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Dance Under the Swastika: Rudolf von Laban's Influence on Nazi Power

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Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Abstract

This investigation of esteemed dance artist Rudolf von Laban's early career examines his involvement with the Nazi regime while working as the director of the German Dance Theater (*Deutschen Tanzbuhne*). During this time, he actively ensured the upholding of Aryan and National Socialist ideals in dance performance and training, and used his own ensemble-based choreography to promote the creation of community under the swastika. Many dance scholars, focused on the numerous contributions Laban made to the development of modern dance, tend to consider his actions between 1930-1937 to have been coerced or executed out of fear for his life. However, based on official Nazi documentation and accounts and timelines of Laban's actions and personally written beliefs, the author suggests that Laban's alignment with the Third Reich was intentional and not the result of coercion or manipulation.

Keywords

Dance, Rudolf von Laban, German Dance Theater

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The history of Germany under the swastika is a well-researched topic. Historians dedicate their entire careers to the political and human consequences of Adolf Hitler's destructive reign; the topic is discussed at length in schools. However, a little-known aspect of the Nazis' regime is that of German expressionist dance (*Ausdrucksanz*), a form of dance that shifted the focus of performance from physicality to the expression of emotion, laying the foundation for what became known as modern dance. Its history is inextricably tied to that of the Third Reich due largely to the efforts of Hungarian-born choreographer Rudolf von Laban, the leader of modern dance in Germany between 1934 and 1937. His career as a dance artist was long and prestigious, and his post-Nazi regime work is best known for its influence on the development of modern dance.

Yet information on Laban's early career working under the employ of the Nazi party is sparse and shrouded with mystery – exact details regarding how he was involved in political affairs and how his skills were used to the advantage of the regime are hard to come by. Furthermore, many historians who have researched Laban's career either brush by the fact that he worked for the Nazis or portray him as having been forced to do so. Interpretations about Laban's participation in Nazism vary widely and, though many consider Laban to be a victim of coercion, a less popular but perhaps more feasible explanation is that Laban voluntarily chose to align himself with the Third Reich.

No one can say for certain what was going through Laban's mind as he aligned his art with a corrupt government, but

because of his countless positive contributions to modern dance, many prefer to consider his artistic integrity to be unmarred and interpret his actions between 1934-1937 as acts of desperation and survival in the face of coercion by the National Socialist government. There is much evidence to the contrary. Many of his writings show compatibility between Nazi ideals and his own, and his early and eager adoption of Nazi ideals is perturbing. It also calls into question whether artists have a responsibility not to promote destructive ideals through their art. What were the ethical implications of Laban aligning his art with a morally corrupt regime? He saw the power of dance and group choreography to unify the people under the swastika and showed intolerance of those with oppositional views well before the National Socialists took power.

Previous scholarship on Laban's work for the Nazis is contradictory. In *Rudolf Laban: The Dancer of the Crystal*,¹ Evelyn Doerr offers an overview of Laban's career and the limited ideology encouraged in the arts under National Socialism, but generally examines the two separately rather than drawing direct connections. A second interpretation is Lilian Karina and Marion Kant's *Hitler's Dancers: German Modern Dance and the Third Reich*,² which takes a stronger stance on the impact that Laban's career had on the Nazi regime, interpreting his letters and other writings as indications that he fell in with the regime naturally, but not enthusiastically, as it came into power, and later showing a desire to remain a part of it when his position with the government was threatened. In a third interpretation of Laban's early career, Carole Pew implies in

¹Doerr, Evelyn, *Rudolf Laban: The Dancer of the Crystal*, (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2008).

²Karina, Lilian and Marion Kant, *Hitler's Dancers: German Modern Dance and the Third Reich*, (New York, NY: Bherghan Books, 2003).

