

Research Paper

Fashion During Nazi Germany: A Critical Insight

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Abstract: Hitler used fashion extensively to promote his idea of Germany. All up from the German uniforms to the common trends portrayed by women under the Reich were covertly portraying this ideology. As the war progressed, the type of clothing changed to indicate the role men and women were supposed to play in the scheme of things. At the same time, designers like Boss, Chanel and Dior were also practicing their craft and had to associate themselves with Germany to avoid bankruptcy and ensure survival.

Research Question: The Paper will attempt to analyze fashion during Hitler's reign in Germany. Was it different from the earlier period? What was the contribution of Hugo Boss, Coco Chanel and Christian Dior? How have these fashion trends been emulated in present times? These and other questions will be attempted during the research.

Keywords: Nazi Germany, Fashion, Third Reich, Hugo Boss, Hitler, Coco Chanel, Christian Dior, Wehrmacht Uniforms, SS, Concentration Camps, World War 2, Joseph Goebbels, Aryan Race, Volksmeinschaft, Insignia.

Received 13 Apr., 2025; Revised 24 Apr., 2025; Accepted 26 Apr., 2025 © The author(s) 2025.

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I. Introduction:

During Hitler's reign as Fuhrer of Germany, paintings and sculptures lost their status as artworks and were demoted to a dangerous Anti-Nazi category, reducing their worth to nought. Visual symbolism was important to the Nazis as Hitler himself was a former painter, as it seems unlikely that Hitler produced any painting after gaining power in 1933. Therefore, most works of art and media in all its forms were heavily censored by the Nazis, instead promoting Hitler's vision of a racially pure and powerful Germany. Due to Hitler's artistic background, he imposed, through law, his artistic preference. His preferred model revolved around classical Greek and Roman art, that was comprehensible to the average man and was both heroic and romantic, often depicting strong, 'racially pure' Aryans. This was reflected through his work before his reign which was largely realistic landscapes.

Figure 1. Hitlers' Artworks 'Vienna State Opera (1912)', 'Schloss Neuschwanstein (1907)'



Source: www.wikiart.org

Figure 2. Artworks during Nazi Germany ‘Aryan Family by Wilrich Wolfgang (undated)’, ‘The Ideal Aryan Male (1915)’



Source: ghdi.ghi-dc.org, Mary Evans Picture Library

Clothing during the Third Reich also became part and parcel of Hitler's propaganda, symbolizing the bravado of the German Empire while also indicating the mindset of the Führer. Clothing, according to the Nazis, was hoped to be a visible sign of “inclusion into” or “exclusion from” the *Volksgemeinschaft* (the national community). This was a central vision established by the NSDAP under Hitler. Their political ideology was based around a fascist and authoritarian system, considering only a particular group of people as deserving of calling themselves Germans, while parts of the Judaic, African, and Roma communities (amongst others) were segregated from the central state. Whether it was clothing at concentration camps, uniforms of the NSDAP/SS, or women's attire, this vision of control and identity was embedded in the design. This was seen in the designs of prominent designers of that time such as Hugo Boss, Coco Chanel and Christian Dior. The Nazi uniforms were particularly utilized as a form of standardizing individual identities and instilling a sense of power, stability, and organization—all of which were lacking under Weimar rule, as claimed by many Nazi officials like Hitler himself.

Fashion Under the Swastika

Despite perceptions of fashion and clothing as superfluous elements of history, they reflect the socio-cultural and political values of specific time periods. For instance, during the French Revolution, clothing became a powerful symbol of political allegiance and social upheaval. The *sans-culottes*, meaning “without breeches”, rejected the aristocratic knee-length trousers in favour of working-class trousers, visually aligning themselves with revolutionary ideals of equality and resistance to monarchy. This politicization of clothing marked a direct challenge to traditional hierarchies and was used deliberately to signal one's ideological stance. On a similar note, literature on Nazi Germany frequently focuses on military, politics and/or the Holocaust as central studies. But fashion during this period also offers a lens through which we can understand the culture, the society and the racially based notions of men and women that existed during that time.

