The pseudohistorical model of empire provided by Italian Fascism found ready imitation in Germany. *Italia docet* (“Italy teaches”), as one German intellectual—and coiner of the phrase “The Third Reich”—had put it in 1922.¹ So the question arose: Who would be Germany’s Mussolini?² The answer came in January 1933, when Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany. The Nazis’ *Dritte Reich*—i.e., “Third Empire”—succeeded the Wilhelmine empire that Bismarck had brought about in 1871 after the Franco-Prussian War and in turn harked back to the most famous German empire in history. The Holy Roman Empire of German Nation (962–1806) had managed to exist for well over three quarters of the time that the new Nazi empire was supposed to last. Even earlier, Charlemagne had been crowned Roman Emperor. To make the Nazis’ view of historical continuity plausible, the period between the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 A.D. and Charlemagne’s coronation in 800 A.D. had been explained as a mere suspension of Roman history. So in 1933 the new rulers of Germany could claim long-standing connections to ancient Rome and a Roman-influenced imperial ancestry,


and they did. In his 1878 essay *Was ist deutsch?* ("What is German?") Richard Wagner, Nazi Germany’s favorite composer and one of its chief cultural figureheads, had anticipated a historical development he was not to witness himself:

> in der Sehnsucht nach “deutscher Herrlichkeit” kann sich der Deutsche . . . gewöhnlich noch nichts anderes träumen als etwas der Wiederherstellung des römischen Kaiserreiches Ähnliches, wobei selbst dem gutmütigsten Deutschen ein unverkennbares Herrschaftsgelüst und Verlangen nach Obergewalt über andere Völker ankommt.

In their longing for “German grandeur” Germans can . . . commonly not yet dream of anything other than something similar to the restoration of the Roman Empire. In this even the most good-natured German is seized by an unmistakable lust for domination and a craving for supreme power over other peoples.

Wagner made these observations following a brief discussion of the Holy Roman Empire. A revealing if rather sardonic, even grotesque, visual statement of the connections between Wagner and Hitler on the one hand and the Romans on the other appears in Hans-Jürgen Syberberg’s seven-hour filmic meditation *Hitler—Ein Film aus Deutschland* (*Hitler: A Film from Germany* or, more loosely, *Our Hitler*; 1978), in which Hitler rises from Wagner’s grave wearing a toga. To Syberberg, Hitler represents the unavoidable end point toward which German and European history and culture have been moving. The abyss awaits.

Hitler’s own views on the ancient Romans fit all these perspectives. Two of his informal statements give us a representative summary: “The Roman Empire is a great political creation, the greatest of all.” And: “The Roman Empire never had its like. To have succeeded in completely ruling the world!” So the Romans were a natural model for the new Germany. As such, they had to be integrated into Nazi ideology. How could this be done? By postulating that Aryan Indo-Germanic settlers had actually brought about the civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean. In Hitler’s words: “It was in Greece and Italy that the Germanic spirit found the first terrain favourable to its blossoming.”

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3. Appendix 3 lists the relevant scholarship on this and closely related issues.
   In the immediately following sentence Wagner states that the Romans and their politics had been highly detrimental to the German tribes.
5. The three quotations are taken from Trevor-Roper 2000, 10 (July 21–22, 1941), 111 (November 2–3, 1941), and 289 (February 4, 1941). With the last of these cf. the chapter on the
In the German appropriation of Fascist rituals, the raised-arm salute and the accompanying words “Heil Hitler!” had become part of what now was called the “German Salute” (deutscher Gruß). Its words followed the pattern of “Ave Imperator,” Italy’s Latin greeting for Mussolini. But since the Italians had already claimed the straight-arm gesture as their own not least through its very name, it clearly would not do to adopt the gesture and preserve its foreign name. A new term was necessary to establish the Germans’ independence from the Italians and to lay claim to the gesture as being innately German. Hitler himself traced its origin to earlier periods in German history:

On parades, when mounted officers give the military salute, what a wretched figure they cut! The raised arm of the German salute, that has quite a different style! I made it the salute of the Party long after the Duce had adopted it. I’d read the description of the sitting of the Diet of Worms, in the course of which Luther was greeted with the German salute. It was to show him that he was not being confronted with arms, but with peaceful intentions.

In the days of Frederick the Great, people still saluted with their hats, with pompous gestures. In the Middle Ages the serfs humbly doffed their bonnets, whilst the noblemen gave the German salute. It was in the Ratskeller at Bremen, about the year 1921, that I first saw this style of salute. It must be regarded as a survival of an ancient custom, which originally signified: “See, I have no weapon in my hand!”

I introduced the salute into the Party at our first meeting in Weimar. The SS at once gave it a soldierly style.\footnote{Cf. Franz-Willing 1974, 127. The origin of the words accompanying the German Salute is unrelated to the gesture and for that reason excluded from the present study. On the verbal greeting see Hamann 1999, 243 and 252, and Fritzsche 2008, 19–24; for a study dating to shortly before the Nazis’ seizure of power see Prause 1930, 2 (diagram), 123–26, and 180.}

Roman Empire as Nordic creation in Gehl 1940, 72–122, a history textbook for high school (Gymnasium) and related schools and only one of such pseudo-historical Nazi statements that could be adduced here. On Hitler and antiquity, with extensive quotations and references, see in particular Karl Christ, “Reichsgedanke und Imperium Romanum in der nationalsozialistischen Ära,” in Gabba and Christ 1991, 17–42, rpt. in Christ 1996, 255–74; Lorenz 2000; and Alexander Demandt, “Hitler und die Antike,” in Seidensticker and Vöhler 2001, 136–57, and Demandt 2002. On Nazi ideology and imperialism and their sources—cf. such terms as Weltpolitik and Lebensraum—see, e.g., Smith 1986, especially 231–58 and 304–8 (notes; chapter entitled “Nazi Imperialism”).

6. Cf. Franz-Willing 1974, 127. The origin of the words accompanying the German Salute is unrelated to the gesture and for that reason excluded from the present study. On the verbal greeting see Hamann 1999, 243 and 252, and Fritzsche 2008, 19–24; for a study dating to shortly before the Nazis’ seizure of power see Prause 1930, 2 (diagram), 123–26, and 180.

7. Trevor-Roper 2000, 172–73 (January 3–4, 1942). Allert 2008 is a sociological study of the German salute and its uses and implications; see especially Allert, 30–53 and 102–3 (notes; chapter entitled “An Oath by Any Other Name”) and 93–100 (on its survival after 1945). The SS (Schutzstaffel) was originally Hitler’s bodyguard but became an independent and paramilitary force in 1925.
Hitler’s mention of the SS reinforces what we have observed earlier about D’Annunzio, the militarization of a previously rather innocuous gesture adopted for a specific ideological purpose. Hitler’s explanation of the origin of the “German” salute, attributing to it some vague Germanic past, only reveals his lack of historical knowledge. It is also unconvincing. Anyone in ancient, medieval, or modern times can show someone else an open palm but still be armed and dangerous. Nazism has made the “soldierly style” even more famous—or infamous—internationally than its Italian precursor had managed to do. There is also a noteworthy variant: the man in absolute power most often employed a salute in which his right arm was raised but bent back at the elbow, sometimes so far back as to make the palm facing up horizontally. This Führergruß (“Leader’s salute”) set Hitler apart from his minions—they want to show their eagerness to him by snappy salutes, he does not have to do so to them—but it was also employed in situations when there was insufficient space to extend a straight arm.

The Nazi salute’s close similarity to that of the Italians was the chief reason why the NSDAP, the Nazi party, was often called a Fascist party, although the Fascist and Nazi ideologies were closely related to begin with. In his overview of Western European peoples cultural historian Luigi Barzini attributed the Germans’ propensity to imitate others to their innate “blotting-paper capacity at all times to absorb and improve alien conceptions,” a characteristic part of their Deutschtum. He then went on to ask rhetorically:

Was not nazism (among other things) a thoroughly perfected and efficient copy of disorganized and ramshackle fascism, down to the Roman salute? (Nobody really knows if the Romans saluted each other and the emperor by raising their right arms. The salute was probably invented at the beginning of the century by the forgotten director of a silent movie version of Quo Vadis or Fabiola.)

