by the journalist Herwarth Walden, editor of the magazine *Der Sturm* (*The Storm*), which published works by many leading Expressionists. The journal *Die Aktion* (*The Action*), edited by Franz Pfemfert, was also an important publication featuring literary texts, as well as numerous graphics by Expressionist artists. (Both Walden and Pfemfert later joined the fledgling Communist Party of Germany. Walden died in the Stalinist purges in the Soviet Union in 1941. Pfemfert became personally associated with Leon Trotsky, and his wife, Alexandra Ramm, did extensive translation of Trotsky's works.)

The Expressionist painters were concerned with shaping the world according to their own subjective feelings and impressions, rather than attempting to depict physical reality. Manifold examples of such work were produced by the artists' associations Die Brücke and also Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider). Many of those involved in these groups, including Nolde, enthusiastically welcomed World War I in 1914 as a gigantic storm that would thoroughly rock the tectonic plates of an encrusted age.

Politically, the Expressionist movement was very diverse. Its political statements were largely diffuse and non-committal. Representatives of the movement regarded themselves as rebels against the bureaucratic, backward-looking cultural policy and decadence of the Wilhelmine Period in Germany (1890-1918), but they largely rejected socialist ideals in favour of the anti-bourgeois sentiments expressed in the irrational philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer and Henri Bergson.

They rebelled against the decadence and narrow mindedness of the bourgeoisie and the established schools of art—Impressionism, Naturalism and Art Nouveau. The same period saw the emergence of similar tendencies such as the *Lebensreform* (Life Reform) and *Jugend* (Youth) movements, as well as Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy. These were tendencies that appealed to and were predominantly propagated by layers of the petty bourgeoisie, who rebelled against the bourgeois world, industrialisation and urbanisation. They rejected what they called the vulgar "materialism" of capitalist society and often sought instead a romantic, back-to-nature alternative. They had little in common with Marxism, socialist ideas or the working class.

### "Storms of Colour"—Nolde and Die Brücke

The Die Brücke artistic group (Heckel, Pechstein, Kirchner and Schmidt-Rottluff) was founded in Dresden, and Nolde felt at home in the group. In February 1906, Schmidt-Rottluff wrote a letter to Nolde, who was about fifteen years older, inviting him to become a member of the association: "Dear Mr. Nolde, think what you want, we want to repay you accordingly

for your storms of colour."

Nolde gladly accepted the invitation and remained linked to Die Brücke after he left the group the following year. He was "disturbed" by the group's alleged effort to create a unified artistic style, noting: "You should not call yourself a bridge, but rather van Goghiana." Nolde's own art was influenced by both Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, among others.

In 1912, Nolde exhibited alongside the Blue Rider group, a second group of significant Expressionist artists, founded by Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky. During this period, Nolde acquired recognition in the art world and was able to live comfortably from his painting.

A year later, Nolde and his wife took part in a South Seas expedition organised by the German government's Colonial Office, which landed them in New Guinea. Nolde's task was to investigate the "racial peculiarities of the population." He regarded progressive colonisation as a danger to indigenous peoples, who allegedly lived in harmony with nature. He had previously studied the art of "primitive" peoples in the Berlin Ethnological Museum in search of the "strange, primeval and primitive." (6) The First World War broke out as Nolde was returning from his trip. Nolde welcomed the outbreak of war.

In connection with an early self-portrait of Nolde, reminiscent of Rembrandt's self-portraits, the curators Bernhard Fulda and Aya Soika explain in the introduction to the Hamburger Bahnhof catalog that Nolde and his wife Ada revered Julius Langbehn (1851-1907) and his book *Rembrandt as Teacher*. Langbehn's book claimed that Rembrandt was the most "German of all German painters," a representative of a "purely German art" and portrayed the great Dutch painter as a figure who could be identified with a "Greater Germany." Such nostrums were integral to the ideological baggage of Nazism.

For Nolde, Langbehn's image of the "individual artist as a sacred figure" and "national saviour" was extraordinarily attractive, the curators write, above all, because he always understood himself as a misunderstood genius, a heroic prophet whose time was yet to come.