As Nazi troops conquered areas around Germany, many newspapers and magazine articles devoted space to the type of ‘Tracht’ or traditional costume system that they wore. It is quite possible that uniformity in the way people dressed coincided with the unification of Germany. Which would also spill into the areas that they conquered.

In 1914 the uniforms of the German army had not changed much since the 19th century. After the start of the First World War, the German high command realized that the prewar uniform standards could not be maintained, and simplifications were made in 1915.

Tailored For Tyranny: The NSDAP Uniform

In the early days of the party, there was no standard uniform, and members often wore paramilitary uniforms. The infamous ‘brown shirts,’ which originated as surplus military gear and were adopted by the SA, became a central focus in their attire. Around 1930, this uniform was essentially: a brown shirt and jacket, brown trousers, and various insignias. In 1932 braided shoulder boards and collar-ranked insignias were introduced.

As Hitler started accessing power, especially after 1934, there were different levels created within the party as seen in many authoritarian states such as Hitler's own. These were divided into

- Ortsgruppen (Local Towns/Cities)
- Kreisleitung (District Counties)
- Gauleitung (Regional States/Provinces)
- Reichsleitung (National)

According to the divisions the party people served in, their shoulder board, collar insignia and armband differed. Hitler and some of the party leaders such as Goebbels, Goering and Himmler, still did not have any special attire. They continued with the brown shirt along with black or brown trousers. Depending on the event, Hitler, however, would match his brown shirt with black or brown trousers (with or without a belt depending on the formality of the event).

There were also variants in the type of uniform he wore at this time: the summer uniform was white. Here too the shirt was single or double-breasted and was worn with white or black trousers, at times, with a visor cap.

For many of his famous speeches, Hitler wore the brown shirt uniform which is synonymous with the military attire at the time. This is particularly important as his uniform gave the people a sense of security by showing him as a competent and in-control military leader.

The visor caps were introduced in 1933 and Hitler asked for a longer visor to protect his eyes from the sun and light as he suffered from hyper photo sensibility after a mustard gas attack during World War I where he served the Bavarian army in both France and Belgium. As Hitler became more powerful and embodied his role as Fuhrer, this visor cap changed drastically with gold embroidered wreath and bullion. Perhaps to strengthen his perceptions amongst ordinary Germans.

From 1st September 1939 to the end of the Second World War, Hitler exclusively wore the 'field grey' uniform, symbolizing his self-image as a frontline soldier and not merely a political leader. He even adopted this uniform in his private life, rejecting more ornate attire in favour of a style that projected simplicity and solidarity with the common soldier. His jacket was notably plain, adorned only with silver buttons and devoid of any braid, epaulettes, or elaborate decoration. The few insignias he wore included the Golden Party Badge, positioned on the left side of his chest, the Iron Cross (awarded for bravery in WWI), and the black wooden Wound Badge, representing injuries sustained in battle. This deliberate minimalism was not accidental; it was a carefully constructed image aimed at fostering a sense of humility, discipline, and shared suffering with the German people. It allowed Hitler to present himself as a man of the people, enduring hardship alongside them rather than above them. This visual modesty functioned as subtle propaganda, reinforcing the illusion of an empathetic, duty-bound leader despite the authoritarian and oppressive policies he enacted behind the façade. All these details added to his cult of personality as he was seen constantly and consistently defending the German people from various atrocities- hence the war uniform.

Figure 3. Contrast Between German uniforms



In Figure 2. One can notice a stark difference between the uniforms. Pictures 1 and two (from the left) show the uniforms before Hitler, which are characterised by their heavy-looking equipment, the German Pickelhaube helmet and the rather dusty-looking appearance, whereas the uniforms during Hitler's reign focused more on emblems (such as the swastika armband and the various symbols for the divisions in the Wehrmacht- the neer, the Kriegsmarine and the Luftwaffe). It is also quite evident that these newer uniforms appeared sleeker and more polished due to features such as wider notched collars, a more minimalistic cap design, and the absence of shoulder pads, which had previously contributed to a bulkier silhouette. This streamlined appearance aligned closely with Hitler's vision for a modern, disciplined, and ideologically unified Germany, suggesting that even sartorial choices were employed to reflect and reinforce the regime's broader narrative of order and renewal.