8. The SS played a major part in what was called Ahnenerbe (“ancestral legacy”), in which German historians and archaeologists were involved to more or less decisive degrees. So were classical scholars, some of them well known, although the Nazis’ main focus was on Germanic, not on Greco-Roman, history and culture. On this topic see especially Kater 2006.

9. Heller 2008, 30 (ills. 28–29), reproduces illustrations from a guidebook on proper salutes, including ones with bent elbows.

10. So Mussolini himself said on his visit to Berlin in 1937; the text of his speech, delivered in German, may be found in Mussolini 1951–1981, vol. 28, 248–53.

11. Both quotations are from Barzini 1984, 88. The book’s original British title was The Impossible Europeans.
For reasons that are by now clear to us, Barzini was right in his skepticism about the Roman ancestry of the Fascist or German salute but not quite right with his surmise about early cinema. Nevertheless his observation deserved—and deserves—more attention than it has received.

More recently John Toland, author of the most widely read biography of Hitler in English, correctly maintained that Hitler took much of his political inspiration from Mussolini and that “he claimed that the stiff-arm salute at least was German.” Toland next quoted the passage from Hitler’s table talk given above. But even as astute and careful a scholar as Toland followed the common misperception about the salute when he stated, just before the words quoted above:

> Audiences were always properly prepared for his [Hitler’s] virtuoso displays by pagan-military pageantry. In addition to stirring music and flying banners, new features had been added—Roman-type standards that Hitler had designed himself and a Roman-style salute. Perhaps he had borrowed both from Caesar by way of Mussolini. . . . ¹²

Historically speaking, it is doubtful that Julius Caesar was Hitler’s source for the Nazi standards, although these were indeed modeled on the vexilla (flags or standards) of the Roman legions. But these had existed long before the days of Caesar. And the salute has nothing to do with either Caesar or any other Roman. Even so, close ties between Italian Fascism and Nazism did exist in many regards, ranging from ideology, anti-Semitism, militarism, and others to parts of their rituals. The German army’s goose step, which goes back to the Prussian army of centuries earlier, is a case in point. Mussolini introduced it in 1938, after being “greatly impressed by the Nazi parades he had witnessed” on his state visit to Berlin the year before. ¹³ At that time Italian-German relations were so close as to make the origin of the new step obvious to all Italians. Nevertheless it, too, was officially propagated as a Roman custom and accordingly called the passo romano (“Roman step”). ¹⁴


¹⁴. See, e.g., Giardina and Vauchez 2000, 259–61, and Luca Scuccimarra, “Passo romano,” in de Grazia and Luzzatto 2003, vol. 2, 335–36. In a speech given on October 25, 1938, Mussolini said that the Italians were the only people in the world in whose history geese had played an important part and told the early Roman legend of the geese on the Capitoline Hill which had saved the city from the Gauls. The text is accessible in Mussolini 1951–1981, vol. 29, 185–96,
One German film set in antiquity provides an eerie anticipation of Hitler’s commanding role as Führer of a Germany rising to new prominence and power after the defeat and misery following World War I. The film also anticipates what Gallone would do later with his analogy of Scipio Africanus and Mussolini. This film is *Die Hermannsschlacht* ("Hermann’s Battle"); 1922–1923 or 1924), directed by Leo König. Its subject is the battle in the Teutoburg Forest in 9 A.D., in which Arminius the Cheruscan—Hermann is his German name—defeated and destroyed three entire Roman legions, three cavalry squadrons, and six auxiliary cohorts. Quinctilius Varus, the Roman commander, committed suicide; no one in the Roman army survived. According to the Roman tradition this was the second worst defeat the Romans ever suffered after the one Hannibal had inflicted on them at Cannae more than two centuries earlier. According to German tradition Arminius had liberated Germany from Roman rule. Since his victory had depended on an alliance of several German tribes, popular historical tradition also made him the first leader to achieve a unified Germany. The foreign occupation of the Ruhrgebiet after World War I was seen as the modern equivalent of the Roman occupation of German territories east of the Rhine. Just as Hermann got rid of foreign overlords in the first century, so Hitler was to do in the twentieth, some years after the release of this film. Hermann is a German leader and liberator. After the premiere of König’s film the audience is said to have sung the *Deutschlandlied* ("Deutschland, Deutschland über alles . . .") with great enthusiasm.

Of central importance for the iconography of the raised-arm salute in both political ideology and popular culture during the second third of the twentieth century are two artistic documentary films designed and directed by Leni Riefenstahl. These are *Triumph des Willens* (1935; *Triumph of the Will*) and *Olympia* or *Olympische Spiele* (1938), a two-part epic filmed during the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. The former celebrates the 1934 Nazi party rally at Nuremberg; its title, the rally’s official motto, was chosen by Hitler himself. This may well be the most controversial with the Capitoline geese at 188–89. In a much earlier speech (April 3, 1921) Mussolini had rejected the thought that in their marches the Fascists were copying the Germans who, after all, had only been copying the Romans. The text is in Mussolini 1951–1981, vol. 16, 239–46, at 244. Ironically, the German term for the goose step (Stechschritt, i.e., “stabbing step”) has nothing to do with animals.

16. The principal ancient sources about this defeat are Tacitus, *Annales* 1.60–62, and Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 56.18–22. The site of the battle was discovered some years ago at Kalkriese near the city of Osnabrück.
17. Leiser 1974, 135 and 137. The well-known essay by Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,”
film ever made. It shows numerous examples of the raised-arm salute on the part of Hitler, high-ranking party officials, and the masses, both party affiliates and the German people in general. The film went on to be shown on a regular basis in German theaters until the end of the Nazi regime, often in truncated versions.\textsuperscript{18}

The first spectacular sequence of \textit{Olympia} shows the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games on August 1, 1936. The national teams enter the Olympic stadium and greet Hitler, their host country’s head of state, as they file past his reviewing stand. We see a number of teams do so with the raised-arm salute, but it is not always clear to a viewer whether they mean this to be the political salute—German or Fascist—or the Olympic salute. The latter, in which the raised arm is extended either to the front or to the side, had become familiar with the 1924 Olympics held in Paris.\textsuperscript{19} French athlete Georges André had delivered the Olympic oath with his right arm raised in a manner indistinguishable from the Fascist or Nazi salute; the poster for that year’s games and French stamps


\textsuperscript{19} On this salute see Alkemeyer 1996, 395–96,
commemorating the games display it as well. But the raised-arm gesture had already been adopted at the opening of the 1920 games in Antwerp, when the ceremony of the Olympic oath had been introduced. A stylized variant could be seen again during ceremonies at the 2004 games in Athens, when classicizing “statues” of nude athletes raised their left arms, with a slight bend at their elbows, presumably to avoid exact political parallels. A photo of the moment in which one athlete, as representative of all, delivers the Olympic oath from an elevated platform during the opening of the Paris games is revealing: he is holding his right arm up and out in exactly the manner soon to become familiar from political contexts. But a clear distinction between the Olympic and the Fascist or Nazi salute seems to be impossible. A larger-than-life bronze sculpture of a nude male athlete that was commissioned for the Amsterdam Olympic stadium in 1928 gives the Olympic salute but extends his arm to the front. (Figure 23) Publicity for Nicola Fausto Neroni’s film *Maratona* (“Marathon,” 1929), a contemporary drama, showed a stylized figure of

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21. Large 2007, 125, states that the Olympic salute was introduced in 1924 and describes the gesture slightly incorrectly (“right arm forward and horizontal from the body”). On the introduction of the Olympic oath see, e.g., Callebat 1988, 198–99 (with reference to ancient athletes’ oaths), and Eyquem 1966, 229–30. On the connections between the early modern Olympic Games and the spectacle tradition see MacAlloon 1981, 128–38 (section entitled “True Tests and Living Pictures: The Exposition Tradition”). The Olympics of 1900, 1904, and 1908 were “amalgamated to world’s fairs” (MacAlloon, 138); their founder, Pierre de Coubertin, had visited the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893 (MacAlloon, 164–65).