*From Weimar Movement Choir to Nazi Community Dance: The Rise and Fall of Rudolf Laban's Festkultur*³ that Laban chose to affiliate himself with the Third Reich, but while he attempted to further the notion of the Aryans as a supreme race of people, he also maintained an ideological distance from Nazi dogma. The argument which I propose combines several existing theories, stating that Laban joined the Nazis eagerly and left begrudgingly, and that he aligned himself with and promoted both Aryan supremacy and Nazi ideals through his work with the Third Reich.

September 1, 1930, marks the beginning of Laban's path to involvement with the Nazis. On this day, he became the director of the Berlin State Opera Ballet.⁴ Though Hitler had yet to take over Germany, the political climate was already in flux as the National Socialists began threatening Prussian power. The street leading to the Reichstag, on which the Opera Ballet studios were located, served as the site of all major political demonstrations, voluntary or otherwise.⁵ Thus, Laban and his dancers had a constant view of all political changes and their effects on the people, a significant detail that would have had a profound impact on Laban's art and on his personal political leanings.

Despite the uncertain political climate and the chaos occurring just outside the doors of the studios, Laban's early works found favor with the public. His *Polovtsian Dances* premiered on October 11, 1930, was

successful with both audiences and critics, as was *Margarete* a short time later.⁶ Oskar Bie, a critic for the *Berlin Borsen Courier*, observed that Laban's strengths lay in ensemble choreography involving large groups.⁷ In light of Laban's later decision to work under the Nazi government, this observation was a notable one, a foreshadowing of what was to come in Laban's work creating ideologically influential group choreography under the employ of the Third Reich. Laban's talent for ensemble choreography and his appeal to the public would have been of great interest to the Nazis, whose desire was to reach, control, and appear to positively influence a large population of people. It is interesting that Bie noted Laban's unique abilities three years prior to his actual association with the Third Reich.

Laban's early movement choir choreography was also thematically well-positioned to become the Nazi party's preferred method of mass communication. He saw movement choirs as a way of bringing people together *en masse* to celebrate the mystic and find a "higher reality" together.⁸ He initially avoided affiliating his work with any specific ideology, preferring to use it as a "way of bringing ritual-symbolic festivals back into everyday life" and promoting a sense of community.⁹ However, he simultaneously endorsed choric dance as a "new folk dance movement of the white race",¹⁰ indicating an early alignment with one of the Nazi party's defining ideals. This alignment, in combination with Laban's goal of using choric dance to bring communities together to reach a "higher reality," was consistent with the Nazis' goal of bringing German

³Pew, Carole. "From Weimar Movement Choir to Nazi Community Dance: The Rise and Fall of Rudolf Laban's *Festkultur*." *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 17, no. 2 (1999): 73-96. Accessed May 19, 2016. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1290839?loggedin=true&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

⁴See note 2, 14.

⁵Preston-Dunlop, Valerie, *Rudolf Laban: An Extraordinary Life*, (London: Dance Books Ltd, 1998), 160.

⁶See note 1, 149.

⁷See note 5, 160.

⁸See note 3, 78.

⁹See note 3, 77.

¹⁰See note 3, 78.

citizens together as a nation under the swastika, and his initial avoidance of affiliating himself with a specific set of ideals left his movement choirs open for Nazi dogma to enter.

As Laban entered his second season with the ballet, the political climate began shifting dramatically as Nationalist ideals became more and more radical. German Nationalist inclinations had been present as early as the 1920s, manifesting as a resurgence of national pride after the perceived unfairness of the Treaty of Versailles following World War I.¹¹ The economy, people, and culture of Germany were downtrodden and in need of revitalization, and it was in this vulnerable state that Hitler was able to rally the people together as a National Socialist nation. Laban's position on Nationalism is unclear, but his great amount of pride in expressionist dance as a purely German art form suggests that he would have held similarly Nationalist views regarding other aspects of German culture. Laban was still director of the Berlin State Opera Ballet in the middle of 1933, when Hitler took power over the country.

