

The 'National Community' under Open Skies: The Thing(spiel) Movement and Its Arenas

Text

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I.

The **Thingstätten**—the **Thing** sites or arenas—dotted over much of Germany (and lands formerly German), are the colossal remnants of a failed experiment in twentieth-century mass culture. Dating from the early years of Nazi rule, they constitute what was perhaps the most visible cultural investment made by the Third Reich. While the ideas underpinning the so-called **Thing(spiel)**—the **Thing** play—did not actually originate inside the Nazi Party, their emergence coincided with the fall of the Weimar Republic. That synchronicity gave the **Thing(spiel) bewegung** [**Thing** movement] crucial right-wing credentials, and the new regime a ready means to make its mark in the cultural sphere. Grassroots enthusiasm and official encouragement complemented each other. — **Thing** mania promptly ensued. **Spielgemeinschaften**—literally ‘play (or playing) communities’—sprang up in the German regions to train up actors (many of them amateur players), to prepare for individual productions and popularise the concept. Exhibitions, ‘radio talks’ and broadcasts of selected **Thing** plays drummed up support; extensive press coverage, ranging from articles in the national and regional newspapers, via trade journals to pieces in school newsletters, spread the word.¹ Architectural sketches for future arenas soon abounded. At the height of the **Thing** craze there were plans for several hundred **Thingstätten**.² Local Party outfits were falling over themselves to make things happen, and the Propaganda Ministry struggled, at times, to keep control.³ Regional **Arbeitsgemeinschaften** [working groups] and **Reichstagungen** [conferences at national level] sought to marshal the logistics. Through their internal reviews of the successes and shortcomings of individual **Thingspiel** productions, the conferences also fed practical advice back to the regions. — These activities of the (initially non-Nazi) **Thing** movement were complemented by the Nazi Party’s ability to mobilise large numbers of activists at a local level. The precise mixture varied from place to place, but everywhere the SA provided participants in battalion strength, while the Hitler

Youth enlisted the Young. The mass scenes of many **Thing** productions would have been difficult to stage without the help of these Party formations. The army of the unemployed, drafted into Robert Ley’s ostensibly voluntary Nazi Labour Service, the **Freiwillige Arbeitsdienst** (FAD), swelled the ranks of the potential **Thing** players still further.⁴ Moreover, the Labour Service also offered a low-cost, biddable workforce to build the new arenas.⁵ — Here, then, was a major cultural initiative. But here, too, was something tailor-made for propaganda purposes (complete with a ready plot line for the more basic **Thing** plays). The political message—and the tale duly told by many **Thingspiel** texts—was this: that the very men cast adrift by capitalism in the Great Depression and left to rot by the republic had been rescued and re-energised by the Führer’s leadership.⁶ United in common purpose under the swastika flag, they were now building the new Reich—both literally and metaphorically.⁷ What is more, they were doing this in the service of **Kultur**, which Hitler had declared a national priority when the Reichstag gave him dictatorial powers in March 1933.⁸ The **Thing** arenas taking shape across Germany were duly hailed by Goebbels as **steingewordener Nationalsozialismus**—‘National Socialism rendered in stone.’⁹

II.

The meteoric rise of the **Thingspiel** can be interpreted in two distinct ways. It can be told as a heroic tale of a small group of like-minded men of the same generation, all with links to the Rhineland, who joined forces in 1933. Fervently nationalist (but, it bears repeating, not originally Nazi), they sought to bring about a renaissance in open-air theatre. To this end, they threw themselves into publicising their cause: through publishing, offering to speak on the radio, organising exhibitions, directing model productions and seeking, via the recently established Nationwide Association of Open-Air Theatre, the **Reichsbund für Freilichtspiele**, to interest towns and cities

- 1 Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung der Universität Köln, Niessen Nachlass Thingspielmappe [hereafter TSUK NN/Th]. This collection contains examples of **Thing** publicity: e.g. Niessen’s radio script of 18 Oct. 1934.
- 2 The precise numbers remain unclear, since not all plans were deemed by the Propaganda Ministry deserving of the name ‘**Thing**’.
- 3 BA [Bundesarchiv Berlin] R 55/20441, Laubinger to Goebbels, 29 Nov. 1934, provides graphic details of the administrative chaos.
- 4 See, for instance, TSUK NN/Th, **Lager-Zeitung des FAD**, 15 Aug. 1934: ‘Deutsche Passion.’
- 5 BA R55/20441, box 60, Laubinger to Ley, 12 Dec. 1933 [on links with the DAF].
- 6 Brief characterisations are found in: Anonymous (ed.), **Volksspiel und Feier: Alphabetisches Suchbuch nebst Stoffsammlung für Brauch, Freizeit und Spiel** (Munich, 1936).
- 7 Neatly summarised in **Westdeutscher Beobachter**, 29 Oct. 1934: ‘Völkische Weihestunde in Jülich: Eine Kultstätte, die Jahrhunderte überdauern wird—ein symbolisches Werk des Arbeitsdienstes.’
- 8 Entry for 23 March 1933 in: Max Domarus (ed.), **Hitler: Reden und Proklamationen 1932–1945** (Wiesbaden, 1973).
- 9 Diary entry for 24 June 1935 in: Elke Fröhlich (ed.), **Die Tagebücher des Joseph Goebbels**, vol. 3/1 (Munich, 2005).