22. At least in its early days the Fascist salute could be given with the left arm, too. Heller 2008, 84 (ill. B2) provides an example from 1923.

23. The photograph may be seen in Eyquem 1966, facing page 208. Its caption reads: Géo André prête le Serment olympique aux jeux de Paris.

24. Cf. Large 2007, 250, on the confusion of the Nazi salute and the Olympic salute during the opening ceremony at the 1936 Winter Games. That the gesture may appear in the most unlikely places is shown by the 1922 painting “Colossus of Rhodes (City)” by Czech artist Frantisek (or Frank) Kupka, now in the National Gallery, Prague, which shows the gigantic statue of Helios (cf. chapter 1) facing away from the viewer and giving the salute with his raised right arm. Since neither any trace nor any conclusive description of this famous statue has survived, all reconstructions, of which there have been many since the Renaissance, are more or less fanciful. Kupka’s painting, perhaps the most anachronistic of all modern imaginations of the statue’s appearance, is reproduced in a small black-and-white image in Vachtová 1968, 298 (catalogue no. 42), and in a cropped full-page color image in Romer and Romer 2000, plate 7 (erroneously attributed to “M. Kupka”).

25. Cf., on the IOC’s website, the photographs from the 1928 games with Olympic salutes being given by athletes on a train and of an onlooker who, gazing straight into the camera, seizes the moment of having his picture taken with the winner of the marathon race.
an athlete, running and giving the Olympic salute, that is based on the bronze statue of Mercury by Giovanni Bologna (Giambologna) of 1576. The Olympic salute was on prominent display again at the 1932 games held in Los Angeles, when, for instance, American athlete George Charles Calnan took the Olympic oath in this fashion.\footnote{The IOC website shows a photograph of this moment as well as another one with three victorious Japanese athletes giving the Olympic salute, if in a more relaxed manner.} The Italians naturally brought the Fascist salute to the games.\footnote{So Bosworth 2006, 229.} In a 1936 photograph taken at the ancient site of Olympia, athletes swearing the Olympic oath are extending their right arms before their bodies at a horizontal or nearly horizontal angle; their gesture is reminiscent of the oath of the Horatii in David’s painting. In another photograph from the same year, presumably taken in Hungary during the journey of the Olympic torch from Olympia to Berlin, five young men are saluting the Olympic flame with right arms raised in a manner almost indistinguishable from the Fascist or Nazi salute.\footnote{The latter two photographs described are in Kuron 1936, a commemorative picture book on the journey of the Olympic torch from Greece to Germany, with captions in German, English, French, Spanish, and modern Greek. Only the introductory text is paginated. The English captions of the photographs in question are “Saluting the Fire” and “The Olympic Oath before the start.”} The relay race of the Olympic torch from Greece was introduced in 1936 and appears in the prologue of Riefenstahl’s film.\footnote{The official report, published in 1937, of the games by the organizational committee—XI. Olympiade Berlin 1936: Amtlicher Bericht, 2 vols. in continuous pagination—provides a}
Olympia shows numerous scenes of Hitler, German spectators and officials, and several victorious German and Italian athletes giving the raised-arm salute. But the opening ceremony displays the most arresting sights of raised-arm salutes in Riefenstahl’s film, whether they are Olympic, political, or both. Noteworthy are the range and variety of the salutes, not only from the countries we expect (Italy, Germany, Austria), but also from several others. Among the teams prominently shown giving the raised-arm salute are those from Greece and France, both countries that would come to suffer heavily from German occupation in the course of World War II. The comments by a modern historian on the opening ceremony are worth quoting:

The march of the athletes in 1936 was complicated by an existing, though rarely used, “Olympic” salute which resembled the Nazi “Heil” except that the open hand, palm down, was held off to the side. In a few delegations the salute was plainly Olympic; among others the gesture was clearly a tribute to the new boss of Europe. The Austrians greeted Hitler in a Nazi fashion and moved the vast crowd to love and grateful applause. The small team of Bulgarians... caused a sensation when they offered a smart Nazi salute and dipped their flag to trail its tip in the red cinders—all the while doing a snappy goose step. The Germans expressed their pleasure loudly, though this performance was, in fact, for the king of Bulgaria who was at the Tribune with Hitler. Then another generous, indeed almost fervent, ovation for the French team’s 250 members... Some Frenchmen later claimed that their salute was Olympic, but it looked like obeisance to Hitler, as with arms raised they passed the dais upon which the beaming recipient was placed. ...

detailed description of all aspects of the games, with numerous photographs. An account of the relay race, with several instructive photos of raised-arm salutes, may be found in vol. 1, 512–37. It is impossible to tell if the salutes are meant as political or Olympic gestures; most probably, they are a combination of both. The photograph at vol. 1, 483, shows several members of the International Olympic Committee, civilian spectators, and one person in Nazi uniform giving the raised-arm salute in virtually identical form.

30. Such moments in Riefenstahl’s film may be supplemented by photographs of victorious athletes saluting their national flags in XI. Olympiade Berlin 1936, vol. 1, 629 (a Canadian), and vol. 2, 665 and 945 (a Hungarian and three U.S. athletes, respectively, giving the raised-arm salute but with palms held vertically.)

31. Alkemeyer 1996, 396, describes the historical background (French-German relations after the German occupation of the demilitarized Rhineland earlier in 1936, French opposition to Berlin as site for the games) and contemporary connotations of the French team’s salute. On Riefenstahl’s film see especially Downing 1992; Graham 2001; Rother 2002, 77–90 and 200–203 (notes); Kinkel 2002, 107–72 and 328–35 (notes); Trimborn 2007, 131–52 and 301–3 (notes); Bach 2007, 123–63 and 327–32 (notes); and Large 2007, 295–315 and 373–75 (notes).
The Italian Fascists, grinning, ebullient, and giving the salute which they originated, got a warm reception. . . . Somehow the few Turks who emerged from the tunnel maintained the saluting position all around the track. The crowd was appreciative.

The last team to enter was Germany’s: “Almost the entire stadium rose instantly to freeze into the ‘Heil Hitler’ position and to stay that way.”

Similar scenes had occurred at the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Winter Games held in Garmisch-Partenkirchen earlier that year: “The Italians . . . rais[ed] their right arms to Hitler in a brotherly fascist salute,” but most of the other national team members opted for the “Olympic greeting.” . . . Needless to say, this saluting business was the source of some confusion, for it certainly looked as if the athletes of the world were honoring the German Führer with a Nazi salute. Many in the crowd of sixty thousand interpreted the gestures in this fashion, which is why they screamed in delight when the French athletes held out their right arms on passing the reviewing stand.

