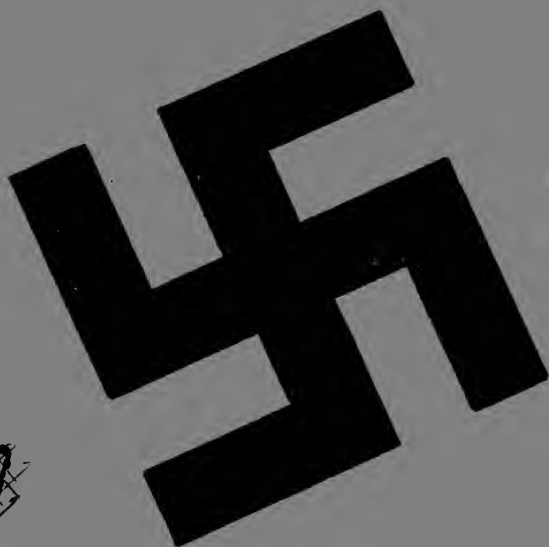

The SWASTIKA

A Study of the Nazi Claims of its Aryan Origin



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By W. NORMAN BROWN, Ph.D.
University of Pennsylvania

An Emerson Booklet

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William Roseman

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The SWASTIKA

ADOLPH HITLER and the Nazis use the Swastika as their emblem. They claim that it is a pure "Aryan" symbol, that it originated in Europe among the "Aryans," and that it is a special characteristic of the "Aryan" peoples as a whole and of the Germanic people in particular. All available evidence today indicates that these claims are unfounded. They hold, too, that the Swastika had a special usage in early Christianity; and this claim is equally baseless.

I

THE MEANING OF "ARYAN"

THE Nazis use the word "Aryan" in the sense which scientists give to the terms "Indo-European, Indo-Germanic." These designate a group of many peoples united by a common culture, of which the outstanding feature is relationship of language.

At some undetermined period, more than four thousand years ago, the original Indo-Europeans were a group of uncivilized tribes living within a comparatively small area, possessing a fairly homogeneous religion, employing more or less similar institutions, and speaking closely connected dialects. Where their early home was we cannot affirm with certainty. Some authorities have placed it in one or another section of Europe; others have argued for Asia; perhaps the weight of opinion today favors Europe. Wherever the original habitat, we know that by about the year 2000 B.C. many of the tribes were migrating towards various parts of Europe and Asia, there to clash with some of the great civilizations of antiquity, and so come into the purview of history. Within a few centuries they became prominent in world affairs, and from then on they have steadily increased in importance until at present they are the world's most powerful group of peoples and their languages its most widespread.

In ancient and mediaeval times the Indo-Europeans already covered an extensive area. At the southeastern extremity of their territory were the inhabi-

tants of central and northern India and those of Persia, who are jointly known as the "Indo-Iranians" and constitute a sub-group for which the name "Aryan" is reserved by scientists. Farther north and west were the Armenians; then came the Balto-Slavic peoples, whose descendants today are the Lithuanians and Letts, and the Russians, Poles, Serbs, Czechs, Croatians, Slovenes, and other Slavs. In Asia Minor were the Phrygians. Across the Hellespont and the Black Sea were the Scythians and Thracians. In southern Europe were the Greeks and Albanians, the Latins and other Italic tribes. The Celts were in western and northern Europe. Still farther north, between the Celts and the Balto-Slavic peoples, were the many Germanic tribes, including the so-called "Anglo-Saxons." There were also several lesser Indo-European peoples scattered over Europe and Asia. Finally, the Hittites of the old Testament have been found in recent decades to possess most interesting Indo-European affinities. Some of these many peoples have since lost their identity, but the total number of Indo-Europeans has constantly in-

creased and the range of their holdings has been extended.

In modern times the Indo-Europeans have spread over all the Americas and large sections of Africa, have taken the continent of Australia and many islands of the Pacific, and have even visited and laid claim to the two poles.

The term "Indo-European," or in the Nazi application "Aryan," has its fullest meaning when applied to culture. In respect to physical stock it affirms practically nothing. There still exist popular vestiges of a belief that the original Indo-Europeans were Nordics, a physical type which is tall, long-headed, fair-haired, and blue-eyed; but that belief is regarded by anthropologists and philologists alike as only a myth. Nowhere throughout the entire Indo-European world do we find evidence that at any time was there a single pure physical type which could constitute an Indo-European race. Everywhere there is now, and has always been, race mixture. Even in Scandinavia, the stronghold today of the Nordics, all evidence, including that of pre-historic archaeology, vouches for the presence of other physi-

cal types side by side with the Nordics: small-framed, dark-eyed "Mediterraneans"; stocky, round-headed "Alpines"; and cross-breeds of the three.