### "The Expressionist dispute" in Nazi cultural circles

A fierce debate about Expressionism developed inside the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP, the Nazi party) in the 1920s and early '30s. In particular, the dispute revolved around Nolde. The exhibition curators reveal that surprisingly Nolde had a number of prominent supporters in the Nazi ranks. His religious images, later denounced by Hitler as monstrosities and prominently featured in the "Degenerate Art" exhibition of 1937, were initially praised by some critics as being inspired by the spirit of German Gothic art.

Statements made by Hitler's chief ideologue, Alfred Rosenberg, are prime examples of the initial vacillating attitude of some National Socialists, as far as avant-garde art was concerned.

Rosenberg praised Expressionism in 1922 as a groundbreaking German style in his work *The Myth of the 20th Century* (1930), while denouncing contemporary painters, including Ernst Barlach, Käthe Kollwitz and Nolde as "Cultural Bolsheviks" and "bunglers." His verdict on Nolde was damning, but he left a small door open. In 1933, he ascribed a certain talent to Nolde and Ernst Barlach, only to later denounce Nolde's "portraiture attempts" as "negroid, irreverent and devoid of any real inner formative power" in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi Party's newspaper. (6)

For his part, Nolde continued to place high hopes in National Socialism and in the eventual recognition of his art by leading Nazis. To demonstrate his ideological loyalty, he joined the National Socialist Association of

Northern Schleswig, a Danish branch of the NSDAP, in 1934. (He had been a Danish citizen since the Treaty of Versailles.)

Nolde publicly welcomed National Socialism and leading Nazis—including Josef Goebbels, Hermann Göring and Albert Speer—owned his artwork and praised it as a powerful expression of German and Nordic culture. However, Nolde soon fell out of grace, along with other Expressionists, after Adolf Hitler's seizure of power in 1933. He was a victim of the Nazis' "blood and soil" ideology directed by Hitler, a failed painter himself lacking any artistic skill.

The more the Nazis consolidated their power and set course for war, the more rigorous became their censorship and suppression of art.

On November 8, 1933, Nolde accepted an invitation from SS leader Heinrich Himmler to attend the tenth anniversary of Hitler's unsuccessful coup d'état in 1923 in Munich. The artist apparently expected his art would be warmly embraced by the Nazis. He assumed—in vain—that they would declare Expressionism to be Germany's national art form.

Göring had watercolours by Nolde in his apartment—until Hitler told him to take them down during a visit. Despite his initial support of the Expressionists, culture minister Goebbels and other leading Nazis finally capitulated to the romanticised, cliché-ridden and reactionary artistic taste of the *Führer*. As early as 1933, Nolde was asked to quit the Prussian Academy of Arts, which he refused to do. His application for membership in Rosenberg's Militant League for German Culture was also rejected.

In the summer of 1933, Nolde went so far as to draft his own "banish the Jews plan" for Germany, which he tried to submit to Hitler. His plan called for the resettlement of the entire Jewish population. He also denounced his Brücke colleague Max Pechstein as a Jew on the basis of the latter's name. Pechstein was forced to deny the accusation by providing "proof" that he was indeed "Aryan." In the same year, Nolde sent two portraits to Goebbels to show to Hitler. Nolde described his art to Goebbels as "German, strong, bitter and heartfelt."

Although these attempts to find pardon were unsuccessful, Nolde still enjoyed some success in the art world over the next few years. He was able to exhibit and his paintings sold well.

## "Degenerate Art"

The tide turned decisively against Nolde in 1937, although the year had begun well for him. His works had been exhibited in Munich, Berlin and Mannheim.

Hitler had proclaimed his own conception of German art at the Reich Party Convention in Nuremberg in September 1935. Art must be, the German Nazi leader declared, "the real herald of the sublime and the beautiful and thus bearer of the natural and healthy." Hitler vilified all types of modern art as "Jewish-Bolshevist cultural mockery": "It is not the function of art to wallow in dirt for dirt's sake, never its task to paint the state of decomposition, to draw cretins as the symbol of motherhood, to picture hunchbacked idiots as representatives of any strength."