The only foreign team receiving a louder ovation than the French squad was the large Austrian contingent, whose raised-arm salute was gleefully interpreted as a sign that the Austrians were anxious to “come home to the Reich.” (The head of the Austrian delegation insisted later that the gesture in question had been the Olympic greeting.) Some German spectators claimed to have heard members of the Austrian team

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32. Both quotations are from Mandell 1987, 148–49 and 150. Cf. also Hart-Davis 1986, 156–57, and Large 2007, 194–95. A detailed report of the opening ceremony, with numerous photographs of salutes, is at XI. Olympiade Berlin 1936, vol. 1, 544–76. Noteworthy photos of the teams are at 548 (Greece, Afghanistan), 550 (Bulgaria), 551 (Colombia, Estonia), 552 (France), 553 (Italy), 554 (Canada; arms held far to the side), 556 (Monaco, Austria, Peru; the last of these with arms held sideways only), 559 (Hungary; male athletes with their arms sideways but holding their hats in their hands), and 560 (Germany). A photo on the next page (561) shows the German spectators greeting the teams entering with their own raised-arm salute. On Riefenstahl’s rearrangement of parts of the opening ceremony for greater visual and emotional impact in her film and on the French team’s salute and its political background see especially Loiperdinger 1988, 44. During the opening session of the International Olympic Committee in Berlin on July 29 a Nazi functionary had even invented the short-lived greeting “Heil Olympia!” Höfer 1994, 163 and note 502, provides textual quotation and source reference. On the cultural and political background of the 1936 Olympic ceremonies see Henning Eichberg, “Thing-, Fest- und Weihe spiele in Nationalsozialismus, Arbeiterkultur und Olympismus: Zur Geschichte des politischen Verhaltens in der Epoche des Faschismus,” in Eichberg, Dultz, Gadberry, and Rühle 1977, 19–180, at 143–53 (section entitled “Weihe spiele und olympisches Zeremoniell”) and 178–79 (notes).
yell “Heil Hitler!,” although Austrian officials vehemently denied this as well.\(^{33}\)

The only film produced in Nazi Germany that is set entirely in classical antiquity is the 1935 musical comedy *Amphitryon (Aus den Wolken kommt das Glück).* This film is a witty and irreverent updating of *Amphitryon*, a comedy by the Roman playwright Plautus. In the tradition of both cinematic depictions of antiquity and Fascist and Nazi iconography this film shows Albert Speer-inspired architecture and a crowd comparable to those in *Triumph of the Will*.\(^{34}\) But its director, Reinhold Schünzel, was partly Jewish. He succeeded in undercutting all the surface enthusiasm for the Nazis that audiences would have expected by now, especially in mass scenes.\(^{35}\) Two hundred members of the *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*, the personal guard of the Führer, played Theban soldiers in the film. When an overweight big shot is being carried through the crowd, it seems obvious that any resemblance of this character to Hermann Göring is purely intentional. More importantly, not a single raised-arm salute occurs in the entire film. Instead, crowds raise both their arms at moments of acclamation. Such scenes do not imitate contemporary practice or political ideology. Schünzel had some problems with censorship over this film, but the following year his film *Land der Liebe* made work in Germany impossible for him.\(^{36}\) He left the country in 1937 and went to Hollywood. Ironically, there he sometimes played Nazis, as did other expatriate Germans.

A curiosity of Nazi cinema is *Ewiger Wald* (1936; *Enchanted Forest*; literally, “Eternal Forest”), directed by Hans Springer.\(^{37}\) It appears to have

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33. Both quotations are from Large 2007, 125–26. Austria’s “return” to the Reich occurred with the *Anschluß* in March 1938.


36. On Schünzel’s relation to the Nazis and in particular to Josef Goebbels, who had provided Schünzel with a kind of patronage but then turned against him, and on the reasons for and circumstances of Schünzel’s self- inflicted exile see Jörg Schönig, “Zur Biographie,” in Schönig 1989, 50–63, at 58–62; and Helmut G. Asper, “Reinhold Schünzel: im Exil,” in Schönig 1989, 64–79, especially 64–69. Schönig, 59, gives samples of dialogue that had to be cut from the screenplay of *Amphitryon*.

been intended as a kind of artistic “documentary” with obvious ideologi-
cal purposes and was marketed as a “symphonic film poem” (Symphonische
Filmdichtung) and a “hymn to the unity of people and forest” (Hohelied auf
die Einheit von Volk und Wald). This side of the film is reflected in its alter-
nate title Ewiger Wald–Ewiges Volk (“Eternal Forest—Eternal People”).
The infamous Nazi ideology of Blut und Boden (“blood and soil”) finds a
pure expression in this remarkable film, although it is couched in histori-
cal storytelling. The second of its eight episodes, which extend from pas-
toral prehistory to the Nazi era, shows the Romans’ expedition, already
mentioned, into Germany in A.D. 9. Even nature rebels at the Romans’
 intrusion onto sacred German soil, for a number of gigantic trees in the
forest primeval come crashing down on the Roman troops. Audiences
 could learn from such thrilling action scenes that Providence, a major if
rather nebulous pseudoreligious concept in Nazism, had destined Ger-
many for National Socialism and its attendant greatness all along. An
off-screen narrator intones the following lines as accompaniment to the
screen images:

Ihr Zeichen der Fremde, Standarten der Römer,
was sucht ihr im Lande, was sucht ihr im Wald?
Wer fremd deinem Boden, Wald, fremd deiner Art,
dem bleibt nicht erspart
unsagbares Leid.

Legionary standards of Rome, you foreign emblems,
what is your business in this land, in this forest?
Those foreign to thy soil, forest, foreign to thy kind
will not be spared
inexpressible suffering.

These vaguely poetical lines were hardly necessary to convey the film’s
ideological message. Ironically, Goebbels and Hitler are said to have dis-
liked the film. The raised-arm salute is absent from this episode of Ewiger
Wald chiefly because the Romans are the enemy of the very people
whose descendants will later adopt this gesture.

In the wake of, first, the entire iconographic tradition of silent films
about antiquity, in particular the immense impact Cabiria had on historical

(with plot outline); Ulrich Linse, “Der Film ‘Ewiger Wald’—oder: Die Überwindung der Zeit
in Herrmann and Nassen 1994, 57–75; and Giesen 2003, 35–37 (a description with quotations)
and 192 (filmographic information).
epics, and, secondly, of the renewed interest in the Roman Empire on the part of Fascist Italy and, to a smaller degree, Nazi Germany, the raised-arm salute had become a regular part of Roman iconography in Hollywood films, too. Notable examples are Fred Niblo’s version of *Ben-Hur* (1925) and Cecil B. DeMille’s *The King of Kings* (1927), a reverent epic about Jesus Christ. In Niblo’s *Ben-Hur* comparatively few raised-arm salutes appear, usually without political significance. After the sea battle Arrius publicly announces that Ben-Hur has saved his life and is now his adopted son; he raises his arm in a loose gesture, and so do others in reply. Here and in a later scene among the evil Roman Messala and his friends, the salute is not yet formalized. In *The King of Kings* the first raised-arm salute, if with the fingers of the right hand held apart, occurs when Caiaphas, arrived to denounce Jesus to the Romans, greets Pontius Pilate: “Hail, Roman!” Pilate’s reply (“Hail, priest!”) is highly condescending in order to convey to viewers the power of the empire he represents. Sitting on a throne-like seat before an immense eagle statue, Pilate only languidly raises his right arm at the elbow from his chair’s arm rest. Later salutes on the part of Roman soldiers are much more what we expect, although elbows can still remain somewhat bent. Even in his two sound films set in classical antiquity, *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) and *Cleopatra* (1934), DeMille does not thoroughly fix the execution of the gesture.

A little-known short film of the same year corroborates this view. In Roy Mack’s *Good Morning, Eve!*, an unsubtle but effective musical comedy that revels in its ravishing color photography, mankind’s first couple travels down an abbreviated timeline of history from Paradise to modern America. En route they stop by antiquity. Their first encounter is with Mercury, a kind of divine postman who leaps about and keeps raising his right arm. Next comes Nero and his court: “Rome 100 AD,” we are informed; historical accuracy is not the issue in such comedies. The raised-arm salute duly appears, as when Nero so greets—you guessed it—Adam and Eve. No political statement is intended, not least because most of the comedy derives from the fact that Romans and other

38. And occasionally elsewhere. A generally unknown instance occurs in Erich von Stroheim’s *The Merry Widow* (1925), a remarkable (because primarily tragic) adaptation of the famous operetta. At one moment the leering villain, crown prince of the Balkan kingdom of Monteblanco, ironically greets his cousin and amatory rival, the film’s romantic hero, with a raised-arm salute but keeps his elbow bent. The gesture must have appeared rather out of place among the Austro-Hungarian uniforms and operetta-land costumes and settings, as must have been the case with the classical Greek motto on the royal coat of arms among all the other signs, notices, etc. in Cyrillic letters.
historical figures are only thinly disguised Americans. But if you present ancient Romans, you had better include “their” salute.