in their enterprise.¹⁰ — In that perspective, the launch of the **Thing** is a tale of enthusiasts mindful of the tides in the affairs of men, who deftly steered their vessel into the surging flood of the so-called National Revolution of 1933 and on, they hoped, to fortune. This is the tale told not least by the men involved. — There were four of them. First, a professor of theatre studies at the University of Cologne (Carl Niessen), who came up with the term **Thingspiel** in the summer of 1933, provided its theoretical underpinning and hosted in his department the inaugurating **Thing** conference, which turned a mere aspiration into a credible project. Niessen had been attending open-air productions for years, with the evident intention of building up a network of like-minded theatre specialists.¹¹ At one such production, in the summer of 1933, he made the acquaintance of a noted director of mass scenes, recently returned from a stint at New York's Metropolitan Opera, who had earlier launched the 1920s Händel renaissance in Germany (Hanns Niedecken-Gebhard).¹² — The two men hit it off. Niedecken-Gebhard became a keynote speaker at the Cologne conference some weeks later and would go on to direct the first model **Thingspiel** production at the Messehalle, the great hall of the Cologne Trade Fair, in November 1933.¹³ That production of Kurt Eggers's **Job, der Deutsche**—an incantatory nationalist vision of recent German history with Old Testament overtones—achieved a nationwide echo. It was widely reviewed in the press and was broadcast by German Radio in its "Stunde der Nation" [National Hour] slot.¹⁴ Niedecken-Gebhard subsequently directed a showcase staging at the 1934 Heidelberg Festival of Kurt Euringer's **Deutsche Passion**—another pseudo-Biblical account of recent German History, and he went on to devise the opening ceremony of the Berlin Olympics. — Niedecken-Gebhard's abiding interest in rhythmic movement on stage provided the link with the **Thing**'s third man, Hans Brandenburg. Now largely forgotten, Brandenburg was a well-regarded writer connected to the modernist **Ausdruckstanz** movement of Rudolf von Laban, Emile-Jacques Dalcroze and Mary Wigman either side of

the Great War. Brandenburg was quickly eclipsed by the other **Thing** proponents, but his artistic pedigree and publishing record on cultural topics gave the early **Thing** movement added kudos.¹⁵ — Number four in the **Thing** quartet, and in some ways the most important of the four, was a Catholic panjandrum with a background in architecture, social work, publishing and theatre activism (Wilhelm Carl Gerst). That eclectic mix made Gerst peculiarly well-placed to help launch the **Thing** movement. He had started out as a member of an innovative architectural practice in the town of Celle (near Hanover)—an early regional outpost of German modernism—and had then worked for Caritas, the Catholic relief agency. The inter-war years saw Gerst on the forefront of attempts to revive open-air amateur dramatics—and, simultaneously, leading the populist fronde against the metropolitan theatre of Weimar modernism, which they accused of arrogant elitism.¹⁶ — Gerst had been in touch with Niessen since the early 1920s.¹⁷ More immediately, he had come to the **Thing**, via his chairmanship of the Bühnenvolksbund [People's Theatre League], a theatre-goers' association-cum-pressure group, which boasted a membership in the interwar years in excess of 400,000, making it larger than many political parties at the time.¹⁸ Gerst, in other words, was no unknown quantity in 1933. — It was Gerst who launched the Reichsbund für Freilichtspiele [Reich Open-Air Theatre Association] in December 1932 when the Weimar Republic was unmistakably in its death-throes; and Gerst deftly steered the Reichsbund through the Nazi seizure of power, avoiding formal **Gleichschaltung** [Nazification]: no mean achievement. The only one of the quartet to be based in Berlin, Gerst would act as 'Mr **Thingspiel**' in the corridors of power (until the Propaganda Ministry eventually forced him to step down).¹⁹ — Drawing on his own experience in architecture, Gerst was able to nurture a small group of architects, who had submitted designs for open-air stages to the inaugural Cologne conference of August 1933. These men—and they were all men—became the house architects of the Reichsbund by Gerst's fiat.²⁰ One of them, Fritz Schaller (who went on

10 See BA R55/20105, box 260, as an example of how the Reichsbund contacted mayors.

11 TSUK NN contains copious photographs and programme schedules for open-air stages.

12 Bernhard Helmich, **Händel-Fest und 'Spiel der 10.000': Der Regisseur Hanns Niedecken-Gebhard** (Frankfurt am Main, 1989).

13 TSUK NN-G [Nachlass Niedecken-Gebhard] / **Kölnische Zeitung** [undated newspaper clipping]: 'Regie der Massen: Eine Beobachtungsstunde bei Dr. Niedecken-Gebhard in der Messehalle.'

14 **Völkischer Beobachter**, 25 Nov. 1933: 'Das Spiel von Job, dem Deutschen.'