Yet even culturally the expression Indo-European, or "Aryan," does not indicate absolute uniformity. There were at all known times variations in religion, art, language, social organization, political institutions, and other cultural phenomena among the different peoples, and as time has passed, the variations and divergences have increased. In many cases there has been actual displacement of old institutions by new ones imported from a non-Indo-European environment. The old Indo-European religion has now passed away, and the Indo-Europeans of Europe and America have chiefly adopted Christianity, a faith that had its origin in a totally separate cultural group, the Semites. Other Indo-Europeans, as in India, adhere to religions that at most are only partly Aryan in character. The Indo-European religious elements that were strong among the Hindus, who composed the hymns of the Rig Veda, have now largely been supplanted by features that were either found in India by the Aryan invaders and adopted

by them, or else were developed among the Aryans after their arrival. Few original religious Indo-Europeanisms remain in India or elsewhere; and, where they exist, they are embedded fossil-like in extraneous material, as, for example, our week-day names Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, which recall the now unhonored gods of our Teutonic ancestors.

Of the many aspects of primitive Indo-European culture, language has remained the most constant; yet it, too, has been markedly altered as the Indo-Europeans have advanced into new territories and their speech has clashed with the tongues they met. Anyone raised as a child to speak both English and Hindi or both English and Russian, is likely to be incredulous when told that the two are linguistic cousins. Even such comparatively close relatives as English and German, or the still closer French and Italian, are mutually unintelligible. Yet we can demonstrate the connection between these languages, and on the basis of these and like connections we can reconstruct a vast amount of information about the pre-historic Indo-Europeans. Language gives a

sub-surface skeletal similarity for Indo-European culture throughout the world, which may vary profoundly in other, more obvious and external, qualities, and language, therefore, is the criterion by which we characterize a people or a person as Indo-European.

This fact is strikingly illustrated in the United States. Our country and we are Indo-European. Yet we are a mixture of most diverse racial and cultural elements. We are white-skinned, brown-skinned, yellow-skinned, black-skinned. English is now the mother tongue, not only of some whose ancestors several generations back were speaking English, German, French, Italian, Russian and other Indo-European languages, but also of some whose ancestors spoke negro dialects in Africa, Mongolian dialects in Asia, American Indian dialects in this continent. Yet the bond of common culture, above all common native language, makes us now all Indo-Europeans. Analogous conditions prevail today, and always have prevailed, throughout the Indo-European world.

In a narrower way the same sort of situation exists inside of nationalities. Where common language does not exist, nationality is ever in peril from inner dissension, as in the old Austrian Empire, or in Belgium, or in Canada. For, of the many elements that may contribute to the national consciousness, that of common language is the most important. The English, for example, are the result of crossing between numerous tribes, of which the most prominent were Celtic and Germanic; and English civilization derives from the Celtic, the Danish, the Anglo-Saxon, the Norman-French, the Roman, the Greek, and through these last from the entire western Asiatic and Egyptian tradition. In Germany today the German language is spoken not merely by those whose forbears were Germans, but also by some whose ancestors were Czechs, or Celts, or Prussians (a people who in mediaeval times belonged to the Baltic group, like the present Lithuanians). A "pure" German people or a "pure" English people does not exist, unless we recognize native language as constituting the criterion of national purity. From a scientific point of view, all those in England

and Germany who speak English or German as their mother tongue are by that fact English or German. Similarly, those who speak any Indo-European language as their native tongue are Indo-Europeans. Any effort to differentiate by religion or previous ancestral affinity is unscientific.

II

SOME GROUPS OF PEOPLE THE INDO-EUROPEANS
HAVE ENCOUNTERED

CONTRASTED with the Indo-Europeans are other groups of peoples, such as the Ural-Altaic, including the Mongolic, the Finnish, the Magyar (Hungarian), the Turkish, and others; or the Hamitic, in northern Africa; or the Semitic in south-western Asia. With some of these and others not so well-known to Americans, the Indo-Europeans have had important contact as they have wandered over the earth.

There is the Dravidian group, which was in India before the Aryans arrived there from the northwest

about 1500 B.C. or later, and appear already to have had a civilization. The Aryans have ever since been driving the Dravidians before them as they have advanced to the east and the south until today the latter are almost confined to the lower part of the peninsula.