The following year, however, Ernest B. Schoedsack took specific recourse to Fascist Italy and its Roman trimmings for The Last Days of Pompeii. An educational guide accompanied the release of this film and asked the following questions: “What form of salute was used by the Romans? In what countries are similar salutes now demanded by the government?” Throughout this film the raised-arm salute occurs in private and public settings. In military contexts it is an analogy to the modern salute in which the right hand touches the helmet or cap. When a soldier acknowledges receiving a command from Pontius Pilate or an officer acknowledges the command of the prefect of Pompeii to open the games, they respond with the raised-arm gesture. In a French film made the same year, Julien Duvivier’s Golgotha (sometimes called Ecce Homo or Behold the Man), Pilate repeatedly addresses the Jerusalem masses during the trial of Jesus with the raised-arm salute, attempting to calm them down. And a large statue of a male nude stretches out its right arm horizontally to the front, an example in which the same gesture lacks any particular context. Presumably this statue owes its existence to a conflation of Roman statuary of orators and the cinema’s own use of raised-arm salutes.

Not long before Niblo’s Ben-Hur, DeMille had made the first of two film versions of a story that was to come to be intimately associated with him: The Ten Commandments. The earlier version appeared in 1923, the later, DeMille’s last and most colossal film, in 1956. The silent film contains an especially noteworthy example of the right-arm gesture because with it one of the Hebrews reproves Aaron, who is engaged in making the Golden Calf. The moment again shows that the raised right arm is an almost unavoidable ingredient in films with ancient settings.

One of DeMille’s lesser-known films is Manslaughter (1922), a contemporary melodrama whose rather preachy attitude toward modern manners and morals does not make it appealing today. But the film is quintessential DeMille, demonstrating to good effect his hallmark of titillating his audiences and simultaneously moralizing to them. The film’s story shows the recklessness of the Jazz Age with champagne parties, high-society flappers, fast cars, and the inevitable fall from morality. Twice DeMille interrupts this modern story with flashbacks to the Roman Empire in the throes of, first, orgiastic decadence—we observe an imperial Bacchanal that now looks embarrassingly tame—and, second, the

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39. Quotation from Wyke 1997, 178. She also discusses analogies to monumental Fascist art in the film and believes that the destruction of Pompeii in this film exorcizes the American fear of Fascism.
price to be paid for this. Barbaric-looking German invaders encounter no resistance when they enter the Roman palace in which worn-out orgiasts are sleeping off their debauch and have to suffer the fate history has held in store for them all along. The leader of the Germanic horde gives a raised-arm salute to his men. The Romans in the film never once use this gesture. Perhaps they are too enervated.

DeMille’s Roman films are instructive for their variations of the raised-arm salute and for other forms of greeting that occur where we might expect the “Roman” one. At the beginning of The Sign of the Cross Praetorian Prefect Tigellinus greets Emperor Nero with a completely different gesture; at Tigellinus’ headquarters fictional Marcus Superbus, Prefect of Rome and the film’s hero, is received with quite a variety of raised-arm salutes. Once Nero even greets Tigellinus with a raised-arm salute although his henchman had not greeted him that way. Gladiators in the arena salute Nero by raising and stretching out their right arms holding weapons. This manner of greeting, examined in chapter 1, recurs regularly in arena sequences. Several examples in DeMille’s Cleopatra conform to the same loose usage. In Alexandria Cleopatra, fresh out of her carpet and without missing a beat, greets Julius Caesar with the raised-arm salute upon their first encounter. (Figure 24) They take their last farewell in Rome on the fateful Ides of March the same way, prematurely hailing each other as “Emperor!” and “Empress!” Then, ascending the

Figure 24. Cleopatra (1934). Cleopatra saluting Caesar. Paramount/Universal.
steps to the senate hall, Caesar, being hailed by an arm-waving crowd, 
turns around and gives them a raised-arm salute. More important is the 
scene already referred to in chapter 4: a servant or slave arrives and kneels 
before Caesar, his right arm stretched out horizontally. The same gesture 
and posture recurs in DeMille’s second version of The Ten Commandments 
as a salute to the queen of Egypt. The fist-on-heart salute appears in this 
film as well. So DeMille does not closely distinguish between or among 
ancient peoples in the ways he shows them saluting. One year after 
Cleopatra, for instance, the gesture and posture of Caesar’s servant finds 
an almost identical analogy in DeMille’s The Crusades when a servant 
kneels before Sultan Saladin to bring him the news about the advancing 
crusaders. Earlier, Saladin had addressed the assembled Christian kings. 
The herald who has just announced him gets down on one knee and 
bends his upper body forward and down. At the same time—he is screen 
left, facing to the right—he extends his right arm, open palm down, but 
holds this arm pointing toward the ground in deference. Except for this 
age, his arm gesture is identical to the familiar raised-arm salute.

DeMille’s Cleopatra is, however, even more instructive about cinematic 
salutes than the moments from it that have been mentioned so far. It 
contains a scene that shows the clearest proof that the creative artist must 
invent something dramatic when historical evidence is lacking. The scene 
in question is an important moment that foreshadows the fall and suicide 
of Mark Antony. It involves Antony’s most loyal follower, Domitius Eno-
barbus—to give his name Shakespeare’s spelling, since DeMille’s screen-
writers took this incident from the bard. Enobarbus deserts Antony 
and goes over to the winning side of Octavius Caesar. In Shakespeare’s 
Antony and Cleopatra his desertion takes place off-stage and is reported to 
Antony by a messenger. This news affects Antony deeply and calls forth 
his nobility of character: he sends Enobarbus’ “treasure” together with 
“gentle adieus and greetings” after him. This in turn makes Enobarbus 
realize the ignoble nature of his act, and in due course he dies, most likely 
of remorse.

By contrast, DeMille puts the moment of Enobarbus’ desertion on 
the screen. To emphasize to his viewers its fateful nature, DeMille has

40. On Shakespeare’s conflation of two separate historical figures (mentioned in Plutarch, 
his source) into his Enobarbus see the comment in Shakespeare 1995, 87.

41. The quotations appear in Antony and Cleopatra 4.5.12 and 14. Enobarbus is overwrought 
(“I am alone the villain of the earth. . . . This blows my heart”; 4.6.31 and 35) and appears to die 
in Act IV, Scene 9, although cf. the editor’s note to 4.9.26 in Shakespeare 1995, 246. DeMille’s 
Enobarbus does nothing of the sort. He can be seen in the company of the Romans who come 
upon Cleopatra’s dead body in her palace in the film’s final moments.
Enobarbus, armed and wearing full military regalia, chide Antony for not abandoning Cleopatra and reclaiming his power in Rome. But, Enobarbus adds, “for what you might have been I give you my last salute.” Without any more words he draws his sword with his right hand, blade upright, and moves it first to the left and next to the right side of his chest. Then he leaves.

This scene looks impressive but has no basis in fact. It is pure invention, as a moment’s thought will reveal. Enobarbus’ gesture is far too clumsy to have been a military salute; it is also rather dangerous to the tip of the saluter’s nose. But it is intended to replace what viewers would expect in a modern drama although it would be an anachronism here: a military officer’s formal hand-to-cap salute. The modern mindset underlying this scene is evident from the fact that Enobarbus wears on his chest insignia commemorating his campaigns with Antony and their heroic deeds together—another invention, the equivalent of modern medals. The scene in the film is unhistorical, but it plays memorably. And that is the only point that matters.

