

QUINN, MALCOLM. *The Swastika: Constructing the Symbol*. (Material Culture). London and New York: Routledge, 1994. xiii + 176 pages. Illustrations, select bibliography, index. Hardbound £25.00; ISBN 0-415-10095X.

One of my first purchases in Japan was a map of Kamakura. Freshly immersed in the study of Japanese, I thought that a good way to make use of my weekly Thursday holiday would be to visit the area's temples and shrines. However, when I opened the map to plan my route I was quite shocked to see swastikas splattered here and there over the streets. When somebody told me that they indicated Buddhist temples, I thought, "Why a swastika?"

My reaction was typical of Americans or Europeans faced with the swastika. For over seventy-five years this ancient sign has been colored by its use as a Nazi symbol. The purpose of Malcolm Quinn's book is to "desymbolize" the swastika by showing how the Nazis constructed it to suit their purposes:

My own task in this book has been to use a micro-historical discourse and a theory of how symbols are constructed and recognised to refute the ahistoricism and absolutism of the Nazi sign. The Nazi swastika cannot be renamed or "resymbolised" in the short term, but it can be "desymbolised" by making it historical. (19)

Somehow this noble venture fails. At the end of the book I knew much more about the various interpretations of the swastika and about how the symbol had been used, but I was still in the European scene. Frankly speaking, I had expected a placing of the swastika in a worldwide context. If American and European readers could see how other peoples consider the swastika outside of its twentieth-century European surroundings, then maybe the sign would lose that false layer of meaning constructed by the Nazis.

The book is valuable, however, in showing how scholars, including linguists, folklorists, archaeologists, philosophers, and psychologists, lent their expertise to the Nazi construction of this symbol. The book also shows how the symbol promoted Nazi racism and helped unify the various classes through Aryan supremacy and exclusion of the Jewish people.

The book has four sections. The introduction presents the argument of the book, discusses Michael Zmigrodski's swastika exhibition in 1889, and shows the racist nature of the Nazi use of the sign. Chapter 1, "Symbol," documents the interest many authorities had in this old "Aryan" sign as they attempted to rebuild pride in their heritage. Accompanying this, however, was the exclusionist element of anti-Semitism. The chief protagonist here was Heinrich Schliemann, who excavated "Troy" and found swastika designs. Chapter 2, "Ornament," takes up Adolf Loos's treatment of ornament and Wilhelm Worringer's racist analysis of the Gothic, then describes the eventual Nazi appropriation of the swastika by means of ornamental proliferation. Chapter 3, "Swastika," compares the swastika to a corporate logo as it explores the Nazi sign's power to maintain its image: "The swastika made German nobodies into Aryo-Germanic somebodies in much the same way as the commodity sign continues to set standards for judgments of value, class, and gender" (111). When the Nazis gained control, the party symbol became the national symbol.

Woven into the discussions are references to numerous scholars. Though these references sometimes slow the progress of the argument, they cause one to reflect on the issues of academic complacency and scholarly complicity in falsehood and injustice. People can still be mobilized by similar constructions of a symbol for demagogic purposes. So, although the book does not really desymbolize the swastika, it successfully demythologizes academics by showing how easily their "sciences" may be employed in the service of racism and terror.

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