The Nazis organised their infamous *Degenerate Art* exhibition, with 650 works confiscated from German museums that were deemed to "insult German feeling, or destroy or confuse natural form or simply reveal an absence of adequate manual and artistic skill," in July 1937. The exhibition featured works by Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, Marc Chagall, Paul Klee, George Grosz, Kandinsky, Kirchner and many others.

Nolde was prominently represented in the exhibition with 57 works. He wrote numerous letters of protest in which he pointed out that in his career as an artist he had been "opposed to the alienation of German art, to the filthy art trade, and the excessive Jewish predominance in all artistic matters." Therefore, the censorship of his own art must be due to

"misunderstandings" that required clarification. (7)

He eventually managed to get his pictures removed from the exhibition when it set off for a tour of German cities. However, much of his work was confiscated and all his paintings were removed from museums. Many of his works were sold abroad for foreign currency, but a large number were simply destroyed.

In 1941, Nolde was expelled from the Reich Chamber of Fine Arts. He was prevented from any professional or part-time activity in the field of the visual arts because his work "did not meet requirements demanded since 1933 for all visual artists working in Germany." The 74-year-old artist could no longer exhibit or sell and could not purchase painting utensils, but this did not amount to an explicit "ban on painting," as he himself claimed.

Even these drastic measures did not shake Nolde's faith in Nazism. He and his wife continued until the end of the war to believe in "final victory," although they suffered the loss of around 3,000 artworks in the 1944 bombing of their Berlin apartment.

Nolde painted many small watercolours in these years, which later served as templates for oil paintings. Nolde himself and art historians later referred to this body of work as his "Unpainted pictures." Although seemingly spontaneously painted on just a few scraps of paper, they are in fact composed quite carefully and Nolde was even able to complete a few of them at the time as oil paintings. His subject matter during this period consisted mainly of flowers, landscapes or figures from Norse mythology. After 1933, Nolde had switched from "Jewish" Biblical figures to Nordic heroes, castles, sacrificial sites and landscapes, even though he never adapted to the type of painting favoured by Hitler.

Sixty of the "unpainted pictures" were turned into oil paintings after the war and represent a large part of Nolde's postwar work.

## After the war: Nolde's elevation to the status of resistance hero

Nolde was given a clean bill of health in the denazification trials in 1946, due to the Nazis' rejection of his art. As the current Berlin exhibition documents, the painter was portrayed in the postwar period as the personification of the persecuted modern artist and even a sort of resistance fighter against the Nazi dictatorship. The Nolde Foundation contributed strongly to this image.

Nolde's longstanding Nazi membership was concealed and his four-volume autobiography was largely cleansed of anti-Semitic and racist passages. His estate in Seebüll became a kind of pilgrimage site.

He received numerous German and international honours and exhibitions up until his death in 1956 and beyond. In 1950, German president Theodor Heuss (Free Democratic Party), a trained art historian, insisted that Nolde accompany him on a visit to Schleswig-Holstein. In 1952, Nolde received the *Pour le Mérite* order of merit, the highest German award for science and art. His paintings were displayed on several occasions at the Venice Biennale as well as at the documenta 1 exhibition in Kassel in 1955, which was dedicated to the "degenerate" artists defamed by the Nazis.

Nolde and his art played an important role in West Germany during the Cold War and the downplaying of the crimes committed by the Nazis. In the documenta 1 catalog, art historian Werner Haftmann wrote that the idea of creative freedom was essential to combat the supposed instrumentalisation of art under Bolshevism. Haftmann was also one of the most important propagators of the legends surrounding Nolde's "Unpainted Pictures." (8)

Nolde was revered as a figure of "resistance" by representatives of all the main political parties. Nolde was used by both politicians and cultural

officials alike to demonstrate that postwar Germany had turned over a new leaf and was undergoing a democratic “new beginning.” Nolde was perfectly suited to help cover the tracks of those who had compromised themselves during the Nazi regime and sought to rid themselves of any guilt or complicity in its crimes. Even after his death, Nolde was made use of as part of Germany’s “coming to grips with the past” via the zealous involvement of the foundation in Seebüll. As late as 2013, Nolde biographer Kirsten Jüngling was denied access to the Nolde archive. She was, however, able to draw upon numerous other publicly available letters and documents. (9)