15 Notably, **Das Theater und das neue Deutschland** (Jena, 1919) and **Der moderne Tanz** (Munich, 1913). For the context, see Hedwig Müller and Patricia Stöckemann, '... jeder Mensch ist ein Tänzer!': **Ausdruckstanz in Deutschland zwischen 1900 und 1945** (Gießen, 1993).

16 See his **Wille und Werk: Ein Handbuch des Bühnenvolksbundes** (Berlin, 1926) and **Gemeinschafts-Bühne und Jugendbewegung** (Frankfurt, 1924).

17 TSUK NN/Th contains their correspondence.

18 Britta-Marie Schenk, **Das Theater der Zukunft: Theaterkritik und Reformvorstellungen des christlichen-nationalen Bühnenvolksbundes in der Weimarer Republik** (Berlin, 2011).

19 See TSUK NN/Th, Gerst to Niessen, 8 Jan. 1934.

20 See TSUK NN/Th, typed manuscript, 'Thingplätze als Spielstätten der Nation', p. 2.

to be a central figure in the post-war reconstruction of Cologne), later recalled that Gerst effectively ran the commissioning of **Thing** arenas from his small flat off Berlin's Kurfürstendamm. Thither he would summon his chosen architects to put them in touch with the mayors of the towns seeking to build a **Thingstätte**—a **Thing** site.²¹ Such accounts give the early **Thing** movement at times the flavour of a picaresque novel. — The story of the **Thing**, however, is also a thoroughly political tale. Here two men heave into sight: a third-rate actor (but able administrator) by the name of Otto Laubinger, who threw in his lot with the Nazis on the eve of the Third Reich in 1932 and was made president of the new Reich Theatre Chamber, the **Reichstheaterkammer**, a year later; and the man, who appointed him, a failed playwright but gifted propagandist: none other than Goebbels himself. Laubinger and his master effectively adopted the **Thingspiel** in the autumn of 1933. When they were joined by the improbable figure of Robert Ley—a thuggish and notoriously uncultured inebriate, widely derided as the **Reichstrunkenbold**—their combined patronage proved decisive.

III.

It is this juxtaposition of the Nazi and the non-Nazi, of earnest cultural endeavour and political thuggery that has bedevilled analyses of the **Thing**.²² The uniforms and the swastika flags in the black-and-white photographs of the arenas have tended to obscure everything else; but, of course, they were **meant** to do that. **Gleichschaltung**—the notion of a country on the brink of civil war magically turning into a harmonious **Volksgemeinschaft** [national community]—was pure stage-management after all. — Let us, then, look beyond the politically desired images to examine the motivation of the **Thing's** original proponents. Niessen, Niedecken-Gebhard, Brandenburg and Gerst—the **Thingspiel** Four—had long been interested in mass theatre. They had built up solid reputations. Decisive success, however, had eluded them. The Great Depression had not helped matters of course. All four men, moreover, were pushing fifty. Their remaining options,

in other words, were limited. The collapse of the republican order in 1932–33, and the promise of a new start that went with it, must have seemed providential to them. — The ultra-rapid launch of the **Thing** movement was their way to seize the moment; there was something almost frantic about the way they sought to maintain the momentum in the following months. What drove them was not a desire to aid the Hitler government but to make use of the 'window of interest by the new regime', as Niessen put it in a telling remark.²³ The Nazis were merely the horse that Gerst and his collaborators were hoping to ride. That point was also made retrospectively by the architect Fritz Schaller in the 1990s, and there is no good reason to doubt his judgement.²⁴ — In fact, the wider evidence corroborates Schaller's view. Take Carl Niessen once more. He was a member of the **Stahlhelm**, the nationalist, anti-democratic war veterans' association (which was probably a contributing factor in the **Thing's** pronounced interest in the politics of remembrance). **Stahlhelm** membership, however, made Niessen a Hindenburg man, rather than a follower of Hitler. That may seem a subtle difference to us now, but it was real enough at the time; and it would lead Niessen during the war to stand up to the Nazi chief censor over a theatre ban in a manner unparalleled in the surviving files of the Propaganda Ministry.²⁵ — Now consider Niedecken-Gebhard. His decision to sail 'home' from New York in March 1933 may seem politically suggestive—and it suited him, at the time, not to dispel such notions. Yet it was not nationalist fervour that prompted his return to the Fatherland, but dire necessity. The Metropolitan Opera had made him redundant when it faced bankruptcy that season.²⁶ Back in Germany, Niedecken-Gebhard made little headway amid the **Theaterkrise**—the funding crisis of the German theatre sector was so pronounced that a word had actually been coined to describe it. He was still out of work in the summer of 1933, which is why he tried his hand at a patriotic open-air play in his home town on the Rhine (where he met Niessen).²⁷ In the Germany of 1933, patriotism was the last refuge not just of the scoundrels. The fact, moreover, that Niedecken-Gebhard was still not sure how to spell Goebbels's name six months after the Nazi seizure of power speaks volumes.²⁸ — Finally, there is Gerst, the **Linkskatholik**

21 Emanuel Gebauer, **Fritz Schaller: Der Architekt und sein Beitrag zum Sakralbau im 20. Jahrhundert** (Cologne, 2000), p. 57.