Confirmation for such a view will occur a quarter century later in the most famous of all Roman films. During the triumph sequence of William Wyler’s *Ben-Hur* (1959) Consul Quintus Arrius, resplendent in full military regalia, approaches Emperor Tiberius striding up a huge flight of steps, his left hand on the hilt of his sword. (In this, the grandest version of the story, Arrius is no longer a mere tribune.) Before Tiberius, he gives the raised-arm salute. A few moments later and in closer proximity to the emperor, who is now addressing him, Arrius snaps to attention, even audibly clicking his heels. When Tiberius awards him a “baton of victory,” Arrius again stands at attention, again clicks his heels, and dramatically puts his hand on his sword’s hilt at the same time. All this military ceremony looks most impressive and effortlessly draws the audience, which recognizes Arrius’ “body language,” into the proceedings. But all of it is invented.42

We can easily understand why if we contrast a verbal exchange given in yet another film. William Castle’s *Serpent of the Nile: The Loves of Cleopatra* (1953) begins with the assassination of Julius Caesar by Marcus Brutus and his fellow-conspirators and the battle of Philippi before it turns to the story of Antony and Cleopatra. At Philippi a Roman captain in Brutus’ army is looking for his commander. He asks the guard outside Brutus’ tent “Is the general here?” and receives the answer “Yes, sir.” This verbal

42. The baton, however, is an exception; it corresponds to the Roman *scipio eburneus*, an ivory staff with an eagle on top that was carried by triumphators.
exchange reproduces twentieth-century military language verbatim and for this reason is far more jarring than many of the visual anachronisms in this and other historical films. If Wyler had had his Arrius respond to Tiberius’ award of the baton with similar language—e.g., with “Thank you, your majesty!” or with a simple “Yes, sir!”—he would only have undermined his grand moment. To express a modern idea, in this case a military salute, in invented visual terms that make it appear ancient is the best cinematic procedure, even if it is unhistorical.

Now back to the era of Fascism and Nazism. How far the Roman salute had become a standard symbol in 1930s films to denote imperial power or tyranny in any exotic setting becomes evident in an unlikely context. In 1936 Frederick Stephani and Ray Taylor co-directed the thirteen-part science-fiction serial *Flash Gordon*, one of the best-known campy films of all time. It was made on Hollywood’s Poverty Row, but with gleeful abandon and a disarming disregard of its own artificiality. Its eponymous hero battles the forces of evil in outer space, but some of these forces look suspiciously ancient, at least in some ways. An example is King Vultan, a winged human dressed in vaguely Roman armor. His minions carry not only futuristic beam shooters but also antiquated spears. The raised-arm salute is their sign of acknowledging their sovereign’s power. Past (ancient Rome), present (e.g., contemporary art deco sets and dialogue), and future (science fiction) all converge.

That same year images of the Olympic Games and of Italian and German political rituals, all including the salute, appeared frequently in photographs in American magazines and newspapers and in the newsreels shown in film theaters. Then, during World War II, scenes of German, Italian, and Japanese mass rallies reappeared on American screens in some of the seven parts of *Why We Fight*, a series of propaganda films that Hollywood produced in 1942 and 1943 in cooperation with the Office of War Information’s Department of Motion Pictures. Director Frank Capra was the general supervisor of these films, each roughly an hour long and consisting largely of enemy footage. They were required viewing for all American soldiers, intended to enhance their historical and political education and their fighting morale. Part One of the series, *Prelude to War* (1942), and Part Three, *Divide and Conquer* (1943), focused on the rise of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany and prominently contained footage from *Triumph of the Will* as inspiration for his approach to the *Why We Fight* series, but see McBride, 466–67.
Triumph of the Will. Through these films in particular Americans became closely familiar with images of dictators addressing vast masses of people. The raised-arm salute played a major part in such scenes.

Parallels to modern history in the image of imperial Rome became most pronounced in Hollywood films made after World War II. During and after the time that the United States, now itself expanded into a world empire, had been fighting no less than three aggressive empires more or less simultaneously—Germany, Italy, and Japan—the major films set in the Roman Empire reflect an awareness of the ideology of the two twentieth-century Fascist empires that traced their roots directly back to the Romans. In this way the standard image of Rome’s empire as a cesspool of vice, luxury, debauchery, bloodlust, and religious persecution becomes much more pointed. In particular the Roman Empire can now be identified with a specific modern one: Nazi Germany. Hollywood’s first grand postwar Roman spectacle, MGM’s Quo Vadis (1951), directed by Mervyn LeRoy, is the best example of all. To indicate in its very title how seriously the studio took its responsibilities for what it claimed to be historical authenticity, the question mark that had been part of the title of Henryk Sienkiewicz’s novel and had been preserved in all earlier film adaptations was now dropped because Romans had not used it, either. Ironically, this epic extravaganza was filmed at Cinecittà, Mussolini’s studios. After the defeat of Italy and Germany Hollywood could update the standard negative view of the Roman Empire by presenting it as a precursor of its fiercest recent enemy empire, replete with scenes of mass rallies, triumphal processions, and the Fascist salute. Fascist totalitarianism is, in fact, the very starting point of Quo Vadis. For this reason the film deserves a more detailed treatment here than other films have received or will receive, excepting Cabiria. Quo Vadis supplies us with the clearest evidence of the anachronistic modern view of the Romans as proto-Nazi imperialists. Several moments in the film are highly instructive for our understanding of how the filmmakers updated this oft-filmed tale by explicit visual and verbal references to recent history.44

The film opens with shots of the victorious Roman army returning from abroad, while an omniscient narrator describes to the audience the totalitarian system:

Imperial Rome is the center of the empire, an undisputed master of the world. But with this power inevitably comes corruption. No man is sure of his life, the individual is at the mercy of the state, murder replaces justice. Rulers of conquered nations surrender their helpless subjects to

44. The following discussion of Quo Vadis is taken from that in Winkler 1998.
bondage. High and low alike become Roman slaves, Roman hostages. There is no escape from the whip and the sword.

Images of prisoners of war pulling wagons heaped with booty and either being whipped on by Roman soldiers or collapsing and being trampled into the dust accompany these words. The narrator then rises to a rhetorical height of condemnation (“this pyramid of power and corruption, of human misery and slavery”) before identifying Nero as the “Antichrist” at the prologue’s climax.

Religious and political conflicts are intended to illustrate the moral decline of Rome which foreshadows the eventual fall of its empire, an analogy to the recent fate of Nazi Germany. Throughout the film we can observe such analogies both visually and verbally. Its hero, the Roman commander Marcus Vinicius, will eventually renounce his immoral pagan ways and embrace Christianity, an obligatory process for a cinematic hero in this type of story. As long as he is an unregenerate pagan, however, his militarist language points directly to the Fascist rhetoric with which American audiences had become familiar during the war: “Just as long as there’s money to pay the army, Rome will stand forever. That I’m sure of.” And: “Conquest. . . . It’s the only method of uniting and civilizing the world under one power—you have to spill a little blood to do it.” Nothing like these words, a clear reminiscence of the Nazis’ Blut und Boden ideology, appears in Sienkiewicz’s novel. After World War II Hollywood presented the “civilizing” mission of Rome as that of a master race imposing its rule and ideology on other nations by force of arms. “A man must be a soldier,” Vinicius will say later.

The first grand epic sequence in Quo Vadis shows Vinicius’ triumphal procession through the Roman Forum before Nero and his court. It contains obvious analogies to Fascism. The novel had contained no scene of triumph. Its hero was not a commander but a military tribune and, as such, neither a victorious conqueror nor eligible to hold a triumph. After the fall of the Roman republic only an emperor, or an emperor together with an associate as in the case of Vespasian and Titus in A.D. 71, could celebrate a triumph, even if he had not been in the field himself. This is because the emperor was commander-in-chief of the legions, and he alone held the power and authority of office, the highest imperium, which was a prerequisite of the triumphator, the man to be honored. A cinematic triumph such as the one in Quo Vadis is therefore an inaccurate

45. See Livy, From the Foundation of the City 28.38.4; Valerius Maximus, Memorabilia 2.8.5. On Roman triumphs see now Beard 2007.
rendering of Roman practice. But it is an accurate rendition of the spirit of Fascism as it manifested itself in mass assemblies and parades.

