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Jeffrey C. Haylon April 10, 2018

Eyes Turned Skyward: Aviation, Myth, and Society in Germany, 1900-1933

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Abstract

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To the Germans of the early twentieth century, the development of aviation was not merely a technological endeavor but a social cause belonging to the entire nation. Beginning with the development of giant airships before the First World War, manned flight captivated the German people and the language surrounding it encapsulated contemporary social trends. The role of flight and fliers changed with the onset of war, the resultant defeat, and the cultural changes that followed in the Weimar Republic and the Nazi era. Aviation was a matter of German national pride, and represented military superiority, scientific achievement, and cultural perseverance. While other historians have fleshed out the technical history of German aviation, this study directs its attention more towards the social role of aviation, and how aviation came to achieve such a high standing in the minds of the German populace, especially the middle classes. Aviation's popularity in the first decades of the twentieth century became a popular mythology, built around the fliers and flying machines in the skies over Germany. This process of mythologization was long and multifaceted, and warrants a close investigation. This study seeks to determine how Germans came to perceive aviation as a nearly divine process, in what ways that perception reflected social attitudes, and how the shifting realities of Germany within the twentieth century influenced views on flight.

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I am very grateful for the firm guidance of Dr. Astrid M. Eckert, who did not once allow me to produce anything but my best work. Her suggestions and scrutiny through every step of the writing process were invaluable, and the depth of her knowledge of Germany constantly enriched mine. My other committee members, Dr. Patrick Allitt and Dr. Hiram Maxim, also supported the project with enthusiasm from its early stages through its completion.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

The development of aviation was one of the most important technological strides in modern history. In Germany, the birthplace of the Zeppelin airship, flight became a major component of national identity, forming a popular appeal often harnessed for political campaigns, propaganda, or profit. Upon a closer examination of the period before the Second World War, the German public's fascination with aviation seemed to transcend these simple motives, and constituted a fluid civic mythology celebrating aviators and their machines. This mythology, characterized by a number of distinct concepts such as Guillaume de Syon's "Zeppelin Sublime"[1] or Peter Fritzsche's "Machine Dreams"[2] can serve as a lens to Germany's social pulse between the advent of flight in the early twentieth century and the rise of the Nazis, a time period during which Germany's government rotated between authoritarian, democratic, and fascist forms. The stark differences in these political backdrops, as well as variances in war and economy, provide important contexts through which to analyze aviation and its social impact. Thus, the object of this study is the interplay of the mythologization of aviation technology and the social factors that shaped it. What caused the popular fascination with aviation in pre-WWII Germany, and in which ways did that fascination change and develop over time? Understanding the effect of aviation on German imaginations during this period will help us better understand technology's impact on German society, and how modern mythology can shape the course of a nation.

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[1] Guillaume de Syon, "Introduction: Visions of the Sublime," in *Zeppelin! Germany and the Airship, 1900-1939* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 1-5.
[2] Peter Fritzsche, "Machine Dreams and the Reinvention of Germany," *The American Historical Review* 98, no. 3 (1993): 686.

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the intertwining of technology and culture became the focus of many academic studies on Germany.[3] However, until recently aviation was relegated to what some historians disdainfully refer to as "buffs," amateur historians who focus purely on fact and narrative rather than analytical concepts and causes. It was James Hansen who first identified the need for what he described as "synthetic works [on aviation] taking a wider view and looking at the social motives, aims, and second-order consequences of the aviation enterprise,"[4] and in response a growing body of literature has sought to lay out the social appeal of aviation.[5] These new works are significant to understanding the German public's adoration of aviation on a national and transnational scale.

While this literature is useful to examine the appeal of aviation in Germany, few works propose an analytical framework which explains what caused flight's popularity. In the cases when historians do attempt that answer, they usually focus on a specific flier, technology, or time period, and discount the importance of others. Modris Eksteins attributes the mania after Charles Lindbergh's 1927 flight to a release of tensions brought by the end of the First World War, but that argument does not account for the comparable Zeppelin hysteria before and during the war.[6] Guillaume de Syon explains the Zeppelin craze with his notion of the "sublime" but doesn't account for the similar fascination behind non-airship flight.[7] Peter Fritzsche cites the European

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[3] See Kees Gispen, "National Socialism and the Technological Culture of the Weimar Republic," *Central European History* 25, no. 4 (1992): 387-406; Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernity: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
[4] James R. Hansen, "Aviation History in the Wider View," *Technology and Culture* 30, no. 3 (1989): 643.
[5] See Guillaume de Syon, *Zeppelin! Germany and the Airship, 1900-1939* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Fernando Esposito, *Fascism, Aviation and Mythical Modernity*, trans. by Patrick Camiller, (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Peter Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992); Joe Jackson, *Atlantic Fever*: *Lindbergh, His Competitors, and the Race to Cross the Atlantic* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012) for example works of social aviation history.
[6] Modris Eksteins, *The Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).
[7] De Syon, *Zeppelin!*, 3-8.