22 The classic account is: Rainer Stommer, **Die inszenierte Volksgemeinschaft: Die 'Thing-Bewegung' im Dritten Reich** (Marburg, 1985). Evelyn Annuß is preparing an important study from the perspective of theatre theory. Introductions in English include Anselm Heinrich, 'Germania on Stage: Nazi Thing Theatre', in Christina Lee and Nicola McLelland (eds.), **Germania Remembered, 1500–2009** (Tempe, AZ, 2012), pp. 273–288, and William Niven, 'The Birth of Nazi Drama? Thing Plays', in John London (ed.), **Theatre under the Nazis** (Manchester, 2000), pp. 54–95; on the wider context, see Gerwin Strobl, **The Swastika and the Stage: German Theatre and Society** (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 36–88.

23 See TSUK NN-G, box 2, 'Akademische Arbeitsgemeinschaft 1933', p. 54.

24 Interview, 3 Sept. 1992, in Gebauer, **Fritz Schaller**, p. 54.

25 BA R 55/20478, box 215, Niessen to Schlösser, 10 Nov. 1940.

26 TSUK NN-G, box 2, 'Campaign to save the Metropolitan Opera', 23 Feb. 1933.

27 TSUK NN-G, box 12, Niessen to Niedecken-Gebhard, 11 Aug. 1933; TSUK NN-G, box 13, contains details of his frantic job hunting.

28 TSUK NN-G, box 13, Notizbuch 1933, entry for 1 Aug. 1933.

[left-leaning Catholic]: a man full of revolutionary fervour in 1919, who, in 1945, went on to be one of the founders of the left-of-centre **Frankfurter Rundschau** newspaper (before throwing in his lot with the East German regime in disgust at Konrad Adenauer's readiness to accept a divided Germany).²⁹ — Such biographical detail explains the otherwise inexplicable. In February 1933—i.e. **after** the Nazi seizure of power—Gerst famously invited prominent left-wing writers like Bruno Frank, Ödön von Horváth and even Ernst Toller (of Bavarian Soviet Republic fame), as well as several Jewish (!) dramatists alongside Conservative and Catholic ones, to write plays for the open-air theatre.³⁰ The literature on the **Thingspiel** has tended to dismiss that as evidence only of political naiveté. Naïve it may have been, but it was in keeping with Gerst's efforts at reaching out across the political divides both before and after the Third Reich. It is of a piece, moreover, with his making a Social Democrat in bad odour with the Nazis (Ludwig Moshamer) one of the principal **Thing** architects.³¹ — Above all, the biographical background explains the curious Christian ambience of the early **Thing** movement. The name itself, which might suggest **völkisch** Germanic mysticism, and was taken as such in the Nazi press, also appealed to some non-Nazis. Specifically, the term had been in use pre-1933 among the German **Jugendbewegung** and Catholic youth groups.³² This should be seen in the context of the rapidly evolving political situation in the summer of 1933, where the dissolution of the (Catholic) Centre party forced a rethink of Catholic civic activities. Several speaking engagements in those weeks and the launch of a Catholic publishing venture (which go beyond the scope of this essay) strongly suggest that Gerst sought to position his Reichsbund für Freilichtspiele as a vehicle for public religious expression.³³ Indeed, the inaugural **Thing** conference in Cologne of August 1933 affirmed that the proposed **Thing** arenas would also be suited 'für kirchliche Veranstaltungen und Gottesdienste'—'for religious occasions and divine service'.³⁴ — That line, significantly enough, was omitted from the reporting about the Cologne conference in the Nazi daily **Der Völkische Beobachter**; but it should inform our understanding of the early **Thing**. It might explain, for instance, why some of Ludwig Moshamer's initial architectural

sketches of **Thing** arenas should have sported giant crosses (but no swastikas) or why Fritz Schaller's **Thingstätte** at Northeim actually featured a dais where an altar might be placed.³⁵ (Schaller, it should be noted, specialized after the war in building Catholic churches.) Under Gerst's leadership, the **Thing** movement possessed 'considerable subversive intent', as the architectural critic Emanuel Gebauer has put it.³⁶

IV.

If there was thus a hidden agenda among the original **Thing** proponents, which they were increasingly unable to pursue among the solidifying Nazi dictatorship, there was also more to Nazi patronage than met the eye. What motivated the trio of Laubinger, Goebbels and Ley seems to have been, at least in part, a desire to outflank their political rivals.³⁷ Göring (as Prime Minister of Prussia) had seized control of Germany's leading playhouses; Rosenberg was attempting to subjugate the entire sector via his theatre-goers' association, the **Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur**. The **Thing** movement thus gave Goebbels welcome news headlines while the power struggle over the theatre within the Party was in full swing. — Similarly, one step down in the hierarchy, Otto Laubinger was competing with Rosenberg's underlings.³⁸ Laubinger's enthusiasm for the **Thing** concept was genuine, but he was clearly not blind to its publicity potential, and used it accordingly to raise his own public profile. On one occasion, he even appeared as an actor in a **Thing** play: Goebbels was in the audience.³⁹ Part of the attraction for Laubinger, moreover, was the fact that the **Thing** allowed him to extend his activities geographically (into rural areas without existing stages) and calendar-wise into the summer months (when most traditional playhouses, in the days before air-conditioning, were closed for **Theaterferien**—theatre holidays).⁴⁰ It also provided a potential handle for controlling, at least in some measure, the vast field of **Laientheater** [amateur theatre]. In the country, amateur outfits, after all, were often the only readily available theatre. — Finally, there was Robert Ley, who hailed from the Rhineland,