When the Nazis overtook political control of Germany, they also overtook artistic control within the country. They decided that "all artistic concepts that deviated from those of the classical canon were no longer [considered] the intentional articulations of discriminating individuals but rather as mere 'expressions of decline,' outbursts of racially inferior beings and 'spiritually foreign bodies' within the German people."¹² Art was required to promote National Socialist ideals and agendas, particularly that of Aryans as a supreme race of people. Styles such as Dadaism, cubism, and others were deemed "degenerate art" and were no longer

tolerated.¹³ On September 22, 1933, the Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda was formed under the direction of Joseph Goebbels, who was given control of all artistic pursuits throughout the country, including all nationally operated artistic institutions such as the Berlin State Opera Ballet, effectively making Laban an employee of the Third Reich.

Though some artists and choreographers still showed opposition against the Nazis in these early days of Hitler's reign, Laban believed strongly in Nationalism and "fell into line"¹⁴ with the Nazis when they took power. He stated at this time that "dance, when it is approached correctly, succeeds in awakening not only individual decency and a capacity for enthusiasm, but can also promote the larger values of national camaraderie."¹⁵ This idea was, indeed, later manifested in Laban's work, which promoted National Socialist ideals and manipulated people into enthusiasm for those ideals, including that of unity as a nation. He saw modern dance as a racially German art and strove to keep it that way at high cost. On July 7, 1933, unprompted by the Ministry of Propaganda, he showed identification with Aryan ideals by dismissing all non-Aryan children from the school at the Opera Ballet.¹⁶ The dismissals occurred prior to widespread, enforced discrimination against those of non-Aryan origin, an indication of Laban's willingness to accept Nazi ideals without complaint.

The rest of Laban's time as director of the Opera Ballet passed under the watchful eye of the Ministry of Propaganda, and when his contract expired on August 31, 1934, the Nazis offered him the position as the director of *Deutschen Tanzbuhne*, or

¹¹See note 1, 153.

¹²See note 1, 153.

¹³See note 1, 153.

¹⁴See note 1, 159.

¹⁵See note 1, 159.

¹⁶See note 2, 16.

German Dance Theater, a newly established institution directly affiliated with the Ministry.¹⁷ Shortly thereafter, Laban rose to become the “responsible man for the entire creative programming for German dance in general.”¹⁸ His role was to oversee all dance activities in Germany and inspire the next generation of dancers to create work in the tradition of National Socialism. He advocated for obedience to Hitler and vocalized anti-democratic views at every opportunity.¹⁹ Dance throughout Germany became centralized under Laban’s direction, with dancers and choreographers everywhere accepting the exclusion of “non-Aryans” without argument. They

...accepted, indeed welcomed, censorship and political supervision of their own art. They welcomed the fact that it was being wielded by one of their own... They rejoiced in the grand German world vision and all its smaller consequences. They accepted Nazism before the Nazi authorities had decided what that meant. German dance chose the swastika before the state authorities had thought to raise it over their heads.²⁰

This disturbing revelation would not have been possible without Laban’s influence. If he, as the leader of German expressionist dance, hadn’t accepted Nazi ideals so wholeheartedly and so early on, German expressionist dance may not have found itself entangled in the web of Nazism, promoting National Socialist ideals. Had Laban not aligned himself and his art form with the National Socialist regime, expressionist dance would have struggled

through the war, as no one was allowed to practice art unapproved the Ministry of Propaganda. Yet Laban’s apparently complete lack of resistance is troubling. Was it right to associate *Ausdruckstanz* with the Nazis in order for it to survive the war more or less intact? The question is unanswerable, but the situation does indicate a significant lack of artistic integrity on Laban’s part.

Laban’s biggest and most important task was to put together the German Dance Festival as a “display of achievement” among German artists.²¹ The political goal of the festival was to display the success that artists were attaining under the new regime as a symbol of the greatness that Germany could attain under Hitler’s power. The festival occurred from December 9-16th, 1934, and featured performances by exclusively German dance groups including those of expressionist dance pioneers Mary Wigman and Dorothee Guenther. Laban himself staged his version of *Dornroschen*, or *The Sleeping Beauty*.²² The festival proved to be a success – Goebbels was pleased by its implementation and by the ideals it represented, and another dance festival was commissioned.