"technocratic imagination," the important idea that twentieth-century Europe was driven to tinker with its society as much as with its technology.[8] These arguments offer explanations for segments of the fascination behind aviation, but none satisfy the broader question of what drove the fascination in the first place. In seeking to fulfill Hansen's wish to probe "the limits of the conceptual framework that has so far ruled our understanding of aviation's place in society,"[9] historians must elucidate the factors and continuities behind the disparate elements of aviation historiography.

This study posits that a popular mythology surrounding flight and fliers was a phenomenon that existed in most of the industrialized West, and that Germany serves as an effective case study of that myth. Separating modern mythology from classical pantheism is key to this understanding. Classical myth systems used by dozens of civilizations consisted of creation stories and a means to explain natural phenomena. In the case of twentieth-century Germany, rapid changes in both society and technology created a widespread anxiety about the "unknown" of modernity, feeding easily into communal mythmaking.[10] This myth created a certain distortion in the perception of reality. "In the process of its mythologizing," writes German scholar Matthias Waechter, "history is taken out of its immediate temporal context and… protagonists are imbued with transcendental attributes."[11] German historian Fernando Esposito summarizes myth as the "Narrative that constitutes community by associating what [the community] regards as true, good, just and beautiful… and associating it with a supreme value or

[8] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 4-5.
[9] Hansen, "Aviation History in the Wider View," 645.
[10] Bernhard Rieger, "Modern Wonders: Technological Innovation and Public Ambivalence in Britain and Germany, 1890s to 1933," *History Workshop Journal* 55 (2003): 153.
[11] Matthias Waechter, "Mythos," in *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte* (February 11, 2010), https://docupedia.de/zg/Mythos. Original text: "Die Geschichte wird im Prozess ihrer Mythologisierung aus unmittelbaren zeitgebunden Kontext herausgelöst... Protagonisten werden mit transzendentalen Attributen versehen."

being."[12] Flight was universally admired, and often attached to the supreme—even the Judeo-Christian God is an entity of the air surrounded by winged beings.[13] In essence, aviation and aviators were seen as extraordinary, and their representation in the press and via word-of-mouth further elevated their status.

Most importantly, the objects of mythology reflect the values of a community. This broad understanding of modern mythmaking cooperates with how Germany compared to its competitors. Imperial Germany, later to national unification and industrialization than its European rivals Britain and France, held tightly to whichever areas of superiority it could find. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of aviation. The Weimar Republic, burdened with the widely hated reparations and restrictions set out by the Treaty of Versailles, relied largely on the bourgeois pursuit of gliding for technological advancement and soothing its battered ego. In the latter and more prosperous half of the 1920s prior to the Great Depression, aviation became a release valve for latent tensions from the First World War, and a counterpoint to rising nationalist tendencies. All the while, the German public and press consistently deified fliers and flying machines. These myths were central to the German national consciousness, and found much purchase in a German society which ascribed them an unquestioned validity due to their social value and their fomentation of national self-esteem.[14] Further, popular culture of Imperial and Weimar Germany adhered to what Peter Fritzsche calls an "economy of experience," a societal desire to take risks and experiment, which "propelled Germans to embrace technology

[12] Esposito, *Fascism, Aviation and Mythical Modernity*, 41.
[13] Jackson, *Atlantic Fever*, 6.
[14] Darren Kelsey, "Hero Mythology and Right-Wing Populism," *Journalism Studies* 17, no. 8 (2016): 972.

[and] explore the unknown."[15] This desire to nationally conquer "the unknown" and supplant an "inferiority complex" through aviation contributed to the modern mythos of fliers.

Aviation mythology in Germany was not born in a vacuum; flight played a major role in the nation's symbolism. The coat of arms of Imperial Germany included the eagle,[16] and flying Valkyries were a key part of Germanic legend. The legend of Icarus, the boy of Greek myth who flew too close to the Sun with his manmade wings and met an untimely demise, also plays an important role in discussions of German aviation. As Bayla Singer writes, Icarus' recklessness represents "an eternal tension between rationality and emotion, enacted in every generation and every society."[17] This strain spawned German technological anxiety which in turn generated a part of the mythic understanding of aviation. So prevalent was this thought at the turn of the century that some German writers used the term *Ikarustraum*, or the Dream of Icarus, to summarize the emotional investment held by German society in the eventual success of flight.[18]

The German attachment to mythology had its beginnings long before the turn of the century. Philosopher Georg Hegel pointed out in 1796 that Germans "are without any religious imagery which is homegrown or linked with our history."[19] While Hegel wrote before the 1871 creation of the German nation-state, and seems to discount earlier heroes like Martin Luther or Siegfried, his sentiment that Germany lacked a national mythology held weight. The problem of a "homegrown" imagery had been "addressed as early as the 1760s by both Klopstock and Herder, and it was of common concern to Schelling and Hölderlin," all philosophers of note in