29 Wilhelm Karl Gerst, **Eine Abrechnung: 50 Beiträge zur Charakteristik der Adenauer-Partei** (East Berlin, 1960).

30 The list is printed in full in Stommer, **Die inszenierte Volksgemeinschaft**, p. 24.

31 See *ibid.*, p. 279, footnote 50, for biographical details.

32 Gebauer, **Fritz Schaller**, p. 70.

33 See Helmich, **Händel-Fest**, p. 157, on Gerst's speech at the Frankfurt conference of the 'Arbeitsgemeinschaft katholischer Schriftsteller und Jugendführerr', 6–8 Aug. 1933.

34 Stommer quotes the line but, curiously, only in a footnote: **Die inszenierte Volksgemeinschaft**, p. 279, n. 45.

35 The significance of the Northeim dais is emphasized by Gebauer, **Fritz Schaller**, p. 68.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

37 The **Thing** files of the Propaganda Ministry and the Reichstheaterkammer were destroyed; Stommer, **Die inszenierte Volksgemeinschaft**, discusses surviving stray files.

38 Walter Stang's Dramaturgisches Büro and the journal **Bausteine zum deutschen Nationaltheater** kept sniping from the sidelines.

39 See Werner Pleister, 'Kontrolle der Laienspiele?', **Das Deutsche Volksspiel**, 1 (1933–34), p. 11.

40 BA R 55/20441, box 60, Laubinger to Ley, Dec. 1933.

like the **Thing** movement itself, and that link may well have been a factor in the equation. He, too, was dreaming of a theatrical empire: in his case, as part of his efforts to control the leisure hours of the German workforce. That made him a rival of Rosenberg and a potential ally of Goebbels.⁴¹ — The informal alliance with Goebbels was only temporary; most alliances within Hitler's back-stabbing inner circle were short-lived. But there were ideological affinities: both men belonged to the left wing of the Nazi party, which sought to emphasise the 'socialist' as much the 'national' in the Party's name, and that made the **Thing** concept of a community theatre for the masses attractive to them. (That 'socialist' angle also accounts for the prominent involvement of the SA in the early **Thing**). — The minutiae of the power struggle(s) within the Nazi leadership go beyond the scope of this essay—but they provide the context for the rise and fall of the **Thing**; and at times they were the only thing that mattered. Ley certainly mattered from late 1933 through most of 1934. Whatever his precise intentions, he provided crucial support to the **Thing** enterprise. (Similarly, since Goebbels was still fully engaged in fighting Rosenberg during those months, the **Thing** movement, headed by Gerst, retained a fair degree of autonomy under Goebbels's *Schirmherrschaft* [patronage]—the form of words, probably suggested by Laubinger, to avoid formal Nazification of the Reichsbund.) — Ley came to the **Thing** movement with considerable assets. For one thing, he sat on a pot of gold—the trade union funds stolen by the Nazis in 1933, which made a real difference amid the general penury of the Depression. Via the DAF—the Arbeitsfront [Nazi Labour Front]—Ley could provide potentially both huge audiences and **Thingspiel** performers in battalion strength. It did not require massive acting skills, after all, to march to a **Thing** site in formation and then position oneself on various ramps holding swastika flags aloft.⁴² The more adventurous members of the DAF also experimented with the *Sprechchor* [rhythmic chanting]—in emulation of the practices of Social Democrat trade union activists before 1933.⁴³ But it was Ley's control of the FAD—the *Freiwillige Arbeitsdienst* [Voluntary Labour Service]—that made the greatest difference to the **Thing**'s fortunes.⁴⁴ Without the army of the unemployed ready to toil in exchange for little more than a square meal and a bunk for the night, the **Thingstätten** would almost certainly never have been built.⁴⁵ Indeed, the engine of the **Thing** movement promptly began to splutter once

employment picked up again in Germany. The arenas are thus as much testimony to the economic dislocation at the end of the Weimar Republic as they are proof of the ambitions of those hoping for a cultural rebirth in the Third Reich.⁴⁶

V.