Designing Evil: Hugo Boss

In 1924, a young and aspiring fashion designer, Hugo Ferdinand Boss, opened his first tailor shop in Metzingen, Germany. The first couple of years did not look promising, with the Weimar government facing significant backlash due to their economic failures regarding the occupation of the Ruhr (1923) and the

hyperinflation crisis. Boss was forced to give in the the Kurzarbeit policy that allowed private businesses to keep their workers by offering a reduction in working hours and wages. At the onset of the Great Depression, however, Boss was forced to call for bankruptcy-like most businesses in Germany. At this time of desperation, one can assume that he saw in Hitler what most Germans saw- a chance to return to their former glory (before the First World War). With Hitler's wildly patriotic speeches that lashed out at the Weimar government and the Versailles diktat (a sentiment commonly held by most Germans), he was able to gain a massive cult-like following that he would consolidate following 1933. Boss was not indifferent to these tactics and in 1931 itself, joined the Nazi party. This move not only allowed him to gain favour amongst the high-ranking officials but also worked to secure him contracts to supply uniforms to the regime. His clothing company heavily capitalised on forced labour drawn from German-occupied territories and POW camps. Boss's company was struggling financially, and the political and military connections to the Nazi Party provided a much-needed economic lifeline which propelled Boss through the years of depression. It can be said that the relationship between Boss and Nazi Germany was a symbiotic one: Boss supplied the regime with the icons they use to institute their power, while the regime supplied Boss with the chance to stay afloat during a time of upheaval.

The company now manufactured the black SS uniforms, as well as uniforms for other paramilitary organizations including the Hitler Youth, becoming a licensed supplier of uniforms in 1928 (supplying to SA, SS). During World War 2, some sources suggest that Boss had 140 labourers, most of them women. In addition to these workers, 40 French POWs worked for the company between October 1940 to April 1941. There have also been reports that the hygiene levels and food supplies were extremely uncertain and that there were instances of abuse where labourers were threatened by the dreadful concentration camps. These historical facts continue to stain the company long after the fall of the Reich. Alongside this, some other accusations faced by the company include that of ideology: according to Hans de Koster, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, in his statement to Deutsche Welle, "Boss did not join the party out of the economic calculation, instead, he was a convinced Nazi," insinuating that the financial profit was only part of the narrative. This was further demonstrated in 1945 when German Historian Henning Koster found a photograph of Boss with Hitler taken at Berghoff, Hitler's Obersalzberg retreat. That said, a mere photograph is no reason for such a historical correlation to be made. At Nuremberg, however, when Boss was brought in front of the international court for his crimes, he was labelled a 'follower' with a less severe punishment than that if he had been labelled an 'active follower'.

Boss died in 1948, but his business survived. The company did not learn of its founders' past till 1997 when Hugo Boss' name appeared on the list of dormant accounts released by Swiss bankers. In 1999, U.S. lawyers acting on behalf of Holocaust survivors started legal proceedings against the company over the use of slave labour during the war. The company agreed to contribute to a fund that compensated former forced labourers. In 2011 the company published Koster's report and issued a statement of 'profound regret' to those who "suffered harm or hardship at the factory run by Boss under National Socialist Rule." The current company has no ties to the Boss family, upholding only their name.

Nonetheless, the uniforms created became highly symbolic of the Nazi regime, representing authority, power, and control. The association with such a violent and destructive political movement has cast a long shadow over the company's history.

Two Timing Evil: Coco Chanel

During World War 2 Chanel lived in the Ritz in Paris, which was a part of 'occupied France' here she entered into a romantic relationship with a Nazi Agent Hans Gunther von Dincklage also known as Spatz. She was also involved in Operation Model Hut (Model Hat) which was a ludicrous scheme in which a rogue Nazi general enlisted Chanel to travel to neutral Madrid in the hopes of getting a message to her old friend Winston Churchill, suggesting they negotiate an end to the war, ignoring Hitler. The code name for this scheme was 'Westminster' indicating her strong connections to Britain (her decade-long affair, beginning in the 1920's with the Duke of Westminster). This operation shows two pivotal things: one, figures in the fashion industry wielded power far beyond couture, constantly and consistently exploiting social capital for personal gain, reflecting the role of cosmopolitan elites in wartime backchannels, and second, Chanel's ability to move freely within both Nazi and Allied circles illustrates the unique kind of espionage power held by women whose femininity, fame, and connections deflected suspicion. She was a political actor disguised as a cultural icon. Such themes have been explored in greater detail in Rhonda K. Gharelick's 'Mademoiselle: Coco Chanel and the Pulse of History' which labelled Chanel as a 'cultural operator' writing that "Chanel was not simply used by the Nazis; she was trying to use them, too," clearly demonstrating the responsibility thrust upon these elites in times of crisis.

