

Emil Nolde and Nazism

Paloma Alarcó



Emil Nolde
Summer Clouds, 1913

[\[+ info\]](#)

‘Happy the man who can talk himself into believing that culture can safeguard society against violence. Even before the start of the twentieth century, the artists, the poets and the theoreticians of the Modernist movement showed that the opposite was true’, wrote Hans Magnus Enzensberger a few decades ago. He went on to state that ‘their predilection for crime, for the satanic *outsider*, for the destruction of civilization is notorious’.¹ The German writer, who always addressed modern European history from a somewhat pessimistic perspective, associated modern artists, writers and theoreticians with crime and the destruction of civilisation, eschewing the traditional mythicisation of the twentieth-century avant-garde movements as agents of human progress. On reading his words, perhaps we would be well advised to challenge the former impunity enjoyed by modern art, viewed as it was as progress of the human spirit and a paradigm of peace and freedom.

The increasingly questioned belief in the autonomy of artworks has given rise to the current proliferation of critical studies of artists’ historical and social contexts. Less harsh than Enzensberger, Jean Clair analysed the by no means easy relationship between avant-garde art and power as an introduction to the issue of artists’ political responsibility. On discussing the case of Expressionism, he asserted that this movement was ‘not only the “vanguard” of a spiritual liberation but also the spearhead of political terror’.² While, as the French thinker pointed out, German Expressionism was never as closely linked to Nazism as Futurism was to Italian Fascism, attempts were made during the gestation and early years of the National Socialist regime to assign Expressionism the role of representing ‘the “pure” essence of Germanness’.³ He based this statement on the research conducted by the German Jewish philologist Viktor Klemperer on how Nazi propaganda progressively appropriated everyday German words, customs and gestures, besides gathering a few intellectuals and artists around the party.⁴ One of the parallels Klemperer underlined in his study was the importance attached to words such as *Die Aktion* and *Der Sturm* – the names of the well-known magazines used by the Expressionists as vehicles for disseminating their ideology – in the vocabulary of the

1
Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Civil War*, London, Granta Books, 1994, p. 52. Originally published as *Aussichten auf den Bürgerkrieg*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1993.

2
Jean Clair, *La responsabilidad del artista. Las vanguardias, entre el terror y la razón*. Madrid, La Balsa de la Medusa, 1998, p. 57. Originally published as *La responsabilité de l'artiste*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1997.

3
Ibid., p. 33.

4
Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich: LTI - Lingua Tertii Imperii: A Philologist's Notebook*, trans. Martin Brady, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. Originally published as *LTI, la langue du Troisième Reich. Carnets d'un philologue*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1996. Quoted from Clair 1998, see note 2 above, pp. 33 ff.

Third Reich. Of course, the fact that Hitler and the Nazis borrowed from Expressionism and used it to further their own interests does not mean that the Expressionists supported the new totalitarian government; however, some Expressionists are known to have been willing to collaborate with the new leaders. Although we find it difficult to believe today, the educated classes of the Weimar Republic and some of the most highly reputed avant-garde artists went along with an enlightened, high-profile figure called Adolf Hitler.