The **Thing** was the product of its time. That may sound trite but actually goes to the heart of the matter. The plays brought forth by the **Thing** movement—and the arenas resulting from its labours—reflected the lives and experiences of their generation of Germans: a generation scarred by history. For all the swastika flags on display, the **Thing** was not primarily about the coming Third Reich but about the Weimar years, the then recent past.⁴⁷ It was a look back in anger at Germany's fate since the Great War. — In fact, it was the progeny of war. That may seem a surprising thing to say of something launched a decade and a half after the Armistice of November 1918. Yet it was no accident that references to the Great War recurred in **Thing** plays or that many arenas were built complete with shrines for the Fallen of 1914–1918. But for the First World War, and the misery and mayhem resulting from that great slaughter, there would probably have been no Nazism and there certainly would have been no **Thingspiel**. There would have been no ready audiences for it, no political messages to convey, no armies of the conscripted unemployed to build the arenas for a song and no perceived imperative to forge a new theatrical form for the masses to assist in the nation's spiritual resurgence. — The **Thing** thus came with in-built obsolescence. The more the German economy recovered after 1933, the weaker the appeal of the **Thing** would become. It would lose its emotional immediacy and would turn into empty ritual (or grating propaganda).⁴⁸ Some of the reviews were surprisingly open about this. There was too much revelling in 'past misery', as a Hamburg paper put it in the summer of 1934; now that the political enemies at home had been vanquished, there was no longer any need to dwell on the recent *Verfallszeit*—the period of national decline.⁴⁹ — It is probably no accident that the final **Thing** play to achieve a real echo, Eberhard Wolfgang Möller's *Frankenburger Würfelspiel* performed during the Berlin Olympics on the giant Dietrich-Eckart Stage, forsook

41 See the diary entry for 26 Dec. 1934 in Jürgen Matthäus and Frank Bajohr (eds.), *Alfred Rosenberg—die Tagebücher von 1934 bis 1944* (Frankfurt am Main, 2015).

42 See, for instance, TSUK NN/Th, 'Programm zur Spatenstichfeier und Fahnenweihe am Thingplatz an der Löwenburg im Siebengebirge, Bad Honnef, 1 July 1934.'

43 Indirectly acknowledged in BA NS 5/VI 6276, box 64.

44 Explicitly in TSUK NN/Th, Gerst to Niessen, 8 Jan. 1934.

45 Gerst saw the unemployed as the key to **Thing**'s success: TSUK NN-G, box 2, 'Akademische Arbeitsgemeinschaft', p. 46.

46 See *Westdeutscher Beobachter*, 29 Oct. 1934: 'Völkische Weihestunde in Jülich.'

47 Expressed very clearly in the official programme of the 1934 Heidelberg Festival: *Heidelberger Fremdenblatt Offizielle Kurzeitung der Stadt Heidelberg*, Aug. 1934, pp. 1–3.

48 BA R55/20180, box 358.

49 *Hamburger Tageblatt*, 13 Aug. 1934: '120 Stunden Heidelberg.'

contemporary history altogether and used a seventeenth-century plot to deliver its political message.⁵⁰ Three years earlier, the same man had opined, ‘We have lived through ... tragedy, we now only need to write it down.’⁵¹ — In a sense, the difference between that naively confident remark and the carefully considered dramatic structure of the **Frankenburger Würfelspiel** marked the trajectory of the **Thing**: from something, in 1933, which, for all its manifest imperfections, managed to capture the mood of the moment and the raw passions of the crowd to the calculated artifice three years on. The idea of “**hier spielt ein Volk sich selbst**”—of ‘a people playing itself’ in the arenas—had died.⁵²

VI.

Things began to unravel in the summer of 1934. Concerns within the Propaganda Ministry about the long-term viability of the **Thingspiel** had been steadily growing, albeit voiced discreetly behind the back of Otto Laubinger, the **Thing**’s chief defender.⁵³ Sniping from the Rosenberg office was unabating: both in internal party correspondence and via the press. That was all the more dangerous, since Gerst’s reckless drive to create facts on the ground by encouraging construction work of **Thing** arenas to commence often before funding had been fully secured was creating increasingly obvious strains. Then disaster struck at Heidelberg. Geological complications made it impossible to complete the arena on a hill above the town in time for the 1934 Heidelberg Festival, which had been intended to showcase the **Thingspiel** before an international audience. It is not clear what exactly happened—the relevant ministerial files were destroyed by Allied bombing and the Goebbels diaries are suspiciously tight-lipped on the subject. We just know that Goebbels abandoned his previous hands-off approach and descended on the building site at Heidelberg. He evidently did not like what he saw.⁵⁴ There followed a radical scaling back of **Thing** publicity. Furthermore, Goebbels decreed the use of a conventional open-air location at the 1934 Festival and the sacking of Gerst at the Reichsbund. — If Gerst had banked on the fact that the regime’s fear of a loss of face would eventually win out over all other considerations, he was not mistaken. Construction work on the various sites was indeed resumed later and they were eventually completed (albeit often in simplified form). The **Thing** move-