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[15] Peter Fritzsche, "Founding Fictions: History, Myth and the Modern Age," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 12, no. 2 (1998): 211.
[16] While hardly a unique image (Poland, Russia, the United States, and many others prominently feature eagles in their national symbology), the *Reichsadler* is a constant component of German aviation propaganda.
[17] Bayla Singer, *Like Sex with Gods: An Unorthodox History of Flying*, (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 61.
[18] Willi Hackenberger, *Die alten Adler: Pioniere der deutschen Luftfahrt*, (Munich, 1960): 13.
[19] G.W.F. Hegel, "The Positivity of the Christian Religion," in *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox and Richard Kroner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1948), 146-47.

pre-unification Germany.[20] Furthermore, the German philosophers of the early Romantic period proposed a "'new mythology' grounded in modernity itself,"[21] perhaps a precursor to the hero complexes that would come to surround aviation in the twentieth century. In any case, the bourgeois heroes proffered by the Romantic scholars, such as von Beethoven, Schiller, and Goethe, would be succeeded by a new group of middle-class heroes, the aviators of twentieth-century Germany. What historian George Williamson calls the "longing for myth" in modern German history helps to explain the social tenor of the rise of the flier heroes.

Historians have access to a valuable case study on social change in early twentieth-century Germany. The period between 1900 and 1933, examined in this study, can be categorized into non-uniform segments of time, such as the Wilhelmine era, the former and latter halves of the First World War, the postwar chaos, the Golden Twenties, and the Great Depression that preceded, and stoked, Nazi electoral success. These subdivisions of the era allow researchers to investigate aviation myth as a continuous relevant phenomenon against varied social backdrops, and utilize the changes in society and politics as different means of exploring the enduring myth. Thus, we can interpret the gradual transformations in aviation's public perception through the lens of the social status quo, and vice versa.

The conditions of aviation laid out in the Treaty of Versailles are especially indicative of the early Weimar era socio-industrial condition. The treaty forced the disbandment of all airship crews and the transfer of all surviving airships and airplanes to the Allies, as well as most useful components such as engines, instruments, and communications apparatuses.[22] The London

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[20] George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 73.
[21] Ibid., 73-74. Williamson makes an effort to separate his study, on the development of myth within Christianity, from "historical myths" such as personality cults or aviation. However, his elucidation of the "longing for myth" up through Nietzsche does not preclude nor discount historical myth's appearance.
[22] Treaty of Versailles, Section III, Articles 200-208. Full text available for download online at https://www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ust000002-0043.pdf

Ultimatum of May 1921 further hampered German attempts to fly after the war, prohibiting all manufacture of aircraft in Germany for the better part of three years. Even after the ban was lifted, harsh restrictions on airplane capabilities were imposed, limiting engines to 60 horsepower and a top speed of barely 100 miles per hour, essentially bringing aviation development to a prewar stage.[23] The dismantled state of aviation in Germany, the only Central Power with a strong tradition of flight, was a significant step backwards. This made the German relationship with aviation face a stumbling block with which other developed countries did not have to contend.

Furthermore, Germany is key to the development of aviation itself. Aviation's popularity was by no means limited to Germany, although The experiments and accidental death of German glider pioneer Otto Lilienthal in 1896 gave German aviation enthusiasts an almost literal Icarian martyr who was foundational to the subsequent work of the Wright Brothers in the United States. Furthermore, Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin flew his first namesake rigid dirigible airship in 1900, a full three years before the Wright Flyer made its debut in North Carolina. At least until the First World War, the Zeppelin was the most practical form of powered flight. Perhaps as a result, aviation in Germany was directly involved in politics more than in other countries. Historian Barbara Rosenwein notes in her work on emotion that politics, like aviation's public reception in Germany, is irrational and emotional.[24] Vast amounts of wartime propaganda, the potential presidential run of von Zeppelin's successor, Hugo Eckener, and slogans and imagery of virtually all German political parties were predicated on aviation's popularity. The ubiquitous

[23] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 106.
[24] Barbara Rosenwein, "Worrying about Emotions in History," *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2005), 822.

representation of aviation in Germans media and politics kept the enterprise at the forefront of German minds.

Understanding the appeal of aviation in Germany is important on several levels. For one, the field of aviation history is young, and further works are important to fill in the gaps in the historiography. The thrust of this project, using myth as an explanation for German fascination with aviation, is unlikely to directly contradict any extant literature but rather recontextualizes and provides new avenues of discussion for it. On another level, German cultural history in the first decades of the twentieth century is not complete without aviation mythology because aviation is perhaps the most significant aspect of modern technological progress in Germany, and must be treated as such.