Another group consists of the Semites, who occupied Arabia and Phoenicia and at least part of Mesopotamia when the Indo-Europeans came into Asia Minor and Persia. The Semites, through the Babylonians and Assyrians, gave Persia a large part of its civilization; and through the Jews and Arabs, gave the world the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Mohammedanism.

Another group, concerning which archaeology almost daily gives us new knowledge, is one which by 3000 B.C. extended across the Iranian plateau from Baluchistan in the east to the borders of the Mesopotamian region and Asia Minor on the west, and from the Caucasus and the Caspian in the north to the Persian Gulf in the south. This region was later taken over by the Persians, and appears to have been

along the route by which the Aryans got to India. We still know relatively little about this culture, but there is considerable evidence to indicate its existence and the name "Japhetic" has been applied to it—the same term was once proposed for the "Indo-European," but never won acceptance.

To the west of the Japhetic culture was another, still not well known to us, which archaeologists designate as "Anatolian."

Another important culture for the Indo-Europeans lay yet farther to the west, and is called the "Aegean." It was strong at Hissarlik, the site of ancient Troy, during the third and second millennia B.C.; in the eastern part of Asia Minor; in Crete, Cyprus, and the Aegean islands; and on the Grecian mainland; and its civilization was the precursor of the classical Greek.

What the relations were between Dravidian, Japhetic, Anatolian and Aegean during the fourth and third millennia B.C. we are only now beginning to learn. It is probable that all these cultures, which radiated from the Highland Zone, were ultimately

related; about the ethnic connections of their originators little is, as yet, known.

One of the most impressive results when cultures clash is the comparative ease with which they exchange minor, and sometimes major, elements. A most instructive illustration lies in the thoroughness with which the Indo-Europeans of Europe now adhere to the Semitic faith Christianity. Wherever the Indo-Europeans, as barbarians, conquered a civilized people, they were always quick to learn from the conquered. Rome civilized the Teutons who ravaged her lands and burned her city. The Persians built upon the great civilizations that had preceded them; so did the Aryans in India; so, too, did the Greeks. The Indo-Europeans have had a genius for political conquest and the assimilation, development, and propagation of more advanced cultures they have met. In their pristine state they were strong of body and mind, but uneducated. Those whom they vanquished gave them an education which they utilized to build their present intellectual, social, industrial, and political structures.

III

EARLY HISTORY OF THE SWASTIKA

THE Swastika is one of the many minor borrowings which the Indo-Europeans have made from their neighbors.

The origin of this, as of many other widespread symbols, is lost in the obscurity of pre-history. We do not know when it came into being, precisely where it came into being, or why it came into being. We know that in different localities and at different times it has had varying meaning. It has been considered an emblem of the sun, of female fertility, of the macrocosm in the form of a man. Today in Germany it is a symbol of the Aryan struggle toward the light. But the oldest of the known interpretations may, like the youngest, be only a rationalization of an auspicious character which the symbol had acquired for some reason long since forgotten.

The one interpretive fact about the Swastika that seems constant is that it signifies good luck. The very name Swastika is a Sanskrit word meaning

“object of well-being,” and although the first recorded instance of this word is fully two thousand years later than the earliest known Indian examples of the symbol, the meaning has probably always been applicable.

Today, the emblem has many other names, such as gammadion, fylfot, Hakenkreuz, and others, but Swastika is the commonest. It has also many variations and elaborations in appearance, but the simplest form is that of a right-angled cross with four equal arms, each arm with an extension at a right angle, all four extensions pointing in the same circular direction, that is, all moving to the right (clockwise) or to the left (counter-clockwise).

In some localities the righthand motion is considered auspicious and the lefthand inauspicious but in general, this distinction is not observed, and both motions are auspicious.

Although there are gaps in our knowledge of the Swastika, especially at the beginning of its history, we have an enormous number of examples from all parts of the world. Many of these have come from

archaeological excavation in very recent years, and with their aid we are now able to outline a rough and provisional history of the symbol's origin and early migration, as has not been possible before.

The outstanding fact about the Swastika in antiquity is that its earliest known habitat is a wide territory beginning at the valley of the river Indus in India and extending westward across Persia and Asia Minor to Hissarlik (ancient Troy) on the shore of the Hellespont.

In the Indus Valley

For combined age, frequency, and perfect execution, the examples from the Indus Valley are the most interesting.