Nolde and National Socialism

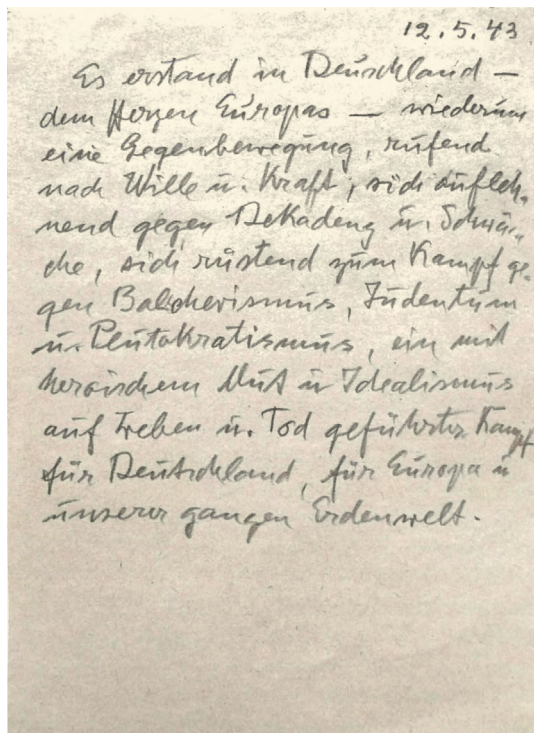
A paradigmatic example was the Expressionist Emil Nolde (1867–1956), a diehard anti-Semite who enthusiastically welcomed Hitler's advent to power. Very soon after the dictator was appointed as the German chancellor in January 1933, Nolde and his Danish first wife Ada Vilstrup publicly proclaimed their support for the Führer by flying a flag with a swastika above their Seebüll home.⁵ The painter, then 65, hailed from a humble peasant family from the Duchy of Schleswig, the northernmost part of the German–Danish border. Largely an autodidact, throughout his career he had developed a free and transgressive personal style that reflected his fondness for the marshy landscape of his native region and for German medieval tradition. Taciturn and distrusting by nature, he had reluctantly taken part in the Expressionist group Die Brücke (The Bridge) established in Dresden by younger artists such as Ernst Kirchner, Erich Heckel and Max Pechstein. However, for most of his life he remained independent and had come to be considered one of the great German artists during the interwar period. Although he is documented as a member of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, NSDAP) in 1934, the Nazis classed him as a 'degenerate' artist⁶ – a circumstance which, as we will see, later proved to be his salvation.

5

The artist lived permanently in that house, built in 1926, from 1940 until his death in 1956. Since then, it has been the headquarters of his foundation, the Stiftung Seebüll Ada und Emil Nolde.

6

This subject is studied and documented in Peter Vergo, 'Emil Nolde, Myth and Reality', in *Emil Nolde* [exh. cat.], London, Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1995, pp. 38–65.



12.5.43
 Es entstand in Deutschland –
 dem Herzen Europas – wiederum
 eine Gegenbewegung, rufend
 nach Willen u. Kraft, sich anfleh-
 end gegen Dekadenz u. Schwä-
 che, sich rüstend zum Kampf ge-
 gen Bolschewismus, Judentum
 u. Plutokratismus, ein mit
 heroischem Mut u. Idealismus
 auf Treiben u. Tod geführter Kampf
 für Deutschland, für Europa u.
 unsere ganze Erdenswelt.

fig. 1

Notes made by Nolde, dated 12 May 1943,
 enclosed in a letter written to Ada Nolde
 on 15 May 1943

Nolde's affinities with National Socialism have been well known for some time. However, it was not until 2019 that a great deal of evidence of the artist's contradictions during the Third Reich was revealed at the exhibition *Emil Nolde: eine deutsche Legende, der Künstler im Nationalsozialismus* (Emil Nolde: A German Legend. The Artist During the Nazi Regime). The curators, Christian Ring (director of the Ada and Emil Nolde Foundation), Bernhard Fulda and Aya Soika also showed that he was far from having been a resistance fighter.⁷ During the years of National Socialist domination, Nolde kept up a flow of correspondence with Joseph Goebbels, the all-powerful Propaganda Minister; Heinrich Himmler, the chief of the fearsome SS (Schutzstaffel); and even Hitler himself. As revealed by the recently unearthed archival documents, underlying this ideological worship of the new regime to an extent were his hopes of being appointed an official state artist by the National Socialist government.⁸

This research also unveiled the artist's intense feelings and convictions about the 'Jewish question'. He had harboured a deep dislike of Jewish people for some time. Above all he felt considerable animosity towards the Jewish dealers and critics who, he claimed, had rejected his oeuvre. After 1933 Nolde even went so far as to draw up a 'de-Jewification plan' to demonstrate to Hitler his loyalty and clever foresight.⁹ To cite an example, in a letter dated 15 May 1943 Nolde sent his wife Ada some of the notes he had made for this plan:

'12.5.43. What has arisen in Germany – in the heart of Europe – is a counter-movement that is summoning the will and the power to resist decadence and weakness, that is arming itself for the battle against Bolshevism, Jewry and plutocracy, that with heroic valour and idealism is fighting a life-and-death battle for Germany, for Europe, for the whole earth' [fig. 1].¹⁰

Nolde's view of the world war as a 'battle against Jewry' leaves no doubt about his unconditional identification with the Third Reich's political 'ethnic cleansing' project.