The long and spectacular sequence is closely modeled on Nazi rallies, replete with martial fanfares, Nazi-like architecture resembling that on view in *Triumph of the Will*, and the closest imitation of the Nazi salute ever put into a film set in the distant past. The victorious legionary commander gives his emperor the snappiest raised-arm salute of any film set in antiquity. (Figure 25) He is rewarded by Nero with a version of the salute that is patterned on Hitler’s own way of greeting: more relaxed, as becomes the man in ultimate power, and with his arm first straight (Figure 26) and then slightly bent. There is a noticeable discontinuity in the editing between the straight-arm salute and the *Führergruß* variant, as if LeRoy wanted to emphasize the Nazi analogy by combining two different takes of the moment. As Hitler did on occasion, this Nero also looks bored. The influence on *Quo Vadis* of Riefenstahl’s films and of other documentary footage from Germany makes for a particularly effective portrayal of the Roman Empire as a precursor of the Third Reich and turns Nero into a close analogy of Hitler. *Quo Vadis* thus gives its viewers the most explicit presentation of the Roman Empire as a Fascist military state and contains the most important examples of the Roman salute. No wonder the American Falangist Party was still enamored of the film decades later.

The huge mass of people present on the screen during the triumphal sequence of *Quo Vadis* is meant to evoke viewers’ memories of newsreel and documentary footage of Fascist assemblies and parades. It is instructive to juxtapose scenes from *Triumph of the Will* and *Quo Vadis*. As Italian and German film documentaries, newspapers, and magazines had done regularly, both these films prominently feature the appearance of dictators at a window or balcony above the crowd. If the triumphal rally as depicted in *Quo Vadis* is a historical impossibility, it is also an architectural one. The Forum Romanum at the time of Nero was far too much built up and too small to accommodate the immense mass of people seen in a panoramic shot on the screen through an obvious special effect, nor did the city possess any other suitable space in the vicinity of the imperial

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46. Bertelli 1995, 61–62, describes Fascist analogies in several cinematic triumph sequences and dismisses all of them as lacking any foundation in history.

47. An especially telling photograph with Mussolini on a podium looking over a sea of people, *faux*-Roman legionary standards topped by eagles, and lictors, appears in Emilio Gentile 1996b, ill. 7. The photo, from October 1935, is a close visual analogy, albeit a static one, to corresponding moments in *Triumph of the Will*. Cf. also Gentile, ill. 10. Illustrations in this book, unnumbered, are between pages 52 and 53.

palaces which would have been large enough. But documentary footage of German, Italian, and Japanese mass rallies taken before or during World War II makes clear that Fascist assemblies are the inspiration for the triumph in _Quo Vadis_. A mass scene such as this visually represents the triumph of the Fascist will. In 1951 none of the adults in the audience could have overlooked the implications of Nero’s repeated raised-arm salute to the people, to the troops, and to their commander, particularly since they follow closely on an appearance, a little earlier, of the _fasces_ on either side of Nero’s throne and of the sculpture of a huge eagle hovering above it. 48 On the cinema screen Roman eagles and Nazi eagles could equally appear as symbols of imperialist or dictatorial power. And after 1945 the standard exclamation “Hail Caesar!” in Hollywood’s Roman films will have echoed the familiar German “Heil Hitler!” even in the linguistic similarity of both expressions.

But _Quo Vadis_ refers its audience to Hitler’s Germany in more than this one sequence. Not least the popular perception throughout history of Nero as Antichrist reinforces this.49 To Americans the reincarnation of the Antichrist in the first half of the twentieth century was Hitler, their archenemy in World War II. The ubiquity of Nazis in American mass media on any level long after the war attests to the lasting American fascination with Nazi Germany as archetypally evil. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s Hollywood turned out large enough numbers of grand-scale World War II films alongside its Roman epics to satisfy any audience’s demands for huge spectacles and hissable villains. Evil Romans and ice-cold Nazis are kindred cinematic spirits.

In _Quo Vadis_ yet another parallel to Nazism may be found in the cult of the emperor. Throughout the film Nero is regarded as a son of Jupiter, addressed as “Divinity,” and treated accordingly; moreover, he believes himself to be a god on earth as well. But this aspect of Neronian culture is unhistorical, too. Roman emperors, including Nero, did not as a rule consider themselves to be gods while they were alive and did not receive or encourage divine rites in their honor at Rome. (Exceptions were the bad emperors Caligula and Domitian.) But American soldiers learned in 1942 and 1943 from some of the _Why We Fight_ films that divinities were back in earthly power. The narrator of _Prelude to War_ informs his audience that “to the Japanese people the emperor is God. Taking advantage of their fanatical worship of the god-emperor, it was no great trick to take away what little freedom they had ever known.” Later he summarizes the

German perspective on this over footage of Josef Goebbels and infamous fanatic Julius Streicher presumably expounding their creed: “Our Führer is the intermediary between his people and the throne of God. Everything the Führer utters is religion in the highest sense.” Shortly afterwards a grade-school teacher leads her students in a new song which contains their pledge to obey the Führer, their god, unto death: *Für den Führer bis zum Tod, denn er ist, er ist unser Gott.* And in the next installment of the series, *The Nazis Strike*, the narrator observes that the Germans’ “passion for conquest reached its historical climax when Adolf Hitler enthroned himself as god and the German Führer.”

Whereas in pre-War cinema the cult of the emperor had made Roman religion at best a quaint or misguided belief to Christian America and at worst a sacrilegious antagonist to Christianity, films after 1945 could add a powerful new political side to this.

The fire of Rome in A.D. 64 also points to twentieth-century history. Studio boss Louis B. Mayer wanted *Quo Vadis* to be a “DeMille-like religious epic,” whereas John Huston, who had originally been set to write and direct the film, aimed for “a modern treatment about Nero and his fanatical determination to eliminate the Christians in much the same manner as his historic counterpart and fellow madman, Adolf Hitler, tried to destroy the Jews two thousand years later.” Mayer had Huston replaced, and a team of screenwriters was instructed “to eliminate the political parallels and turn the movie into a virtual remake of Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Sign of the Cross.*” Remarkably, however, Huston’s perspective survives in the finished film. A clear example of the Nero-Hitler

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50. The following year John Farrow’s *The Hitler Gang*, a film about Hitler’s rise to power, was to contain a speech with this statement: “We need no God on a distant throne. Adolf Hitler is the Jesus Christ as well as the Holy Ghost of the Fatherland”; quoted from Koppes and Black 1990, 300 (with misspelling “Adolph”). On the insistence of the Production Code Administration these words had to be deleted as blasphemous although they were an exact quotation. On the PCA see Koppes and Black, 13–16. Leiser 1975, 27, comments on Hitler’s appearances in *Triumph of the Will*: “He poses as the prophet of a new religion, as the grand master of a mystical order... an intimidating spectacle for those who were still undecided on the sidelines, a beacon signaling Hitler’s power beyond the frontiers of Germany, and a divine service for the faithful.”

51. Both quotations are from Huston 1994, 175. German poet Bertolt Brecht may have been the first to make the analogy between Hitler and Nero explicit in two poems written in 1933 that were occasioned by the fire of the Reichstag in Berlin; see *Die Moritat vom Reichstagsbrand* and *Der römische Kaiser Nero* in Brecht 1976, vol. 1, 408–12, and vol. 2, 525. The former poem refers to Göring, not Hitler, but the implication is obvious. For detailed scholarship on the actual relations between Jews and Romans from the first century B.C. on see Smallwood 1981; for a wider-ranging modern study see Feldman 1993.