ment, however had lost the last vestiges of its autonomy. There were no further conferences and no further input by the original **Thing** proponents. — With Ley simultaneously losing interest in the **Thing**, as his attention turned to creating an empire in light entertainment under aegis of the **Strength through Joy**, and the SA ceasing to be an attractive partner after the murderous elimination of its leadership, the **Thing** had in effect become the property of the Propaganda Ministry.⁵⁵ — Then, in the autumn of 1935, the **Thing**’s staunchest champion within the Nazi theatre bureaucracy, Otto Laubinger, took to his bed and died. When things are delicately balanced, the removal of one man can tip the scales—particularly in a dictatorship, where there is no formal accountability or means of appeal. — Thus, in late October 1935, after a further summer of delays on the building sites, discontent among the conscripted work force, a continuing dearth of suitable plays, dwindling audiences (and, perhaps crucially, with Laubinger on his death-bed), Goebbels finally ran out of patience. With no prior warning, he terminated the entire **Thing** movement. The word itself became taboo. In a secret edict, the press received instructions to censor, if need be, even the speeches of senior personages.⁵⁶ Over the following months, the Propaganda Ministry quietly wound down the regional **Spielgemeinschaften**. Needless to say, the public were never actually told of this about-turn in Nazi **Kulturpolitik**.

VII.

What could not so easily be erased of course were the arenas themselves. The vast Dietrich-Eckart-Bühne in Berlin was duly inaugurated during the 1936 Olympics. It had never officially been called a **Thing** arena, out of deference to the sensitivities of the International Olympic Committee. Such tactfulness now proved fortuitous. Even so, it is surely telling that with exception of the **Frankenburger Würfelspiel**—written, it should be noted, by the deputy chief censor of the Propaganda Ministry’s theatre section—no piece of the **Thing** repertoire was ever performed on that stage. Instead, Niedecken-Gebhard’s version of Händel’s **Heracles** (alternating with the **Würfelspiel** in the Olympic summer) started a tradition of using that arena for musical entertainment. — Other **Thing** sites took their cue from Berlin. The **Frankenburger Würfelspiel** was performed on some of them;

50 See Strobl, **The Swastika**, pp. 66–70.

51 Eberhard Wolfgang Möller, ‘Die Geburt des Mythos und der Dichter’, **Der Neue Weg**, 62 (1933), p. 125, quoted by Stommer, **Die inszenierte Volksgemeinschaft**, p. 26.

52 **Völkischer Beobachter**, 31 July 1934: ‘Euringers “Deutsche Passion 1933”’ [italics in the original].

53 Allusion to existing concerns found in: BA R55/20440, box 60, Kirchner to Schlösser, 27 May 1935.

54 **Heidelberger Neueste Nachrichten**, 19 July 1934: “‘Deutsche Passion’ nicht auf der Thingstätte.”

55 See the entry for 24 June 1935 in Fröhlich, **Die Tagebücher des Joseph Goebbels**.

56 Document 1761, 23 Oct. 1935, in Hans Bohrmann (ed.), **NS-Pressenanweisungen der Vorkriegszeit: Edition und Dokumente**, vol. 3/II (Munich, 1984), pp. 694–65; cf. BA R55/200180, box 285, Moraller to Schlösser, undated memo [ca. Oct 1935].

notably at Passau, i.e. practically within hailing distance of the Austrian border, where the pronounced anti-Habsburg tone of the play fitted in with the regime's aim of destabilising the anti-Nazi government of Chancellor Schuschnigg in Vienna, but otherwise **Thing** plays were conspicuously absent thereafter.⁵⁷

VIII.

The **Thingstätten** had thus been barely completed when they lost their intended function as venues straddling the divide between culture and politics. The German right, it should be noted, had traditionally been anxious to uphold that divide, not least against attempts by the Weimar left to efface it. (Hence the unbounded rage in the theatres at Brecht, Jeßner, Piscator and Toller.) Yet far from advocating a politically neutral stage, the **Thing** activists described the plays they championed as 'propaganda' and the performances themselves as **Kundgebungen** [political demonstrations].⁵⁸ — The **Thingspiel** thus marked a clear break with the traditions of the German right. It was therefore not 'reactionary', in that it never tried to put the clock back artistically (unlike much Nazi-sponsored culture). In fact, it embraced modernist sensibilities and technology: state-of-the-art sound systems and lighting equipment formed part of the concept. As such, the **Thing** arenas are important evidence of German modernism's constituency extending beyond the left in the inter-war years.

IX.

Stylistically, the **Thingspiel** was a mixture of expressionist stagecraft, oratorio, medieval morality play, military tattoo, left-wing agitprop and Nazi party rally.⁵⁹ The elements that went into the mix were thus essentially twentieth-century phenomena or, in the case of the oratorio and the morality play, had recently been revived and re-imagined as mass spectacles. In other words, Reinhardtian aesthetics hedged the **Thing**. That fact remained unacknowledged because Max Reinhardt was Jewish. Invoking his name in 1933 would have sunk the **Thing** before it had been properly launched. — Reinhardt's name, however, is a reminder of modernist theatre's recurring interest in the **crowd**. Indeed, **Thing** plays were remarkable for their scale, involving armies

of performers and five- or even six-figure audiences. No less noteworthy was the underlying attempt at re-inventing theatrical practice: the purpose of theatre, its location and social composition were all to be re-cast. The aim was to establish a right-wing mass theatre, anchored in the German regions. — Such dreams of social reform via the stage were not in themselves groundbreaking. Hopes of overcoming the class barriers of traditional tiered playhouses, of reaching out beyond the cities to the culturally disenfranchised countryside, of blending professional and amateur players, had constituted the common currency of European theatre reformers since the 1890s.⁶⁰ Yet there was, for all that, something distinctive about the **Thing**. What marked it out from its inception was its architectural ambition.