7

Bernhard Fulda, Christian Ring, Aya Soika, eds, *Emil Nolde: The Artist during the Third Reich* [exh. cat.], Munich, London, New York, Prestel, 2019. This catalogue and the Nolde Foundation's website contain essential information about Nolde's ideology and his relationship with the regime.

8

See Bernhard Fulda and Aya Soika, 'Introduction', in Fulda, Ring and Soika 2019, pp. 17–34, see note 7 above, p. 1.

9

Bernhard Fulda, 'Nolde's Anti-Semitism', *ibid.*, pp. 97–114.

10

Ibid., p. 109.

Expressionism and Nazism

It is worth remembering that for a time Expressionism was defended by some of the Nazi leaders as an art that conformed to the myth of Nordic purity and that its exaltation of primitive Germanness was perfectly in keeping, at least in theory, with the artistic interests of National Socialism. Indeed, Goebbels commissioned Hans Weidemann, the head of the Propaganda Ministry's Department of Visual Arts, and the Nazi architect par excellence, Albert Speer, to decorate his home, which was hung with Expressionist works. Speer recalled: 'I borrowed a few watercolors by Nolde from... the director of the Berlin Nationalgalerie. Goebbels and his wife were delighted with the paintings – until Hitler came to inspect and expressed his severe disapproval. Then the minister summoned me immediately. "The pictures have to go at once; they're simply impossible"'.¹¹ Unlike Goebbels, Hitler considered Expressionist paintings to be incompatible with Nazi ideals and soon issued the decrees enabling him to set his 'cultural revolution' in motion. In June 1937 he ordered the director of the Reich Chamber of Culture, Adolf Ziegler, to confiscate all the avant-garde art in public collections.¹² Expressionist artists, whether or not they had been complicit with the regime, were branded 'degenerate' and forced to emigrate or give up painting for good. As a result, Nolde had to endure, not without concern, having his paintings removed from German museums. As if that were not enough, in August 1941 he was astonished to receive an official notification signed by Ziegler barring him from working in any field of the visual arts as well as from selling and showing his pictures [fig. 2].

The culmination of this systematic anti-avant-garde campaign, which is indelibly etched on the historical memory of twentieth-century art, was the defamatory exhibition entitled *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) in which National Socialism used its powerful and effective propaganda machinery to ridicule modern art and present it as an insult to German sentiment and the German race.¹³ The show opened on 19 July 1937 at the Archäologische Institut in Munich, the capital of Nazism, and subsequently travelled to several other German cities until 1941. All the Expressionist artists were represented.

11

Lynn H. Nicholas, *The Rape of Europa: The Fate of Europe's Treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War*, New York, Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 10–11.

12

The purge affected some 16,000 works in a hundred or so museums in more than seventy cities.

13

See, among others, Stephanie Barron, ed., 'Degenerate Art': *The Fate of the Avant-garde in Nazi Germany* [exh. cat.], New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1991.