Following the success of the German Dance Festival, Laban turned his focus to the education aspect of his position, cultivating students in the National Socialist tradition. He conducted a series of “master workshops”,²³ with the goal of working toward the formation of a national dance school. The idea came to fruition in 1935, when the Master Academy for Dance was opened.²⁴ The Master Academy provided centralized, National Socialist-focused training for German dancers throughout the country, ensuring standardization of dance training. By standardizing dance training,

¹⁷See note 1, 160.

¹⁸See note 2, 17.

¹⁹See note 2, 17.

²⁰See note 2, 110.

²¹See note 1, 160.

²²See note 1, 160.

²³See note 1, 163.

²⁴See note 1, 163.

the Nazis were able to standardize the dancers themselves – no student trained at the Academy stood out from the others, and more importantly, nobody went against the Nazi ideologies because they had been trained with them. Later in 1935, Academy training became compulsory for all German dancers when the Ministry of Propaganda mandated that dancers must obtain certification from the national school in order to be allowed to teach, choreograph, or perform.²⁵ Laban used the school to further align dance with National Socialist values, prompting all German dancers to manifest National Socialist ideals in their work. This initiative gained him more favor with Goebbels, who soon offered him the biggest break in his career thus far and catapulting his choreography onto the international stage.

Hitler was initially resistant to the idea of hosting the 1936 Olympic Games, preferring to maintain a degree of secrecy regarding the political operations of the country. However, he came to see that hosting the Olympics could be an opportunity to show the world how great and powerful Germany had become under the direction of National Socialism.²⁶ To that end, he personally oversaw all preparations for the big event, including the construction of arenas and other structures in order to ensure that they would be as grand as possible. Ceremonial displays were to include the *Ausdrucksanz* in which the nation took much pride in as a racially German art. *Ausdrucksanz*, among other arts, was thus used as an instrument of international relations in Hitler's hands, dramatically conveying to the rest of the world that the Nazis had transformed Germany into a magnificent nation and brought the people together into a decidedly unified population. In essence, Hitler wanted

to use the arts, and the German-born *Ausdrucksanz* in particular, as propaganda. *Ausdrucksanz* was in a unique position to be able to act as National Socialist propaganda, having been so extensively affiliated with the Nazi government due to Laban's efforts through the German Dance Festival and the Master Academy for Dance. Goebbels assigned Laban the tasks of choreographing a performance to be presented on the Opening Night of the Games and hosting an international dance competition, though he had been instructed to ensure that top honors went to a German dance group.²⁷

Laban set to work on his assignment, *Vom Tauwind und der Neuen Freude (Of the Spring Wind and the New Joy or Of the Warm Wind and the New Joy)*,²⁸ in January of 1936. It was to be a grand affair, with twenty-two movement choirs throughout Germany rehearsing the choreography, each of which was devoted to Laban and his methods.²⁹ The theme of the piece was one of renewal, symbolic of the thawing winds of spring prevailing over cold winter winds, accompanied by a resurgence of hope and joy. Those involved in the production were thrilled to have the opportunity to work with Laban, the master of German dance himself, and be a part of such a large-scale and important project, a testament to the charisma and allure of Laban's personality.

Vom Tauwind und der Neuen Freude was first revealed in a dress rehearsal on June 20, 1936.³⁰ The dancers performed for a full house composed of both high-ranking Nazi bureaucrats who had been invited in an official capacity and Berlin residents, for whom attendance had been compulsory. Despite the palpable excitement and anticipation of Laban's latest work, Hitler and Goebbels were dissatisfied with the

²⁵See note 1, 163.

²⁶See note 5, 189.

²⁷See note 5, 189.

²⁸See note 2, 59.

²⁹See note 5, 193.

