

MODERN HISTORY

Leni Riefenstahl

(a) Explain the rise to prominence of the twentieth century personality you studied.

In the suburbs of Berlin, on 22nd August, 1902, Alfred and Bertha Riefenstahl gave birth to their first child, a girl, named Helene Bertha Amalie Riefenstahl. Leni, as she was known, lived a relatively easy, middle-class life with her parents and her brother, Heinz – four years younger. As a teenager, Leni was unaware of the difficulties faced by most people after the atrocities of World War I; her father had set the family up well through the establishment of his heating and ventilation company. He was a forceful disciplinarian, up front in expressing his distaste for the seemingly frivolous pursuits of his equally headstrong daughter. At school, Leni excelled in swimming and gymnastics, with a particular passion for dance. These interests reflect her dedication, strong determination and her eye for visual expression of movement – characteristics which shaped the course of her life, contributing to her rise to prominence and success, but equally portraying an impetuosity that has led her to be viewed as having deeper political motives and a questionable influence over the German people under the Nazi regime.

Bertha, Leni's mother, was much more loving and supportive towards her daughter's expressive gifts, encouraging Leni to attend dance classes behind her father's back. Despite Alfred's discovery of this and his subsequent command for Leni to attend boarding school, she never lost conviction for her dreams. As she would come to experience on a much greater level in her future career, Leni showed persistence in the face of adversity. After school she was classically trained, but preferred the expressionist freedom and experiment with movement and body that was cultivated through modern dance under the Weimar government. An important note about Leni's attitudes to modern dance were her feelings that it was a key medium for the open expression of emotion and to glorify the beauty of the body. This approach to the creative arts influenced her life work and leads many historians to believe that Leni was upholding and professing one of Hitler's central ideologies of the *'Body Beautiful.'*

A broken leg in 1925 did not shatter Riefenstahl's desire for fame and accomplishment in the world of stage and theatre. An 'epiphany' led her to view one of German director, Fanck's popular "Bergfilmes," titled 'Mountain of Destiny.' Following her direct approach to Fanck with her persuasive nature and impressive dance portfolio Leni was introduced to the expansive world of cinema, beginning as actor and climbing rocks, braving blizzards, writing, directing, editing and acting – the beautiful young Leni was breaking traditional gender expectations and shifting the cultural perceptions of women's physical abilities and the behaviour that was deemed acceptable for the times. Whilst her directing debut in the 1932 film, 'The Blue Light,' was not quite the popular hit or financial success she had desired, it was a major catalyst towards her rise to prominence, through the interest of the Führer: *"Hitler was already an admirer of hers...following her career with interest... 'The Blue Light' in particular catching his attention."* Leni's attendance at a 1932 Berlin rally and a subsequent letter requesting a meeting with Hitler consolidated the partnership between the two. *"He radiated something very powerful; something which had a kind of hypnotic effect. That frightened me a little."*

Hitler was impressed with Leni and her work, desiring her to make films for the Nazis once they came to power. She became part of the upper-government social circles, despite an uncertain dynamic between many of the highest Nazi officials, particularly Propaganda Minister Goebbels, who may have felt threatened by her assertive prominence as a woman, as well as her alleged rejections of intimate relations with him. Whether or not she remained disengaged with the Nazis' national objectives, there is no doubt that these high-profile associations guided Leni to be perceived as having a position of political influence. Much of her significance as a

director at this time was due to the apparent 'immunity' of cinema from the strict regulation of the state's media industry under Goebbels, who seemed to interfere less with films than other media forms. As her career continued and she agreed to work with Hitler (if only out of a desire to personally satisfy him) on political projects such as the Nuremberg Rallies of 1933 and 1934, including the infamous 'Triumph of the Will' documentary, Hitler's support extended to granting Riefenstahl full independence and control in the production of her work, accompanied with unlimited film budget, supplies and crew, inferred through his alleged words: "The party will exert no influence on you. I have discussed this with Dr Goebbels...you can take a year or several years. You are not to be under any time pressure." It is almost incomprehensible that this sort of freedom was granted by one of the most dictatorial leaders in history.

However controversial, 'Triumph of the Will' set a new precedent for the creation of documentary style films. Riefenstahl understood the techniques of engaging cinematography, and by carefully planned editing of pivotal moments, she was able to capture the thrilling essence of the Rally without being burdened by the monotony of long-winded political speeches. The deification of the Führer is conveyed constantly throughout, using Leni's symbolic sequences of 'descent from the skies,' the public glorification of Hitler's presence and many close-ups on Hitler's face, which captivated audiences viewing the film, pulling them into the atmosphere of the event. The editing process was possibly even more gruelling for Leni than the week-long shoot, having to edit 100,000 metres of footage. *"It was so annoying that several times I felt like dumping the whole film."* Yet ultimately the accomplishment of a five month commitment to editing ensured the completion of a revolutionary piece of art, regardless of whether or not it was deemed unethical Nazi propaganda. Leni had excelled in her project and Hitler gave high acclaim for her production: *"an outstanding and unparalleled tribute to the strength and beauty of our movement."* Released in 1935, Leni received many international awards and positive acclaim for her work, as well as gaining recognition as a female film pioneer.