The primary sources I draw on factor heavily into my argument that flight had a mythic status in Germany. Press and photographic archives at the Deutsches Museum in Munich and the Zeppelin Museums in Friedrichshafen and Zeppelinheim provided hundreds of newsletters, newspaper articles, and visual sources regarding aviation and aviators in pre-Nazi Germany. The Frankfurt Airport Historical Archive and Collections holds dozens of aviation industry newsletters and books, especially concerning the Weimar gliding festivals in the wake of Versailles and the London Ultimatum. The Charles Augustus Lindbergh Papers at Yale University Library's Manuscripts and Archives provided a transnational look at aviation's appeal, as well as letters to the famous aviator from German fans. Memoirs by the "Red Baron," Manfred von Richthofen, Lindbergh, and von Zeppelin added insight into the minds and public appeal of key fliers.

The study is organized into five parts. The first provides an understanding of Zeppelin mania, the first true aviation craze, and how Ferdinand von Zeppelin's invention became an

inextricable part of the pre-WWII German consciousness. Chapter Two details the First World War and its impact on German aviation myth, especially dealing with the prominent fighter pilots Oswald Boelcke and Manfred von Richthofen and how they were treated in the German wartime press. Those aces came to symbolize different eras of the German home front, and the myths with which they were treated conveyed the distinct feelings of the early and late years of the war. Chapter Three discusses the gliding movement that became another craze in southwest Germany throughout the 1920s, which started as a scientific endeavor and morphed into a microcosm of aviatic nationalism. The gliders present an example of aviation myth's ability to change small, scientific sporting events into spectator rallies with huge political significance. The last main chapter explains the concurrent role of transatlantic flights in the Golden Twenties as a counterpoint to any deterministic idea that aviation mythology necessarily led to nationalism or Nazism, and also that aviation myth in Germany was stronger than in other Western nations. The conclusion lays out the ways in which aviation mythology did become a key player in the rise of German fascism, and the implications of modern myth as a vehicle for future historical understanding.

Chapter I

Fly, Zeppelin, Fly: The Birth of Aviation Myth in the German Kaiserreich

Friedrichshafen is a small German port city on the north shore of Lake Constance. On a still morning in 1900, citizens looked out over the lake to see the maiden voyage of the Zeppelin LZ 1, Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin's namesake invention, rising over the water under its own power. Though this first airship was clumsy, slower than an average headwind, and impractical, the prototype and its improved descendants "made one of the strongest impressions on European collective memory of any machine."[25] The silvery Zeppelins inspired dozens of novels, poems, songs, and other works praising the invention and its creator, especially among his middle-class supporters. The airship marked the first major component of German aviation mythology, setting a lasting precedent for the impact of flight on German culture.

While the LZ 1 was not a success on its own terms, von Zeppelin and his chief engineer, Ludwig Dürr, continued improving its design. The next model, the LZ 2, first flown in 1906, had a brief service life but corrected several glaring flaws in LZ 1's blueprint, and included the first effective use of the control surfaces known as elevators that still feature heavily in airplane construction.[26] LZ 3, also flown in 1906, made flights lasting longer than two hours. While the regional public of Friedrichshafen had been impressed with the LZ 1 and 2, the successful flights of the LZ 3 caused the German government, von Zeppelin's true target, to reevaluate the utility of von Zeppelin's airships. A military purchase of an airship was contingent upon a 24-hour flight capability, and so with a 500,000-mark government grant work began on the LZ 4.[27] After

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[25] De Syon, *Zeppelin!*, 3.
[26] On elevators: The Wright brothers used a technique called wing-warping to control the pitch of their aircraft. Separately controlled flight surfaces, such as elevators and ailerons, were not included in mainstream airplane design for some time.
[27] 500,000 marks at the time would be roughly equivalent to $3,000,000 in 2017 U.S. dollars. See Harold Marcuse, "Historical Dollar-to-Marks Currency Conversion," University of California Santa Barbara, last modified February 9, 2013. http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/projects/currency.htm.

successful test flights including a 12-hour run over Switzerland, the LZ 4 was charted to fly a 24-hour trial from Friedrichshafen to Mainz and back. News of the flight attracted considerable public attention, especially in the cities along the route. Historian Peter Fritzsche refers to the affair as "a production on a scale seldom seen before." In Basel and Strasbourg, citizens lined the roads and rooftops for hours in the hopes of seeing the Zeppelin—the first man-made flying object the vast majority of these Germans had ever seen—even for a moment. A quarter-million citizens streamed onto the streets of Mainz in anticipation.[28] The LZ 4 was novel and in some ways unimaginable to the average German. The fascination with the airship would clear the way for its mythologization: Germans had already accepted the LZ 4 as a good and welcome innovation. The next stage of myth came when that innovation was communalized and associated with supernatural power.