³⁰See note 5, 196.

performance they had commissioned. Goebbels described the piece as "...freely based on Nietzsche, a bad, contrived and affected piece. It is so intellectual. I do not like it. That is because it is dressed up in our clothes and had nothing whatever to do with us."³¹

His displeasure was understandable given that Hitler did everything he could to prevent people from considering varying ways of thinking, which might lead to opposition that could endanger the power that he maintained partially by indoctrinating the population with Nazi ideals. As such, the free thought and intellectualism that Hitler and Goebbels saw in *Vom Tauwind und der Neuen Freude* had the potential to pose a grave threat to the Nazis – they couldn't have Laban encouraging their people to think independently or know the work of thinkers like Nietzsche, whose controversial philosophical ideas regarding the human condition of freedom were dangerous to the precarious control of the Nazi regime. The piece was considered "intellectual" because there was no particular story, allowing audience members to interpret it individually.³² In Nazi culture, being "intellectual" was a negative label, a mark of opposition that followed Laban and was used against him throughout the rest of his career with the Ministry of Propaganda.³³

Additionally, the choreography in *Vom Tauwind und der Neuen Freude* was focused on the inner experience of the dancers as much as it was aimed at an outward manifestation of ideas intended for the audience. This ambiguity in the extent to which the piece was intended for the audience, in addition to its lack of ideological clarity, created a "barrier to shared meaning in a culture where a shared

communal experience was paramount."³⁴ Anything less than a "clear ideological message" could be destructive for the regime, posing a threat to the communal thinking it fostered.³⁵ Following the disastrous dress rehearsal, the piece was forbidden – the first "explicit prohibition of Labanism"³⁶ since Laban had taken the post directing the German Dance Theater.

Some interpret the failure of the piece to be evidence that Laban wasn't supportive of the Nazis after all. However, contrary to the common belief that he was fired from the Ministry of Propaganda when his piece failed to satiate Hitler and Goebbels at the dress rehearsal, he remained under the employ of the Third Reich until his contract expired the following year, in 1937, and he maintained many of his previous duties.³⁷ He fell ill shortly after the debacle, but went so far as to write letters asking for extended medical leave rather than have to leave his position with the Ministry.³⁸ Nonetheless, the Opening Ceremony dress rehearsal marked the beginning of Rudolf Laban's slow descent from his high position within the Nazi government.

Shortly after the calamitous rehearsal of *Vom Tauwind und der Neuen Freude*, Goebbels initiated an investigation into Laban's personal and political history.³⁹ Laban was able to prove his Aryan ancestry with ease, at which point the Gestapo raised the possibility of his involvement in freemasonry, an organization condemned by the Nazis, prior to the rise of the Nazi regime. They questioned him on the issue, and he voluntarily confirmed that he had been a freemason with the rank of Grand

³¹See note 5, 196.

³²See note 3, 82.

³³See note 1, 171.

³⁴See note 3, 79.

³⁵See note 3, 82.

³⁶See note 2, 59.

³⁷See note 2, 60.

³⁸See note 2, 18.

³⁹See note 5, 198.

Master between 1917 and 1918.⁴⁰ He also confirmed that he was not an official member of the National Socialist Party, which had not previously been an issue when he worked for the Ministry of Propaganda but was now being used against him. National Socialist law declared that freemasons who had resigned membership before the Nazis took power of Germany and had then become members of the Nazi Party would not be penalized for their former affiliations; however, those who had not joined the Nazi Party would be, even if they had resigned freemason membership well before the Nazi takeover, as Laban had.⁴¹ This fact had been overlooked during Laban's time of employment with the Third Reich, when he had been valuable to the Nazi cause. Yet now that he had displeased Goebbels and Hitler, his past and present affiliations were brought back to haunt him, putting his life in danger.