The success of 'Triumph of the Will' undoubtedly contributed to the International Olympic Committee's decision to commission Leni to make the official feature film of the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Titled 'Olympia,' Leni's masterpiece of cinematography focussed on conveying the strength and beauty of the body – argued by some historians to be an extension of the Nazi ideologies of elitism and the 'Body Beautiful.' Yet, through her complementary use of music, sound and images, and fluidity of camera sequences and transitions that captured the feeling of the events, audiences were left with an emotional experience of the Olympics, rather than an unengaged viewing. Innovative experimentation with underwater cameras allowed a new appreciation for the world of diving, balloons provided aerial images, camera dinghies were pulled alongside row-boats and some shots were even edited in reverse to give a different artistic interpretation of the grace of the body. Leni highlighted the triumphs of all nations and races, thus 'Olympia' presented an optimistic outlook for international social harmony. Reception of the film came some years later due to the long editing and release process, but initially, Leni's work was met with prizes and international acclaim, including a gold medal from the International Olympic Committee. Yet, a publicity trip to America in which Leni and her film were expected to be celebrated turned harmful to her reputation as Germany experienced its infamous Kristalnacht in which many Jews were beaten, arrested and killed. Leni claimed not to know anything about what was happening: *"I didn't believe it...I'd read so many false reports about Germany in the American newspapers. I thought it was lies, so I said so."* Leni, through naivety or an inability to accept the reality of Germany's corruption, continued defending the integrity of her homeland and its Führer.

This turn in international sentiment towards her films marked the beginning of a long, downhill spiral for Leni. Accusations of her Nazi sympathies, manipulation of the German public through knowingly making propaganda, and refusing to leave Germany with other fellow artistic colleagues led the female film pioneer to be rejected by the international industry. She faced considerable resistance when attempting to make more films after the War. However,

despite the criticism from historians and the general public over her morality and dubious political allegiances, it is undeniable that Leni Riefenstahl rose to distinction, as the pioneer of a new approach to cinematography, breaking the typical *'Kinder Kirche und Kuche'* stereotype for German women of the time, and ultimately, revolutionising the genre of documentary film making.

(b) To what extent does history present us with a balanced interpretation of the twentieth century personality you have studied?

Hindsight is a highly powerful manipulator of the way people interpret events and decisions. The way in which German cinematographer, Leni Riefenstahl, has been viewed by the world since her initial rise to fame prior to World War II shifts along a spectrum from either immense acclaim for her artistic talent and contribution to the film industry, to severe condemnation for her involvement and influence in the Nazi movement. Evaluation of her life becomes a battle for evidence and opinion between the integrity of Leni's art and her personal motivation for producing it. Arguments exist between historians for both sides, and the additional question about whether Riefenstahl's gender contributed to her propensity to be detested is an interesting issue. Conflicts between facts and judgments make it difficult to fully ascertain where Leni's moral priorities lay, however, the existence of these ambiguities proves that a clear conclusion cannot be passed, and therefore, history does present both positive and negative interpretations of Leni Riefenstahl.

Riefenstahl's first real controversial production was 'Triumph of the Will,' which has, since the end of the Second World War, been the most debated aspect of Leni's life as a director and provided much evidence for those believing she is a Nazi sympathiser. The conflicting interpretation of her film can be summarised by the two words: 'Documentary' and 'propaganda.' The facts leading up to the filming of the Rally offer evidence for both sides of the argument as to whether Leni wittingly embarked upon a project to highlight the strength and power of the horrendous Nazi movement. Many film historians emphasise that the whole rally was planned around what the film intended to portray, and believe that the clarity of the film's archetypal images of Nazism were constructed to convince the audience of the positives of the National Socialist movement. This clear in Goebbels own response to the film in 1935: *"It's the great vision of the Führer on film presented in images of vividness never seen before."* Therefore, this could not be an objective documentary presentation of the Nuremburg Rally event. This idea can be seen from the film's opening scene, where Hitler descends from the skies, described as *"quasi-religious"* by historian Bach, implies the arrival of a Christ-like saviour for the German people. Countless, carefully captured images of the extreme order, discipline and commitment to country of flag-waving, spade-bearing soldiers and Labour Front workers also enforce the idea that Hitler is the one who will lead Germany back to its past, chaos-free 'glory days.' The precision and fluidity of these shots lead many to confirm that Leni herself was clearly a devotee of Hitler and the ideals he preached, trying to influence others of his greatness.