However, on July 13, 1908 the LZ 4 crashed and then exploded near Echterdingen. Approximately 45,000 spectators had trekked from Echterdingen and nearby towns to see the grounded airship, and witnessed firsthand the destruction of their newfound pride. An unprecedented groundswell of national support for von Zeppelin's work in the aftermath of the LZ 4 disaster sparked what was called the *Zeppelin-Spende*, essentially a grassroots crowdsourcing campaign which brought in 6.5 million marks within six weeks from all corners of Germany. [29] The influx of wealth to von Zeppelin's efforts led to the development of further airships, including the ones that would be used in World War I.[30]

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[28] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 7-10. See also De Syon, *Zeppelin!*, 37-39.
[29] 6.5 million marks in 1908 had a value exceeding $30 million in 2017 American dollars. See Marcuse, "Historical Dollar-to-Marks Currency Conversion," University of California Santa Barbara http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/projects/currency.htm.
[30] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 16-17.

The German Kaiserreich, the imperial government lasting from German unification in 1871 through the 1918 establishment of the Weimar Republic, contained several cultural trends that informed the significance of the Zeppelin. Of particular importance is the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II, a "loud-mouthed poseur with absolutist pretensions." He set the tone of the era that bears his name: imperialist and reactionary in social and foreign affairs, but also attracted to technology and modernization. [31] Especially after the Kaiser's appointment of Theobald von Bethman-Hollweg to chancellor in 1909, when any pretense of political support from the Social Democrats in the German parliament dissipated, the bourgeois class was also the main bloc of the Kaiser's popular support. The relative strength of the middle classes, whose economic power had increased since industrialization, factored into the appeal of aviation. Middle-class Germans were almost always the primary supporters of aviatic development, from the *Spende* onward. Especially in the Wilhelmine Kaiserreich, this support merged with jingoistic sentiment and turned belligerent.[32] The same "ugly and aggressive" public opinion that supported the massive expansion of the Imperial Navy supported the military role of the Zeppelin.

In terms of cultural effect, the Zeppelin was the earliest symbol of German aviation. Accordingly, the rigid airships precipitated a significant mass-culture upheaval in Germany. The invention of "Flying Fool" Ferdinand von Zeppelin transformed from a provincial distraction to a national phenomenon. In order to fully appreciate the emotional response that the Zeppelins and their inventor stirred up, a closer examination of their history—and the concurrent history of their myth—is necessary. Flight was novel to almost all people, and for the Germans to see a product of their countryman's ingenuity overhead would have significant repercussions for the

[31] Martin Kitchen, *A History of Modern Germany: 1800 to the Present*, (Chichester, West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012): 159-160.
[32] Kitchen, *History of Germany*, 174-175.

development of aviation's mythic status. The Zeppelin's role in war, peace, and culture evolved over time, and presents an important timeline for the social history of aviation.

After the LZ 4's 1908 crash at Echterdingen, von Zeppelin was catapulted into legend, presented in some media as a new Icarus.[33] The widespread success of the Zeppelin-Spende's early form of crowdsourcing in some ways already proves the immediate emotional appeal of the airship. Germans who had never seen and only recently heard of the machine were still convinced to send donations for its further development. One newspaper likened von Zeppelin to Christopher Columbus, as a pioneer in need of money and support. Rather than the monarch or the government, the German people took up his cause.[34] The Zeppelin-Spende laid the groundwork for the populist nature of aviation in Germany. In every other country with a prominent aviation scene, the government or military became the primary sponsors of flight development.[35] Germans recognized their own contributions to the success of the Zeppelin as a contrast to this model, despite the German government's significant investment into von Zeppelin's enterprise. The entire premise of the Zeppelin, then, was predicated on populist, *volkstümlich* support, and so the German airship became firmly encased in the German psyche. This level of attachment would prompt the earliest incarnation of German aviation mythology.

The early and immediate communalization of German aviation is fundamental to the understanding of its mythology. For myth to take hold, a community must widely perceive a given entity or event to be good, beneficial, and beautiful, drawing on Esposito's understanding

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[33] Newspaper Clipping, Drawer 1, Box 1, Newspaper Cutouts 1900-1914, Zeppelinheim Zeppelin Museum Newspaper Collection, Zeppelinheim Zeppelin Museum. Henceforth, this collection will be abbreviated Zeppelinheim NC.

[34] W. Boltzmann, "Über Luftschifffahrt," Luft- und Raumfahrtdokumentationen, Signatur 10527, Archiv des Deutschen Museums, Deutsches Museum München. Henceforth, "Luft- und Raumfahrtdokumentationen" will be abbreviated "LRD, " and "Archiv des Deutschen Museums, Deutsches Museum," "ADM. "

[35] In the United States, the Wright Brothers' first main demonstrations were to military observers in 1908, only months before the LZ 4's crash. Hearing of their success, British and French military buyers also bought into the airplane. There was no equivalent of the *Spende* in any of those countries. See Corn, *The Winged Gospel,* 6.

of mythologization.[36] Accordingly, idolization of the Zeppelin was unmistakable in Germany. As Hugo Eckener wrote in 1908, the Zeppelin "seemed to be coming from another world and to be returning there like a dream."[37] Even years later, during the Weimar period, the promise of a Zeppelin appearance would still guarantee a crowd of 100,000, and even the best contemporary sport airplane fliers could only expect half that turn-out.[38] The universal popularity of the Zeppelin certainly confirms its "good and beautiful" place in the public consciousness.