In addition to this persecution, later in 1936, accusations began surfacing that questioned his loyalty to the Third Reich. Laban was said to have had an "unreliable attitude toward National Socialism" and to have been "irresponsible in the administration of state funds."⁴² This last allegation is doubtful – Laban was notoriously incapable of money management, and the accusation of using state funds negligently could be manipulative slander based on an exaggeration of incompetent budgetary record keeping. Allegations of ambivalence regarding National Socialism were also slanderous, as Laban had shown no such ambiguity prior to the performance of *Vom Tauwind und der Neuen Freude*, nor did he afterward. However, the Nazis were able to manipulate these circumstances to portray Laban as a villain and a threat to National

Socialism, using them as an excuse to oust him because of his unsatisfactory and politically dangerous performance. Political accusations were not, however, Laban's only concern, as allegations of homosexuality surfaced,⁴³ which would also have presented a threat to his life. His position and his life became more and more precariously balanced as the accusations piled up, and his fear for his life grew over the year after the dress rehearsal.

On March 31, 1937, Laban reached an agreement with the Ministry of Propaganda that "Laban resigns 1.11.36 as leader of the Meisterwerkstätten für Tanz [Master Workshops for Dance] and makes himself available only for special occasions as an expert."⁴⁴ Not wanting to leave Germany, Laban searched desperately for a way to be allowed to continue working in the country, applying to many jobs and continuing to find work right up until his contract expired. His last application for employment was denied by Joseph Goebbels himself,⁴⁵ a definitive statement that Laban was no longer welcome in the Ministry of Propaganda or in Germany. He left Germany for good on August 7, 1937, when he traveled to Paris under official auspices, having been invited to France by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and approved by the Third Reich to make the trip.⁴⁶

Ultimately, the reason for Laban's downfall was a cultural shift. *Vom Tauwind und der Neuen Freude* was condemned as Germany's war preparations were going into high gear, and Laban's philosophy of dance as a way of communally reaching a higher reality was being replaced with a stricter, easier to control festive Nazi culture.⁴⁷ By the time of Laban's termination in 1937, the

⁴⁰See note 5, 199.

⁴¹See note 5, 199.

⁴²See note 2, 20.

⁴³See note 2, 60.

⁴⁴See note 5, 199.

⁴⁵See note 2, 60.

⁴⁶See note 5, 201.

⁴⁷See note 3, 89.

“old conservatives were no longer needed, however noisy their conversion to Nazism.”⁴⁸ This applied to all political officials, and included Laban, whose goal of communal ascension was ultimately at odds with the realities of political control.⁴⁹ By this time, the original wielders of power were condescendingly thought of as the “elite,”⁵⁰ and Laban was not valuable to them or the newer ideals that they represented. In the end, it was the emergence of new Nazi figureheads and restrictive ideals that made Laban and his work obsolete, and so he was forced out of his work for the Third Reich disgracefully. Dance, which was dangerous for the Nazi regime because of its open interpretation and was therefore too difficult for officials to control, was demoted from an integral part of culture and national identity to simple, frivolous relief from the war.⁵¹

Despite Laban’s unscrupulous decisions during the Nazi reign, he went on to leave a legacy of positive contributions to the dance world that are no less remarkable or important for his morally questionable political alignment; his visionary work after his departure from Germany shaped part of the foundation of modern dance, and that is mostly how he should be remembered. His later work, though, should not absolve him of actions that would readily be considered deplorable had he not made significant contributions. His development of movement analysis and dance notation inherently sustained the disgraceful legacy of the corrupt moral conditions of his early career, his work for the Ministry of Propaganda having built a foundation upon which to base these findings. Art can be a powerful tool; it can also, as Hitler and Laban both knew, be dangerous. If artists

carry a responsibility not to promote destructive ideals, then the implication of Laban’s early work upon his career is shameful. In spite of the great contributions he later developed, we should acknowledge this part of his history, and of modern dance history, as a lesson in artistic ethics – in and the hope that such a significant lapse in artistic ethics is not replicated elsewhere.

⁴⁸See note 2, 131.

⁴⁹See note 3, 90.

⁵⁰See note 2, 130.

⁵¹See note 3, 89.