Yet, this idolisation of Hitler, shown through the close-ups and camera angles of Leni's film, was common among the majority of the German population. As Leni herself states in Muller's 1993 documentary film "The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl," – *"By that time 90% were in favour of Hitler. Should I have been a resistance fighter...?"* confirming that Leni's understanding of Nazism was just as misled as everyone else's at the time. It is important to note that 'Triumph of the Will' was not considered to be Nazi propaganda until after the War – an example of how situations appear differently once a person's hindsight can put them into the broader context of their ultimate implications. In 1934 neither Riefenstahl nor anyone else could have foreseen the extent to which the Nazis would go in terms of implementing ideologies of racial purity in their pursuit of *lebensraum* during the war.

When Hitler requested Leni to make the film, she refused due to commitments to other projects. It could be argued that if Leni felt such a strong and intentional connection to Hitler and his fascist political movement, then she would not have refused his request. As it was, she suggested that Hitler instead approach another German film pioneer, Walter Ruttmann, who was in fact an open communist. This contributes to the argument that Leni was quite politically naive and caught up in her own career, rather than concerned with the success of the Nazis.

When eventually Leni did accept the task, she gave three clear conditions to Hitler: that funds must be arranged by a private company, not the Nazi Party; that nobody be allowed to see the film until complete (not even Hitler or Goebbels); and that she not be asked to make another film. These points could be interpreted to show how she valued her artistic career more than her favour with the Nazis, and that she could use this project to experiment with new techniques and make herself better known, so that afterwards she could continue her career elsewhere without being bound to the Ministry of Propaganda. In words directly stated by Leni, 'Triumph of the Will' was about "*peace*" and "*creating jobs*." She set out to make a visually stunning film using revolutionary conventions. This was her trade. Her passion, ambition and self-confidence ensured that Leni would complete it with considerable flair: "*To me the film wasn't about politics. It was an event. I'd have made exactly the same film in Moscow if the need arose...I shot the subject matter as best I could and shaped it into a film. Now whether it was about vegetables or fruit I couldn't give a damn.*" She was committed to producing the best film for the Führer, but was not necessarily personally promoting his ideas. Thus it may be unfair to label her a "Fellow Nazi Traveller." In her eyes, the film could not be viewed as intentional propaganda because there was no script written before, during, or after filming; she was not a Nazi Party member; and it was completed before the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws which drew attention to Nazi discrimination policies. Another significant argument that confirms the impact of hindsight in the denunciation of Leni was that, at the time of the film's release, she was met with much acclaim, both nationally and internationally, marked by her receiving the Gold Medallion at the 1937 Paris World Expo. Subsequently, the course of time and the development of the war have shifted people's perspectives towards Leni's work, and a merely critical response to Riefenstahl's life would be failing to accept the many arguments in circulation that suggest her innocence.

There are some historians, such as Rainer Rother, who argue that the distinction between propaganda and art is too blurred, and that the film can only be viewed as both. In his book, *The Seduction of Genius*, Rother infers that the aim of the artistic film was to portray the cult of Hitler, and Leni's commitment and talent to her project allowed this aim to be successfully presented. However, she must also accept responsibility that any portrayal of Hitler's greatest was completely due to her own efforts, wittingly or not. The belief that 'Triumph of the Will' is clear Nazi propaganda, whether or not intentionally depicted by Leni, is encapsulated by Salkeld's comment: "*She may not have set out to glorify Hitler, but her feeling towards him were so worshipful that she could portray him only through the shining eyes of admiration.*" With these comments in mind, it is evident that there is a multitude of interpretations relating to Riefenstahl and her work on 'Triumph of the Will', and to pass an ultimate judgement on her motivations is practically impossible.

Leni Riefenstahl's 1939 film, 'Olympia' has not met as much criticism as 'Triumph of the Will.' However, there are many arguments that try to prove the idea that the film was used by Riefenstahl and the German government as a mechanism to subtly push Nazi ideals of the '*Body Beautiful*' and the greatness of strength of power. Initially, the film's 1938 reception was extremely positive and met with adulation across Europe. The multiple awards won by Leni could be used as proof for the international acceptance of her stunning depiction of a global sporting event. Yet, at the same time, critics stress the need to look further into who the awards were issued by. For example, 'Olympia' won the Mussolini Cup for best foreign film in 1938 at the Biennale Film Festival, but this could be deemed politically prejudiced due to the relationship growing between the two fascist countries, Italy and Germany. Similarly

questionable is the winning of the German National Film Prize, for being “*politically, artistically and culturally valuable*” – which could easily be interpreted as a euphemism for the film’s sympathetic portrayal of the success of Nazi Germany, seen through images of swastikas waved by spectators, scenes of Hitler, and allusions to the superiority of the perfect physical body above others who are less abled. If ‘Olympia’ had been released much sooner after it was made it may have been received more positively by the United States. As it was, Hitler’s expansionist policies and controversial treatment of the Jews and other minorities were already well established and under international scrutiny, particularly with Kristalnacht occurring whilst Leni was in America. Despite this, there were many Americans who saw past the political associations tied with Leni’s work to the feat of cinematography that is ‘Olympia’. Such is shown in an unsigned editorial in the LA Times during Leni’s visit:

“It is regrettable that political issues should intrude to prevent the general distribution of the feature in America, because, contrary to rumour, it is in no way a propaganda production but simply a superfine camera analysis of great athletic events accomplished with art and imagination which are truly international in scope.”