Another prevalent feature of mythology is the production of additional lore surrounding the core tenets, and Zeppelin mania is no exception. Hundreds of songs, poems, and works of fiction, many of them household names in Germany during the First World War and Weimar era, sprouted from the emotional root of the Zeppelin fascination. One of the most notable of these works is a short children's song called "Fly, Zeppelin," repurposed from the well-known German tune "Maikäfer flieg:"

Fly, Zeppelin!	*Zeppelin, flieg!*
Help us in the war,	*Hilf uns im Krieg,*
Fly to England,	*Flieg nach England,*
England will be destroyed by fire,	*England wird abgebrannt,*
Fly, Zeppelin![39]	*Zeppelin, flieg!*

"Fly, Zeppelin" is representative of the Zeppelin craze, and perhaps a sign of its enduring integration with German culture. The children of the wartime era who were the target of such songs would become the young adults who would see Zeppelins at airshows, or even become glider pilots at the Wasserkuppe.[40] In the mythical frame, Zeppelins became detached from their

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[36] Esposito, *Fascism,* 41.
[37] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 23.
[38] De Syon, *Zeppelin!*, 206.
[39] Robert Hedin, *The Zeppelin Reader: Stories, Poems, and Songs from the Age of Airships,* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998): 81. For information on "Maikäfer flieg," see Lotta Wieden, "Maikäfer, flieg!" *Frankfurt Aktuelle Zeitung,* April 12, 2015. http://www.faz.net/aktuell/gesellschaft/altes-kinderlied-maikaefer-flieg-13522509.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_0.
[40] Peter Thoene, *Eroberung des Himmels: Geschichte des Fluggedankens* (Leinen, Germany: E.P. Tal & Co., 1937): 21.

crews or builders. They rose to the status of deities in and of themselves, capable of levelling England with impunity. This hyperbolic understanding of Zeppelin's destructive power spread into the Western world at large.

While Zeppelins were praised as pseudodeities and symbols of German power in their homeland, they were feared for the same reasons in France and Great Britain in a phenomenon that would come to be known as "Zeppelinitis." The terror of the airborne threat in countries outside Germany before the First World War contributed to the self-confirming, hubristic belief of aviation-based invincibility within Germany. British newspapers, attuned to the mythological language in which Zeppelins and their activities were couched, actively contested the "Zeppelinitis" bombing fears in Britain by explaining the science behind airships in simple terms.[41] In a similar vein, cartoons belittled the Zeppelins. One such example showed a pompously dressed lady disembarking a train, stating "I shall descend at Knightsbridge," to which a lower class passenger remarked "Takes 'erself for a bloomin' Zeppelin!"[42] This attempt to deconstruct the fledgling myth before it could grow legs in Britain and France met with little success.[43] Citizens still feared that their homes would be *abgebrannt*—fears stemming from a mythological understanding of Zeppelins.

English writer D. H. Lawrence described a 1915 Zeppelin flight over England as "a bright golden finger in the sky, the very hand of God appearing."[44] Even in peacetime, citizens of Germany's rival states were cognizant of what Lawrence called the "apocalyptic and utopian" force of the airship's presence. This was not an entirely misplaced understanding. Zeppelins

[41] Stuart Sillars, *Art and Survival in First World War Britain* (Macmillan Press, 1987): 109.
[42] Ariela Freedman, "Zeppelin Fictions and the British Home Front," *Journal of Modern Literature* 27, no. 3 (2004):
[43] Freedman, "Zeppelin Fictions," 49.
[44] Freedman, "Zeppelin Fictions," 51.

were gargantuan, weighed hundreds of tons, and used vast amounts of resources,[45] but even given the exact knowledge of the origins of Zeppelins, many Britons were inclined to describe them as a "force of nature" rather than machines.[46] Much like their German counterparts, British observers translated the reality of the Zeppelin to something beyond the power of humanity, like nature or God. This disconnect from physical reality is key in understanding the mythologization of these machines, and the disconnect's acceleration is noteworthy in both Germany and Great Britain.