This is shown when she unsuccessfully tried to use the Nazi's Aryan laws (this stated that Jews could not own any business in occupied Germany) to take control of her perfume company from her Jewish partners, the Wertheimer family. This attempt was eventually blocked as the said partners had already sold the parfums company to their non-Jewish Friends. The motivation for Chanel collaborating with the Nazis was primarily for their continued existence and an inert desire to protect her work and self-interest. This indicates that during the

difficult time that Europe was going through, being in good books with 'Nazi Germany' was imperative for existence. It is also documented that war, Chanel fled to Switzerland and shut shop for close to a decade before she relaunched her label. This was even though she was a French fashion designer. The fact remains that the place to be and the place to sell was Germany and if this was so, then being connected to Hitler was essential.

Ultimately, Coco Chanel's wartime narrative reveals the murky entanglement of cultural power, personal ambition, and political opportunism. Her calculated proximity to both Nazi elites and Allied contacts positions her not merely as a fashion designer navigating war, but as a symbol of how influence, image, and survival intersect in times of crisis. Chanel was not a passive bystander nor a coerced collaborator- rather, she operated within a liminal space where loyalty was fluid, and self-preservation often trumped ideology. The resurfacing of her Nazi affiliations in postwar media, including biographies like *Sleeping With the Enemy*, underscores a retrospective reckoning with the moral compromises made by those who thrived in fascist societies. Whether as a cultural operator, a covert agent, or simply a woman protecting her empire, Chanel's story forces us to confront the uncomfortable truth: that beauty, power, and political complicity often share the same stage.

Figure 4. Chanel with Churchill and Hitler



Chanel with Churchill (left), Chanel with Hitler (right)

Deconstructing Evil: Christian Dior

Dior was also a French designer whose life was not as complicated as Chanel's, but he kept designing for the Nazis so that he could make a living. He also helped his sister who was eventually tortured. The couturier was long involved in World War 2 politics and issues of antisemitism. The factors that impacted him were his mother's death, the Great Depression (before he became a designer, he was involved in the stock market) and the women's rights movement (indicated by his sister joining the French resistance). Sometime the Nazi regime ruled over France during his earlier career, his sister, working for the French resistance eventually died in the concentration camps, he named the perfume 'Miss Dior' in her memory.

Various exhibitions in his name have indicated that his designs were influenced by the desires of Nazi wives. His sister's trauma was epitomized in the melancholy strain in his most famous perfume label, 'Miss Dior'. Antisemitism predisposed him to his designs. His relationship was not as traumatic as Coco Chanel's, except for the pain that he felt for his sister. Once he entered military service which ended soon in the armistice between France and Germany in June 1940 and 1941, he found himself in Paris under Nazi occupation.

One can also see how Dior personally felt about the Nazi occupation through his "New Look" (1947) which was a direct contrast to the strict, practical wartime fashion imposed during the Nazi occupation of France. Under Nazi rule, women's clothing in occupied countries became more restrained skirts were shorter due to fabric rationing, and fashion was expected to be utilitarian rather than extravagant. The Nazis favoured conservative femininity, but Dior's designs after the war embraced opulence, excess, and hyper-femininity. The voluminous skirts, cinched waists, and luxurious fabrics of the New Look were a deliberate return to pre-war elegance, symbolizing rebirth and freedom rather than Nazi ideals.