In 1924 the Archaeological Survey of India announced the first results of excavations it had been conducting in that valley at two sites named Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, and in 1931 it described the work to date in three bulky and compendious volumes with copious and excellent illustrations. Archaeology has made many dramatic discoveries, and the discovery of the Indus Valley civilization was

among its most dramatic. Until that time we had no material remains from India to indicate a civilization earlier than the first millennium B.C. Now, with a relatively few turns of the spade, we got evidence that highly organized cities had existed in western India fully two thousand years earlier. These two cities were large and well laid out; the houses were elaborately built of brick with several storeys and many rooms. A characteristic feature was the careful provision for drainage, both of houses and of streets. Writing was in existence, but as yet we have not succeeded in reading it. There have been found remains of pottery, stone, and metal. We can draw inferences about the religion. Art was well developed, especially as illustrated on the many seals, which exhibit both animal and linear geometrical designs.

This civilization was not limited to those two sites; in the Indus valley there are other mounds awaiting excavation. Many problems of great interest have arisen from the Mohenjo Daro and Harappa discoveries, and much important knowledge has come from them. Chief of all is the fact that

India's civilization can be pushed back to a period that approaches the known antiquity of Mesopotamia and Egypt. Second to this is the fact that this newly found culture shows double similarities, on the one hand, to the later historic civilization of India from the first millennium B.C. on, and on the other hand, to ancient and still partly buried civilizations west of it in Baluchistan, Persia, Mesopotamia, and even Egypt.

Unfortunately, we do not know just what people developed this great culture. It did not rise among the Aryans, for it was in existence fifteen hundred years before the Aryans invaded India. A guess is that it belonged to the Dravidians, the people whom the Aryans pushed before them as they advanced. If we could read the numerous inscribed seals, we should probably be able to settle that question.

Among the finds at Mohenjo Daro and Harappa there were many seals with splendid representations of the Swastika. In the volumes published by the Archaeological Survey of India in 1931 fifteen of these are reproduced, and this number shows that the design was by no means sporadic, but rather was

exceedingly common. India, during her historic period, has been the Swastika's home par excellence; and it has long been known that the symbol had there, for over two thousand years, a frequency and variety of usage not paralleled elsewhere. Now we see that the Swastika was also thoroughly well established in India's more ancient antiquity. It appears among her first civilized remains, as early as 2500 B.C., possibly 3000 B.C., and appears in forms perfectly developed, in contrast with slightly older but more primitive and less perfect forms found farther westward. It existed in India before the arrival of the Aryans, who gave it the Sanskrit name Swastika. Like other symbols which the Aryans of India used on coins and stone sculpture, it came to them from non-Aryan predecessors. It was a single minutia of the spoils the victors had taken from those they had vanquished.

In the "Japhetic" Region

In a number of localities west of India many other early examples of the Swastika have been found. Recent cursory explorations in Baluchistan have re-

vealed an extensive and ancient civilization, as old as that of the Indus Valley, yet like it unknown a decade ago, and among the few remains brought back from the preliminary reconnaissance of its sites are seals bearing the Swastika. Still farther to the west, in the general "Japhetic" region, which we mentioned above, more seals have been found showing several varieties of the Swastika, including the most primitive yet identified. These, too, are from a time around 3000 B.C. And in early painted pottery of Susa, Persia, in that same region and of that same period, there have been found some excellent, beautifully executed examples.

In this same Japhetic region, there also appears at this time the triskelion. This consists of three bent radii, or three bent legs, radiating from a common centre, a device known to us from the Greeks and other peoples of Europe, and sometimes regarded as a variant of the Swastika.

These various examples of the Swastika (and the triskelion) date from before the Indo-European arrival into that region, which we believe was after 2000 B.C.

In the Aegean Culture

The next chronological stratum for the Swastika appears to be Hissarlik, the site of Homer's Troy and of many older cities that had risen and perished before it. There, in the "second city," known also as the "burnt city," dated around 2000 B.C., it has been found frequently on terra cotta. Ancient Hissarlik was a part of the "Aegean" civilization; and throughout the bronze period of that civilization, down to around 1100 B.C., the Swastika appears on pottery ornamented with geometrical designs and on other objects. At Hissarlik or elsewhere in Asia Minor the Indo-Europeans may for the first time have met the Swastika. It was not long after 2000 B.C. that the Hittites were establishing their empire nearby, and it is possible that other Indo-European elements were then sifting into the population of that region.