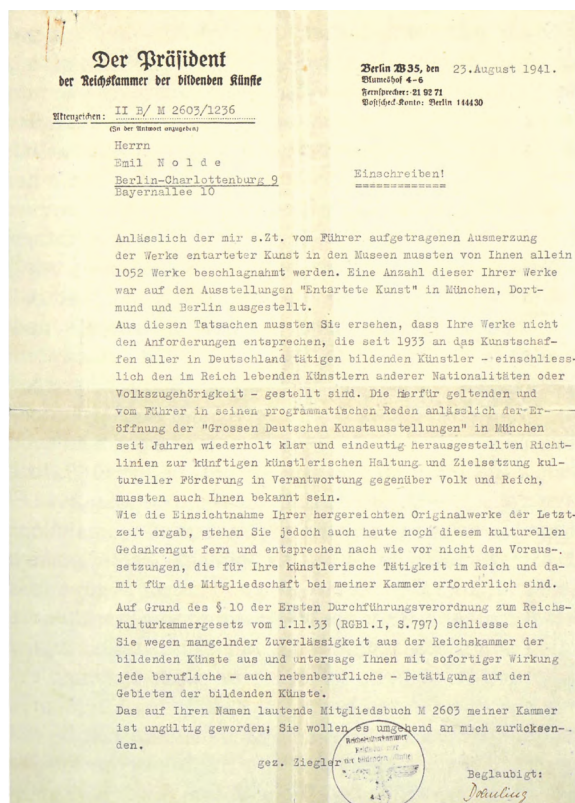


fig. 2
Letter from the president
of the Reichskammer der bildenden
Künste to Emil Nolde, 23 August 1941



fig. 3
Emil Nolde,
The Life of Christ, about 1911-12,
in the *Degenerate Art* exhibition in Berlin,
about 1938

Paintings by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Max Pechstein, Otto Mueller, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, August Macke, Franz Marc, Wassily Kandinsky, Alexei Jawlensky, Paul Klee, Lionel Feininger, Max Beckmann and George Grosz, as well as Emil Nolde, were chaotically hung and topped with denigrating labels. Of the 650 pieces by 112 artists on view, 33 were by Nolde, whose large polyptych of *The Life of Christ* was one of the highlights of the show [fig. 3].

Smarting and frustrated after visiting *Entartete Kunst* with his collector Friedrich Döhlemann, who besides directing the Bayerische Gemeindebank was the treasurer of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst (House of German Art) - the museum established by Hitler - Nolde decided to pen a series of letters to Nazi civil servants. He also wrote to the Education Minister Bernhard Rust and to the Propaganda Minister Goebbels, asking for the pictures shown in the exhibition to be returned to him. The historian Aya Soika has provided important information on how the painter campaigned to have his pictures removed from the show. A six-page declaration



fig. 4

Emil Nolde
Summer Clouds, 1913
Oil on canvas, 73.3 x 88.5 cm
Museo Nacional Thyssen-
Bornemisza, Madrid,
inv. 691 (1972.12)

14

Aya Soika, 'The Long Dispute over Expressionism around Nolde', in Fulda, Ring and Soika 2019, pp. 39–64, see note 7 above, p. 62.

15

Ibid.

16

As proven by the inscription on the verso and the label on the back of the frame bearing the inventory number 'S.H.K.V. Inv. 277'.

17

Inv. EK 14222. Inventory of *Entartete Kunst*, about 1941–42. Two typed volumes listing the works confiscated from the public institutions by the German Propaganda Ministry and subsequently sold. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, MSL/1996/7/2.

of intent, written in a strongly anti-Semitic tone and sent to the Reich's press chief, Otto Dietrich, in December 1938,¹⁴ made it possible for several influential people with posts in various official Nazi agencies to express their support for him. As a result of these letters, after the spring of 1939 no more paintings by Nolde were displayed at the successive venues of *Entartete Kunst*. As Soika notes, in June 1939 Ada told their friends: 'We have fought and achieved much. In the "degenerates" is nothing more by N. and his name may no longer be mentioned in this connection'.¹⁵

The Museo Thyssen's permanent collection includes a painting whose provenance illustrates the ostracism to which the painter was subjected: *Summer Clouds*, executed in 1913 [fig. 4] and acquired by the Schleswig-Holsteinische Kunstverein for the Kunsthalle Kiel in 1918.¹⁶ It was confiscated on 14 July 1937 and stored in the Schloss Schönhausen in Berlin's Niederschönhausen district in August 1938, as is specified in the inventory of degenerate art.¹⁷ In their attempt to reclaim his seized pictures, Nolde and his wife visited the deposit in the spring of 1939 and Ada read out aloud a few paragraphs from her husband's memoirs to demonstrate his loyalty to the Nazis. It must have worked, as not long afterwards Ada's art dealer brother Aage Vilstrup managed to acquire eleven of Nolde's confiscated paintings.