X.

The **Thing** arenas constitute the largest body of open-air theatres built anywhere in the world since the days of ancient Greece and Rome. They also set the **Thingspiel** apart from the mainly left-wing mass theatre of the 1920s and '30s in Germany and elsewhere, which has left little beyond fading photographs and a sense of retrospective bemusement.⁶¹ — To that extent, the **Thing** proponents had learnt from the failures of the left. They had concluded that the emotive potential of mass theatre could best be unlocked through the considered use of space and the ambient landscape.⁶² Hence their rejection of initial suggestions from Party quarters to use existing sites, such as stadiums.⁶³ Hence the attention to landscape in the architectural sketches considered at the first **Thing** conference; hence also the frequently striking settings of the arenas. The **Thing**, in other words, was about creating the right external conditions for a psychological transformation to occur within the assembled masses. Not the plays (which were mediocre at best), but the arena was the thing wherein the **Thing** proponents sought to catch the conscience of their kin. — Kinship was the operative term. By rejecting the essentially random locations of traditional theatre in favour of carefully-considered amphitheatrical settings, the **Thing** practitioners hoped to induce among performers and audiences a sense of common origin, destiny and purpose. The idyllic locations of most **Thing** arenas thus did not simply pay tribute to older European ideals of marrying Art with Nature; they focused, above all, on German notions of belonging. As the **Thing**-architect

57 BA R 55/20442, box 48, Mayor of Passau to Schlösser, 19 July 1937.

58 Carl Niessen, "'Thingplätze' als Spielstätten der Nation', *Blätter der Staatsoper* [Dresden] 13 (1934), p. 101; see also TSUK NP/Th, radio manuscript, 18 Oct. 1934, p. 4.

59 See the review of *Deutsche Passion* in *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 30 July 1934.

60 Christopher Balme (ed.), *Das Theater von morgen: Texte zur deutschen Theaterreform* (Würzburg, 1988); Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (London, 2005); Peter Jelavich, *Munich and Theatrical Modernism: Politics, Playwriting and Performance* (Cambridge, MA, 1985).

61 Matthias Warstat, *Theatrale Gemeinschaften: Zur Festkultur der Arbeiterbewegung 1918–1933* (Tübingen, 2005).

62 TSUK NN/Th, manuscript, 'Thingplätze als Spielstätten', p. 32.

63 *Ibid.*, pp. 41–43.

Fritz Schaller put it in 1934, it was part of the 'künstlerischen Auseinandersetzung mit der heimatischen Natur': a practically untranslatable phrase containing key words in the emotive vocabulary of the German **Bildungsbürgertum** from the 1890s onwards.⁶⁴ — For the **Thing** proponents, the actual plays were only ever part of the **Erlebnis**—the emotional experience. At Heidelberg, the audiences in 1935 set out up for the steep climb up to the arena from mid-afternoon till evening. Getting there physically gave them time to arrive emotionally, too. Niessen's defiant claim that, no matter if a **Thing** repertoire should emerge or not, the key thing was to get the arenas built was not just bravado. It was born of the belief that in any open-air theatre seeking to transcend the moment, from ancient Greece onwards, the landscape and the sky above mattered most. — That was no isolated view. Witness the notoriously acerbic critic Herbert Ihering, one of the sharpest commentators on

the German stage in the twentieth century. He was breezily dismissive of the **Thing** play he had just seen at Heidelberg in the summer of 1935. It had been a mere 'attempt'—though not one, he felt, that had 'disproved' the venue.⁶⁵ In spite of the 'poetic inadequacy', the evening had been memorable: 'the unforgettable experience of 10,000 people [assembled] under a black, night sky' on a terraced hill top, with the clouds 'racing on' overhead. Pure aesthetics—and not a word, three years into the Third Reich, about the ostensible political aims of the **Thing** enterprise. — The sometime 'patron' of the **Thingspiel** had actually reached a similar view. In 1939, Goebbels drove in his official car to a deserted **Thingstätte**. It was just Goebbels and the arena. Afterwards, he recorded in the privacy of his diary that it was 'doch sehr schön und eindrucksvoll'—'in spite of everything, it was very beautiful and impressive'.⁶⁶ Dashed ideological hopes had given way to aesthetic appreciation.

64 TSUK NN/TH, Reichsbund für Freilichtspiele (ed.), **Die Thingstätte: Wege zu einem deutschen Kult**, special edition of the newspaper **Der Deutsche**, 4 July 1934.

65 TSUK NN/Th, unidentified press clipping, 22 July 1935: Herbert Ihering, 'Auf der Thingstätte des Heiligen Berges'.

66 Entry for 13 July 1939 in Fröhlich, **Die Tagebücher des Joseph Goebbels**.