The clearest example of the literary headiness that accompanied the rise of the Zeppelin was the emergent subgenre of novels known as Zeppelin fictions. H. G. Wells wrote the most famous of these, a tale in which Zeppelins and other airships took to the air in fleets of hundreds and had battles much like Renaissance-era navies.[47] In his novel, "Wells makes use of every rhetorical device available that would enhance the *mysterium tremendum* of the new machine," focusing on any superlative synonym of '"vast."'[48] Wells took the assumed capabilities of the Zeppelin to the limits of the conceivable, describing a German Zeppelin fleet bombing New York City into submission. By turning stretches of imagination into a plausible storyline, Wells contributed both to the mythology of the Zeppelin and the fear it would create. "No doomsday scenario," remarks historian Laurence Goldstein, "could be entirely dismissed in an era of stupendous technological progress."[49] Especially around the turn of the twentieth century, a historical moment prone to futuristic fantasies, extreme conceptions of the future flowered in

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[45] The *Hindenburg*, the largest Zeppelin ever made, was 2.5 times as long as Big Ben is tall, and only marginally shorter than most of the tallest skyscrapers of the day. The R101, an interwar British airship built to Zeppelin designs, used over a million oxen intestines for its gas cells. See Hedin, *Zeppelin Reader,* xi.
[46] Freedman, "Zeppelin Fictions," 48.
[47] Herbert George Wells, *The War in the Air,* 1907. Full text available at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/780/780-h/780-h.htm.
[48] Laurence Goldstein, *The Flying Machine and Modern Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986): 68.
[49] Goldstein, *The Flying Machine,* 76.

popular culture.[50] With hindsight, his stories and those of contemporaries such as the German bureaucrat Rudolf Martin are patently absurd, but in the context of the mythic status that Zeppelins held, they were believable enough to instigate real fear. [51] The addition of hard facts, such as maps depicting the range of the airships from German territory into Europe which made it clear that England had no retort to Zeppelins capable of bombing London, fed the confirmation bias which had established the mythology in the first place. Germans could see the fear evident in the "Zeppelin fictions," which only emboldened their belief in the might of the airship.

Germans were just as quick to pounce on predictions of the Zeppelin's future, but their motivations stemmed not from the fear-based myth prevalent in Britain in France but rather from the optimistic promise of the future that Zeppelins brought to the Fatherland. Many uninformed but hopeful newspaper illustrators believed airships to be the future's transportation system, contributing much to public misunderstanding of the power and future of airships. One such image, drawn for the newspaper *Die Woche* in 1912 by illustrator Fritz Koch-Gotha shows *Die Leipzigerstraße der Zukunft*, the Leipzig Street of the Future, as a near-empty avenue through central Berlin in 1920 with dozens of individual or "family" airships jamming the airways overhead.[52] Any manner of contrivances were illustrated and sent out in legitimate media, including horses suspended by small airships for all-terrain travel or bicycle-powered Zeppelins.[53] Such science fiction was a major part of aviation media during the *fin de siècle,* with writers like Rudyard Kipling going so far as to posit a world benignly governed by an airship-

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[50] Michael Matzenberger, "Wie man sich 1900 die Zukunft vorstellte," *Der Standard*, November 13, 2013. https://derstandard.at/1381371707804/Wie-man-sich-1910-die-Zukunft-vorstellte

[51] In his 1909 novel, Martin explains a Friedrichshafen-centered sphere of German influence based solely on the power of thousands of advanced airships, set in the contemporary near future. See Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 40.

[52] Fritz Koch-Gotha, "Die Leipzigerstraße der Zukunft," *Die Woche,* June 1912, Drawer 1, Box 1, Newspaper Cutouts 1900-1914, Zeppelinheim NC.

[53] Ibid.

driven bureaucracy.[54] Even the German Army General Staff was "inundated with fantastic plans for the aerial defeat of England," with pressure from politicians and bureaucrats like Walther Rathenau and the Catholic Center Party's Matthias Erzberger.[55] The populist impact of the whirlwind myth of aviation had the power to impact even the highest levels of Imperial German bureaucracy.

That influence crystallized in support of Ferdinand von Zeppelin. Before 1914 he was arguably the most popular individual in Germany, easily beating out the Kaiser. Newspapers tripped over themselves to find laudatory titles to give to the count, including *ganzer Mann,* Renaissance Man, or "people's emperor."[56] The only public figure who held nearly the same level of popular interest was Otto von Bismarck, who in some ways was a figure of the past, while von Zeppelin was a paragon of the future. In what Peter Fritzsche calls the "peoples' archive" of games, magazines, music, and advertisements, "only Bismarck occupied as much room as did Graf Zeppelin."[57] Indeed, Bismarck's cult of personality carried on well past his death, much like the Count's, as a "vital national symbol."[58] Much like the airships he created, von Zeppelin was the recipient of a grassroots swell of emotion and mythmaking in the Wilhelmine era, and those social forces were so strong that they carried his legend well into the future.