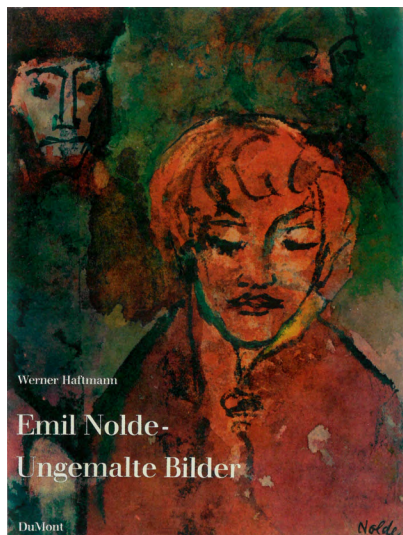


fig. 5

Cover of the book by Werner Haftmann,
Emil Nolde, Ungemalte Bilder, 1963

In 1939, when the government decided to put some of the seized artworks on the market to raise funds for the war, it enlisted several like-minded dealers and *Summer Clouds* was given to Karl Buchholz. This bookseller and gallery owner specialising in Expressionist art had managed to keep his Berlin gallery open by staging many exhibitions approved by the regime while secretly selling works by 'degenerate' artists. That is how Nolde's *Summer Clouds* came to be sold to Arvid Brodersen from Denmark in 1939.¹⁸

Nolde's Self-legend

When Hitler committed suicide, Nolde's passion for Nazism waned. The artist then set about undoing his previous association with the regime to present himself as a victim of National Socialism. It is fairly likely that he also did so to make amends for his previous life and convince himself that he could not have acted otherwise. It is known for a fact that he destroyed documents and rewrote certain passages of his memoirs – both *Das eigene Leben* (My own life, 1931) and *Jahre der Kämpfe* (Years of Struggle, 1934) – to shape his legend of a wronged martyr and promote a self-narrative of a misunderstood artistic genius doomed to ostracism, who secretly painted hundreds of small pictures during the last years of the war. This legend spread and after the painter died in Seebüll in 1956, at the age of 88, the Nolde Foundation further fuelled it by putting on display in a special room the *Ungemalte Bilder* (unpainted pictures), which had been concealed there [fig. 5]. These small watercolours were presented as evidence that Nolde had not made – artistically, at least – any concessions to the Nazi regime.

18

Later, in 1960, *Summer Clouds* was in the possession of the Gemäldegalerie Günther Abels in Cologne, and in 1966 it was auctioned at Kornfeld und Klipstein in Berne. From a private collection in London, it returned to the market through the London-based dealers Roland, Browse & Delbanco and Roman Norbert Ketterer, who displayed it in the *Moderne Kunst V* exhibition held at his Galerie R. N. Ketterer in Campione d'Italia in 1968. Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen purchased it from the Hamburg auction house Hauswedell & Nolte in 1972. Since 1993 it has belonged to the permanent collection of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza.

But it was possibly Siegfried Lenz's novel *Deutschstunde* (translated into English as *The German Lesson*), published in 1968, that gave the greatest impetus to the whitewashing of Nolde's image. The main character, an artist called Max Ludwig Nansen – apparently based on Nolde – creates a series of 'invisible paintings' when the Nazis bar him from painting. This book turned Nolde's 'unpainted pictures' into a lasting symbol of artistic resistance against the tyrannical regime.

Nolde's case is paradoxical and remained an obscure and unexplored terrain until very recently. The new information brought to light by Christian Ring and the Seebüll-based Foundation, which has opted for transparency and ceased to shield Nolde from his Nazi past, coupled with the research conducted by Bernhard Fulda and Aya Soika, has made it possible to reinterpret many issues surrounding Nolde and give rise to an uncomfortable question: Should we ignore the artist's ideology and focus exclusively on his oeuvre? It also leads us to the somewhat troubling conclusion that if it was his painting, and not his ideology, that was persecuted during the Nazi regime, can his art, which no doubt blazed a brilliant trail for Expressionism, redeem his political convictions? ●