Dior's designs came with a lot of Jewish history as well. Most of his exhibitions don't timeline the impact that Nazi Germany had on his work. Haute Couture is not something that exists in a vacuum. It is part of a dialogue with history. It is possible that the desires of Nazi wives as well as his sister's trauma were emotions that he portrayed through his dresses and perfumes. It must have been extremely challenging for Christian to maintain his Nazi clients (necessary for his business) given his sister's affiliation, nonetheless, he survived the

war years, keeping himself financially afloat until he could move away from Nazi censorship to produce more liberal work like his New Look.

Figure 5. Dior's New Look



Dior's 'New Look

Fabric of the Nation: Civilian Attire During Hitler's reign (1933-45)

One of the cornerstones of any authoritarian state is the curtailment of Individuality in favour of allegiance to the state (Volksmeinshaft in Hitler's case). Fashion reflects this element of history by portraying the socio-cultural norms and political values of the era. When Germany entered Austria through Anschluss 1938, there were sweeping declarations of gratitude even in fashion magazines, which in turn bolstered pro-Nazi sentiments within and outside Austria. Clothing was seen as a means of participating in the culture and society. As part of a larger German Reich that was envisioned to encompass all Germans under the Swastika, Nazis were insistent on propagating Germany as a Fashion empire which was used as an economic and cultural tool. The women in Germany preferred French Fashion over German, while many groups such as the Swingjugend that emerged as an opposition to Hitler youth were closely aligned with British fashion.

With the growth of the Third Reich, women in Nazi Germany paroled themselves as 'ideal' which was far removed from French, British or even American Fashion as it was dominated by conservative ideologies. The ideal Nazi woman was entuned with the 'pure German Aryan culture' that Hitler and Goebbels propagated. Women were encouraged to look more feminine which was defined by a small cinched waist accentuated by a belt, and full skirts that highlighted the 'birthing hips of a proud woman'. Women were portrayed as curvaceous and domestic rather than practical and in trousers and were encouraged to stay at home, support the family and raise their kids to German ideals. Claudia Koonz, an American feminist historiographer, talking about the same, labelled this as 'maternal nationalism' writing that the "Nazi vision of womanhood exalted the woman as mother and guardian of racial purity. Women were to be reproductive vessels, whose femininity was biologically and politically necessary to the state." This argument can clearly be supported by the Nazi's various attempts at publicising female fertility as a national strength: women were awarded 'fertility medals' based on how many children they contributed to the Reich. Fundamentally however, women had little part to play in ruling the nation and were subject to wide-scale misogyny, being excluded from many of the paying jobs until it was absolutely necessary for the wartime machine.

Furthermore, to remove the stressful impact of the war, and the anxiety that could and did overflow at the home front, women were encouraged to be beautiful and hide their exhaustion or stress via simple makeup that was essentially made in Germany.

The men in Germany, on the other hand, were mainly in uniform since the conscription started in 1935. The uniform was designed by various designers. The ideal man is portrayed as tough and aggressive, contrary to the gentle feminine woman, and the uniform reflected that from the clothes to the boots. In totality, the German men portrayed 'Protean Masculinity' that integrated diverse men and diverse emotional and moral conditions into a fighting unit.

Figure 6. German Uniforms



From the Holocaust Library

Dressing the Other: Attire in The Concentration Camps

Apart from Civilian attire, the Nazis also attempted to structure and dehumanize their ‘opponents’ or anyone they didn’t believe to be worthy of living in Germany through their uniforms. The various persecuted groups within the concentration camps had distinct hierarchies and ‘classification systems’ that the Nazis used to divide and identify them. Some of these include a blue triangle for immigrants, a pink triangle for homosexuals and red triangles for Poles with the addition of a yellow star of David to segregate Jews. These badges made the Nazis ‘final solution’ speedy and effective, allowing them to eliminate 6 million Jews by the end of the Holocaust. Apart from these familiar figures, about 15,000 homosexuals; 1.8 million Poles; 250,000-500,000 Romani men, women and children; and 300,000 disabled people were also victims of Nazi brutality.