One of the leading patrons of Nolde’s art was a former leader of the Social Democratic Party, Helmut Schmidt. In his position as Germany’s chancellor, Schmidt wrote to his friend author Siegfried Lenz that Nolde was the greatest German artist of the century. Schmidt went on to assert that Nolde’s inclusion in the *Degenerate Art* exhibition was the reason for his own rejection of Nazism as a 17-year-old. During his years as chancellor, 1974-1982, Schmidt exhibited paintings by Nolde in the Chancellery in Bonn. Lenz’s well-known novel, *The German Lesson*, played its own role in elevating Nolde’s stature and was often read as if it were a non-fiction work about the persecuted artist.

Schmidt, shortly before his death in 2015, wrote the introduction to a Nolde exhibition catalog in Hamburg. In it he briefly mentions that there had been a controversy over Nolde’s Nazi connections, but wrote nothing more.

Only after the death of Nolde’s second wife Jolanthe in 2010 and a change in the management of the Ada and Emil Nolde Foundation in Seebüll were the painter’s archives gradually made available for research, enabling Nolde’s real attitude to Nazism to be discussed publicly. A number of such documents were first made available to the public in an exhibition at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt five years ago. The Frankfurt exhibition drew attention to the significant changes in Nolde’s artistic subject matter following Hitler’s seizure of power.

The Hamburger Bahnhof exhibition was able to draw on recent research by its two curators, Aya Soika and Bernhard Fulda, who had complete access to the archives of the Nolde Foundation. The exhibition exposes the extensive efforts of Nolde and his wife Ada to consolidate their relations with the Hitler regime and avoid censorship.

A visitor to the Berlin exhibition could not help being struck by the sight of visitors of all ages poring over the documentation and letters at hand, as well as intensively examining the artwork on display.

What makes an assessment of Nolde and his art complex, given the reality of his abject opportunism and fidelity to Nazism, is the fact that he did not adapt his artistic style to the backward-looking, monumental and parochial inclinations of Hitler and his followers. Nolde did not paint in the manner of Adolf Ziegler, a wretched painter and an organiser of the *Degenerate Art* exhibition, and many other artists exhibited in the large *Great German Art* exhibition of 1937 in the newly built Haus der Kunst in Munich.

The fact that it is now possible to correctly classify Nolde and his art historically is in large part due to the current exhibition and its curators.

The latest revelations about Nolde have failed to affect the value of his pictures on the capitalist art market. As Kirsten Jüngling explained in an interview: “Immediately after the publication of my book, I asked around at Art Cologne and quizzed gallery owners if the recent publications on Nolde’s political past had had any effect on the desire to buy (his paintings). It was annoying. You have to know that enormous amounts are paid for Expressionist pictures, not least because they represent stable investments. People get nervous when the Nolde company shows signs of weakness.” (10)

Notes:

(1) *Emil Nolde: The Artist during the Nazi Regime*, Bernhard Fulda, Christian Ring and Aya Soika, Prestel, 2019

(2) Christian Ring, “Art itself is ~~Emil~~ language,” in: *Great Colour Wizard*, Munich 2018, 29

(3) Emil Nolde, *Years of Struggle*, Rembrandt Verlag, Berlin 1934, 101, 102

(4) Ring, 22f

(5) Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, Berlin 1994, p. 132, 133

(6) [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kunst\\_im\\_Nationalsozialismus](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kunst_im_Nationalsozialismus)

(7) Ring, 37

(8) Werner Haftmann, *Emil Nolde—Unpainted Pictures*, 7th edition, Cologne 1996

(9) Kirsten Jüngling, Emil Nolde. *Die Farben sind meine Noten*, Berlin 2013

(10) Kirsten Jüngling, Interview in tageszeitung:

<http://www.taz.de/Nolde-Biografin-ueber-schwierige-Aufarbeitung/!5432445/>



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