52. Higham 1993, 389.
analogy occurs immediately after the Fire-of-Rome sequence. Empress Poppaea coaxes Nero to divert the people’s suspicion of his own responsibility for the fire onto the Christians. When Nero dictates a proclamation to the Roman people to this effect, Petronius, Nero’s arbiter of taste and an independent spirit who is unafraid of his tyrannical master, tries to dissuade him. The dialogue leaves no doubt that Nero is meant to be understood as a precursor of Hitler:

NERO: I hereby proclaim that the guilt of the burning of our beloved city rests with the foul sect which calls itself Christians. They have spread the lie that it was Nero who burned Rome. I will exterminate these criminals in a manner matching the enormity of their crime. Their punishment will be a warning, a spectacle of terror, to all evil men, everywhere, and forever, who would harm you or harm Rome or harm your emperor, who loves you.

PETRONIUS: Pause, Nero, before you sign this decree. . . . Condemn these Christians, and you make martyrs of them, ensure their immortality. Condemn them, and in the eyes of history you’ll condemn yourself.

NERO: When I have finished with these Christians, Petronius, history will not be sure that they ever existed.

Unlike almost twenty years earlier, when DeMille’s Nero had commanded “The extermination of Christians must continue,” in 1951 the words “exterminate” and “terror” will have struck many in the audience as an unambiguous reference to Nazi atrocities. Nero’s last statement quoted here supports this view, for it is a reminder of the Holocaust. Later in the film, Nero’s order after Petronius’ suicide (“Burn his books!”) echoes Nazi behavior as well. The large model of the new Rome that Nero intends to build on the ruins of the burnt city and that he shows to Petronius and some of his courtiers may remind some viewers of Albert Speer’s models for Germania, the new Berlin planned for the Thousand-Year Reich after its projected final victory (Endsieg) in World War II.53

Nazi-like viciousness finds a dramatic visual expression in the film’s depiction of the death of St. Peter. Peter says to the centurion who comes to lead him to crucifixion: “To die as our Lord died is more than I deserve.” The centurion snidely answers: “We can change that!” Now there is a cut, and director LeRoy shows us Peter on the cross in a

manner intended to shock. The camera slowly tilts up from the ground to reveal Peter crucified upside down, with a musical fortissimo on the soundtrack. This is one of the very few moments in almost three hours of screen time, and the most forceful one as well, that draws the viewers’ attention to the film’s cinematic technique. According to the principles of classic Hollywood filmmaking, audiences are rarely if ever to become conscious of camera or editing; their attention is not to be diverted from the plot. Here the camera’s unusual vertical movement departs from this standard to create a strong emotional reaction in the spectator. According to the Christian tradition St. Peter himself had requested upside-down crucifixion, but in the film this is presented as a particularly choice example of Roman sadism. It is meant to fulfill what Nero, ominously, had said about Peter a little earlier: “Something singular must be done with him.”

Altogether, then, the pagan Romans of *Quo Vadis* and any number of such films run a totalitarian military empire and resemble the Nazis of the filmmakers’ recent past while ancient Christians take the place of modern Jews. The fact that in such films’ plots most of the persecuted Christians are Roman citizens reinforces the obvious point that tyranny turns against its own people. *Quo Vadis* explicitly states this by lifting Suetonius’ report that Emperor Caligula wanted the Roman people to have only one neck—the more easily to be killed—and applying it to Nero. “The world is mine, and mine to end,” Nero will later say about his empire, a clear reference to Hitler’s megalomania and recklessness in bringing war to the world and leading his own country to the brink of annihilation. Such words or those uttered by Marcus Vinicius quoted earlier will have evoked to viewers the Nazi ideology of Aryan superiority and its successful dissemination among the German people. In *Quo Vadis* Petronius comments on Nero’s attempt to blame the fire on the Christians: “People will believe any lie if it is fantastic enough.” The success of Nazi ideology, not only in Germany and not only in the 1930s and 1940s, fully bears him out.

Besides carrying obvious political connotations, the raised-arm salute also occurs in *Quo Vadis* as a general feature of Roman life. Wrestlers at Nero’s banquet, for example, greet him with this gesture, and even

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55. Suetonius, *Caligula* 30.2. The saying has been given to Nero since at least the early seventeenth century; examples at Gwyn 1991, 439–40.
General Plautius, a good (because Christian) Roman and soon to be a victim of Nero’s terror, employs it. We are meant to realize that this mode of saluting was a regular Roman custom but that it became politicized under a tyrant and turned into a sign of blind obedience to the power of the state.

A similar point had been made fourteen years earlier in a new production of Shakespeare presented in New York City. As is still the case, plays by Shakespeare are frequently staged in modern dress to emphasize their timeless qualities or to comment on contemporary situations. The first and most famous instance in which a play by Shakespeare was staged in contemporary dress to make an anti-Fascist point was Orson Welles’s Mercury Theatre production *Caesar* (1937). It was highly influential.\(^{56}\) The American television *Coriolanus*, already mentioned and made the same year as *Quo Vadis*, follows Welles’s example; it is set in Mussolini’s Italy. The Fascist salute is given once in *Coriolanus* in an unusual variation when a uniformed messenger’s right arm is pointing downward in the direction of an officer seated before him.\(^{57}\) Since then, Fascist

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56. Described by Leaming 1986, 170–72, with excerpts from Welles’s press release. Details in (the play’s producer) Housman 1972, 296–321. For representative other examples of Fascist overtones or settings in productions of the play see the comments in Shakespeare 1984a, 56 (the play’s “Fascist/liberal dichotomy”), 66–67 (on Welles and his influence), and 69–70 (on a 1968 Royal Shakespeare Company production by John Barton and on Trevor Nunn’s 1972 Stratford production, with illustration at 70 of Caesar’s statue giving a bent-elbow variant of the Fascist salute in the latter). On *Antony and Cleopatra* cf. Shakespeare 1998, 87 (on the architecture in Glen Byam Shaw’s 1946 London production); Shakespeare 1994, 36–37 (on Tony Richardson’s 1973 production at the Bankside Globe with Octavius Caesar as a Fascist blackshirt). On *Coriolanus* cf. Shakespeare 2000, 80–84 (on German editions and productions of the 1930s with Coriolanus as a Führer figure and on British and American productions of 1935 and 1938), 85–86 (on Peter Hall’s 1959 production at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, with illustration of the dead body of Coriolanus hung upside down, modeled on Mussolini’s fate), and 93 (on a 1980 American production); on *Titus Andronicus* cf. Shakespeare 1984b, 56 (on a 1967 production by Douglas Seal in Baltimore). After World War II the Allies banned *Coriolanus* in West Germany for its alleged Fascist tendencies until 1953.

57. Unusual, that is, in the context of moving images of the salute after 1945. As described above, DeMille’s *The Crusades* had already contained a salute in which the right arm was extended downward. In Fascist cinema a comparable posture, with arms stretched out lower than horizontally, appears in two Italian films of the same title and made in the same year, although these are oath scenes, not salutes: *I martiri d’Italia* (1927; “The Martyrs of Italy”), directed by Domenico Gaido and Silvio Laurenti Rosa. Both films are sweeping historical canvases spanning several centuries of Italian history. Rosa’s film has the subtitle *Il trionfo di Roma* (“The Triumph of Rome”). Stills from both films showing the oath scenes appear in Gori 1988, figs. 50 and 55; Gori, 48 and 84–85, describes the two versions. He gives filmographical information at 104. Verdone 1970, 207, provides a still of what appears to be a comparable oath scene in a silent film (unidentified, but from Guazzoni’s *Messalina*). The body of a young woman, presumably killed, is lying on the ground; several bystanders raise their right arms while one is stretching his down and toward her body.