All these details convey ambiguity as to how the audiences responded to the film, and whether some of Leni’s awards were deserved objectively, or influenced by underlying political interests. Consideration of both arguments gives a balanced interpretation of the dynamics of Leni’s work and her motivations behind it, proving that history does present two sides to Leni’s personality.

It seems that the questionable nature of Riefenstahl’s artistic motivations at the peak of her career set her up for international scrutiny for the rest of her life. Every decision Leni has made has been analysed by historians, and often related back to alleged Nazi objectives. For instance, renowned critic of Leni’s morality, historian Susan Sontag, has even suggested that the German film-maker’s later life interest in photography of the African Nuba tribe imparts principles of the Nazis’ idolising of the perfect, athletic body: “*the contrast between the clean and the impure, the incorruptible and the defiled, the physical and the mental...*” However, many believe this conclusion to be too far a stretch. Another way of responding to Leni’s years of travelling to spend time with the Nuba is that she wanted to remove herself from the judging eyes of Western civilisation post WWII; to move on and forget the gruelling process of her imprisonment and de-Nazification at the hands of the French and Americans. Before this, Leni had been publically shamed for allegedly using gypsies from a concentration camp as extras in her movie ‘Tiefland,’ filmed between 1940 and 1944. Under libel action, Riefenstahl was acquitted of these charges, yet uncertainties still exist surrounding them. So too, the nature of Leni’s relationship with Hitler is still questioned, particularly in light of the telegram she sent him following Germany’s overthrow of France in 1940: “*...simply the offer of my congratulations is an inadequate expression of the feelings that are stirred within me.*” Again, Leni asserted her innocence; that she was merely expressing in words the feelings that most Germans held, thinking that the war would soon be over, in favour of their nation. Thus, it is often Leni’s word against the historians’, creating a balance between evidence and opinion presented regarding perspectives of her life. It is up to individuals to view both sides objectively to come up with their own response to Leni’s achievements and morality.

Some people wonder whether attitudes towards Leni Riefenstahl and her artistic works would be different had she been a man. There were many other famous German cultural artists at the time, such as director Veit Harlan and conductor Herbert von Karajan who were open producers or supporters of Nazi related activities and were able to make a new name for themselves after the war. Perhaps being one of the only highly successful females in her chosen field meant she was unfairly pin-pointed and blamed for being caught up in the Nazi movement. In this respect, history may be giving people a prejudiced depiction of Riefenstahl. Looking beyond her gender, one could attribute Leni’s personality traits to being another reason why she has endured so much criticism and people have had such a dubious opinion

of her. Words such as “*audacity*,” “*ruthless*,” and “*self-centred narcissist*” have been used over the years to describe her nature. In documentaries like ‘The Wonderful, Horrible Life of Leni Riefenstahl,’ she comes across as uncompromising; almost aggressively defensive. It may be that this harsh attitude has increased people’s dislike and suspicions of her. Or, on the other hand, some may also believe that without her headstrong determination she would never have succeeded as a woman in her career to begin with. Some argue this point further, saying that she is merely a victim of her obsession with art – creatively absorbed and passionately driven to the point of being politically blind to the implications of her actions. Maybe all these issues have amalgamated, causing Leni Riefenstahl to become a form of scapegoat for Germany and the rest of the world to affix the blame upon for some of the greatest atrocities humanity has ever witnessed, simply by her tentative Nazi association. Whatever the argument, it is clear that these judgements did not get the better of Leni and her artistic ardour. As a child she shrugged off her father’s contempt for her dancing. Likewise, as an adult, Leni stood against both the overbearing patriarchal influence of her times and the criticisms of the world, to continue to pursue and succeed in what she loved, showing her constant persistence in the face of adversity. Over the last century, the blurred presentation of opinion contrasted with facts surrounding Riefenstahl’s life makes it near impossible to resolve whether any historian’s interpretation is absurdly misconcocted, or indeed, an accurate psychoanalysis. Yet, because there is still so much debate over her morals and motivations, it is clear that history does present a balance of both praise and condemnation for the “wonderful, horrible” life of Leni Riefenstahl.

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