Entry Into Europe

Hissarlik may reasonably be considered the point from which the Swastika spread to Europe. By way of the Aegean it went to Greece, and in post-

Mycenean times, that is, after the Grecian phase of the Aegean civilization had collapsed, it appears upon vases of Cyprus, Rhodes, and Athens from the seventh century B.C. It is depicted on a funeral car, and on the figure of the goddess Artemis and other Asiatic deities. It also reached northern Italy, where it has been found on certain urns often regarded as funerary.

The great bronze industry of the Aegean, and especially of Hissarlik, sent its wares and its technique along the trade routes into Europe. When, late in the bronze period, ornamented objects appear in the lower Danube region, the Swastika is among the designs. The Celts, who were proficient workers in bronze and gold, used it.

Finally the Germans acquired it, and used it abundantly. They were employing it for ornament at the end of the bronze period, and after their contact with the Romans they decorated elaborate plaques with it. In at least one instance, the Swastika and other symbols appear with a male figure, who is possibly a god, but certainly not the Christian

God. Both the Gallic and the Germanic peoples employed it, and during the Gallico-Roman period in Aquitania and Britain, it is found on altars, where it is associated with the thunderbolt, a fact which recalls the association the Swastika is said to have in Scandinavia with the god Thor.

*Some Ancient Civilizations Ignorant
of the Swastika*

One of the most interesting features of the history of the Swastika is its comparative absence in certain sections of the civilized world of antiquity. Egypt seems to have been without it until very late, when Greece had arisen. Ancient Assyria and Palestine, as far as I know, were also without it.

Although by 2000 B.C. it extended from the Indus across to the Hellespont, it passed to the north of the great Semitic territory and missed that people. The Jews did not use it. Early Christianity seems not to have known it. The Christians used the Swastika only after their religion was well established in Europe.

Further Diffusion of the Swastika

The later history of the symbol is voluminous. Almost forty years ago Mr. Thomas Wilson, of the United States National Museum, wrote and published (1896) a 250-page treatment of it on the basis of the material then available. Since then much more material has been discovered, including part of that which I have used above. A treatment today as thorough as that of Mr. Wilson's for its time could well make a book half as long again as his.

When Buddhism spread from India, it popularized the symbol in Central Asia, Tibet, China, Japan, and other regions. As the cultures of Greece, Rome, and Byzantium, and then later of Arabia, were taken abroad by various conquerors, the Swastika became common in northern and other parts of Africa.

A curious problem lies in the presence of the Swastika in America before the time of Columbus. It is frequent in northern, central, and southern America, and has many variant forms. It is possible that it may have originated on this continent independently of Europe and Asia; on the other hand,

it may have migrated here. Early contacts between Asia and America are now accepted, but their nature and extent are uncertain.

IV

CONCLUSIONS

OUR available evidence permits us to make certain more or less definite generalizations about the Swastika. Its early centre of gravity appears to have been the Iranian plateau, but the exact place of origin may have been anywhere between the Indus on the east and hithermost Persia or upper Irak on the west. It was spread over that entire region by 3000 B.C. It appears next in the Aegean culture, particularly at Hissarlik, from about 2000 B.C. on; and from there it went on the one hand to Greece, and on the other to the lower Danube. From these two regions it spread throughout the rest of Europe.

It was not invented by the Indo-Europeans. The peoples among whom it first appeared were the so-called "Japhetic" and Indus Valley peoples. What-

ever these various peoples were, they were not Indo-Europeans; and the Indo-Europeans, as far as our evidence indicates, did not know the Swastika until a thousand years after the time of its earliest preserved specimens. The Indo-Europeans may have met it in Asia Minor very early in the second millennium B.C., or in upper Irak or in Persia shortly afterwards, and again in India shortly after that. The Germans do not seem to have had the symbol until the first millennium B.C.

It has had a very high position in the cult of certain Indian religions, and possibly was important in certain western Asiatic religions. But it has held no great value in Christian symbolism, where its occurrence is only incidental and relatively late, not primary.

It is clearly neither a peculiarly Aryan nor a peculiarly Christian emblem; where these groups have it, they have borrowed it from older religions or more early civilized peoples.

The present Nazi claims are untenable. Just as their theory of Aryan racial purity is fanciful, so, too,

their use of the Swastika as an Aryo-Christian symbol, with aspects of anti-Judaism, anti-pacifism, and anti-Marxism, is entirely arbitrary. The term "Aryan" or "Indo-European" signifies nothing of race integrity and only a relative degree of cultural uniformity, while the Swastika is far too ancient and general a human property to bear their limited construction.

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