Circling back to the uniforms, these badges were usually worn on a coarse cotton shirt with the infamous blue cobalt stripes against white accompanied by wooden clogs with occasional prisoners getting their hands on boots from a deceased individual. Thus, proving that the concept of “fashion” in Auschwitz was radically different from its pre-war meaning. In the camps, fashion was about survival, adaptation, and the assertion of humanity. The desire to look “better,” even in small ways, was an act of resistance against dehumanization. The notion of “elegance” or personal style persisted as a social construct and a motivating force, even in the most appalling conditions. What is clear, however, is that the Nazi state was successful in utilising these uniforms as a form of psychological manipulation of prisoners and force an inferiority complex upon them that many Holocaust survivors still carry on today.

The other half of the camp, the oppressor rather than the oppressed, also had distinct uniforms. The death’s head unit or the SS-Totenkopfverbände which was responsible for much of the atrocities in the concentration camps, used the Totenkopf (the German word for skull) as their primary insignia since 1923. Apart from the skull’s history as symbolic of Prussia’s military might, a history that the Nazi’s greatly weaponised for staking their claim on parts of Eastern Europe. The “Skull (was) a reminder that you shall always be willing to put yourself at stake for the life of the whole community,” according to the Nazis most decorated general Heinrich Himmler. This symbol was plastered on their collar tabs and their peaked caps and was intentionally fear-inducing. Apart from this, the unit’s uniforms resembled the standard black SS uniforms along with jackboots to complete the look.

In essence, the uniforms of the SS-Totenkopfverbände were not merely clothing but calculated instruments of psychological warfare and ideological expression. Every element-from the stark black fabric to the ominous Totenkopf insignia- was designed to project dominance, instil fear, and reinforce the regime’s deadly hierarchy. By blending historical militaristic symbolism with the aesthetics of terror, the Nazis used these uniforms to visually separate the oppressors from the oppressed, embodying the brutal ethos of the concentration camps. The uniform became a symbol not only of authority but of complicity in one of history’s gravest atrocities.

Echoes of Evil: Remanent of Nazi Fashion in Current Times

Few Dictatorships were as obsessed with Fashion as Nazi Germany. Glamour and Horror were two sides of the same coin. On the Glamour side were the uniforms, armbands, and lapel print that gave the Third Reich a visual presence. This was also true for the Scottish Hitler Youth and the German girl’s garb. As glamour became more elusive, under the strain of the war, Hitler’s propaganda conditioned women to equate frugality with patriotism. Women resorted to sewing new dresses out of remnants.

Nazism put style before substance, propping up an outer façade as part of a glitzy show. It thus may be possible that none of it ever went ‘out of fashion’. The use of high-profile designers like Hugo Boss and Chanel have immortalized their designs. The basic uniforms may have gone out of fashion but the basic ideology and

maybe part of the clothing trends continues to be in style. This is instanced by several emerging and established political groups that have some affinity with Hitler and the Nazi movement. They form a broader 'Neo-Nazi' cluster in the political spectrum. Examples include the Atomwaffen Division, the Nordic Resistance Movement, the Antipodean Resistance, and the Russian National Unity Party. With the continuance of the philosophy, it is likely that their way of dress also follows the same path. This may not be as high profile as Boss or other noted designers but still follows the same smart and confidence-building attire that these uniforms are supposed to impart.

Figure 8. Groups associated with Nazism



Nordic Resistance Movement (left) Russian National Unity Party (right)

II. Conclusion

Fashion under Hitler's reign indicated the mindset that the Fuhrer had concerning the 'Aryan race', the Wehrmacht, and the role of women, all of which fit into his dream of creating a racially and morally pure Völksgemeinschaft.

Keeping this in mind, designers like Boss, Chanel, and Dior were roped in to design uniforms and curate aesthetics for German women irrespective of their ideological prerogatives. The soldiers of the SS were dressed by Boss and uniforms were different depending on the designation and rank they held in the army hierarchy. The imposing demeanour of all of Hitler's soldiers was enhanced exponentially by the clothes they wore. The respect and fear this elicited increased with the spread of the German Reich, which by 1942 held large swathes of Europe. The role of women on the other hand was more towards portraying an image of a stress-free and strong Germany. That said, the role of women was a natural progression for the German war machine and their contribution allowed men to stay at the warfront while managing the home front. One of the reasons for 'design' being so important was maybe that Hitler himself was an artist and understood the implications of using visual features as part of his propaganda, promoting his image. He managed to use this extensively and effectively during the years of his reign.

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