Von Zeppelin's public perception had several ramifications for the German political reality. As a South German aristocrat with twinkling eyes and a jovial smile, the count presented

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[54] Will Tattersdill, *Science Fiction and the Fin de Siecle in the Periodical Press* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) 66-68.
[55] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 44.
[56] Ibid., 35.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Richard Frankel, *Bismarck's Shadow: The Cult of Leadership and the Transformation of the German Right, 1898-1945* (Oxford: Berg, 2005): 51. Frankel goes into great detail on Bismarck's posthumous cult of personality, which shared a number of parallels with those of aviators in Germany.

a counterpoint to the stern Prussian image that dominated earlier Kaiserreich heroes like Bismarck. Prussia, argues historian Martin Kitchen, "still enjoyed hegemonic power in Germany" before the First World War, and political power was largely centered on the Prussian Kaiser and his chancellors.[59] Von Zeppelin's none-too-secret loathing for the elite northern bureaucracy, whose ranks were mostly recruited from the Prussian government, garnered him even more favor among the southern middle classes, who saw his airships and him as symbols of anti-Prussian sentiment within the Kaiserreich. One 1909 political cartoon even depicts an anthropomorphized Zeppelin "mooning" the Kaiser, representing the defiance of southern and western Germany to Prussian leadership.[60] Von Zeppelin's image probably benefitted from the indifference many Germans had for the Kaiser. While Wilhelm II spent vast sums of taxpayer wealth on his navy—a popular but rather old-fashioned enterprise compared to the novelty of airships—von Zeppelin "more nearly fitted the aspirations and ambitions of the young empire."[61]

Importantly, the aviation craze was a middle-class activity. While workers were often fascinated by flight and found some small avenues through which they could support or involve themselves in it, the "optimism about the new mechanical civilization" in Germany was primarily a bourgeois phenomenon, as the middle class had the time, money, and experience to dominate voluntary associations and other groups in support of aviation.[62] It was in part through von Zeppelin's image that middle-class Germans began to seek a larger portion of political power, as it became clear during the *Spende* that one needed not be a high-powered aristocrat to become a German hero. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a significant development of the bourgeois identity was the resentment of aristocratic power within the

[59] Kitchen, *History of Germany,* 161.
[60] De Syon, *Zeppelin!,* 46.
[61] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 35.
[62] Ibid., 279.

government. As historian David Blackbourn notes, "Middle-class attitudes may not have amounted to an antiaristocratic front, but among the more class-conscious there was a sharp dislike."[63] The pride of Germans in their aviation (as well as their navy and military whole) was communal, and that pride translated to further demands for representation in a government still firmly in the hands of Wilhelmine elites.[64] While Count von Zeppelin was a nobleman, the communalization of the Zeppelin enterprise with the Zeppelin *Spende* amounted to middle-class investment in aviation, and on some level bourgeois Germans considered his achievements an inevitable result of their support.

The *Spende* was not the only significant takeaway from the crash at Echterdingen that originated so much of the brouhaha around von Zeppelin. The crash itself becomes more noteworthy when viewed through the lens of classical mythology. Icarus, the flier who crashed, suddenly became a reality to the Germans—as stated, the Count had already been nicknamed Icarus in certain newspapers. Much like Otto Lilienthal, the German glider pilot and inspiration to the Wright Brothers who crashed in 1896 before von Zeppelin's rise, the fame of an aviator in Germany was tied to catastrophe. Von Zeppelin had the luck to escape the Echterdingen explosion unscathed along with the rest of his crew, making him the first living "son of Icarus" in Germany. The so-called Miracle of Echterdingen was miraculous not because of the crew's survival, but because von Zeppelin emerged from the crash a hero, and the LZ 4 a martyr. Peter Fritzsche writes "According to inflated press reports and popular histories, it was at Echterdingen that a broad, grass-roots nationalism revealed itself."[65] The press reports and popular histories he mentions were inflated, but not entirely in the artificial way Fritzsche implies. Rather, the media

[63] Blackbourn, *The Long Nineteenth Century: A History of Germany, 1780-1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 214.
[64] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 36.
[65] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 15

were just as swept up in the nationalistic fervor brought up by Echterdingen as any other citizens, and wrote articles lionizing the Count—one such newspaper called him "a true star… who the German people hold as a symbol of unity!" and "the first to swing [his] sword for Germany's greatness."[66] They found in him a new Icarus. Nazi writer Peter Thoene would reflect on von Zeppelin, writing "The old Dream of Icarus, to be uncoupled from our Mother Earth, for the Eagle to sail among the clouds, is fulfilled."[67] Von Zeppelin is thus the best and earliest example of a modern Germanic legend, as the frenzied adulation surrounding him moved further out of his hands and into the control of the general population who created his status in the first place. Von Zeppelin thus lost any semblance of control over what he symbolized or how that symbol was used, pushing him more into the realm of a public myth.

Icarus was not the only legendary figure with whom von Zeppelin was compared in popular media. Prometheus, the Titan who first brought fire to humanity, is another frequent icon. Romantic interpretations of the crash at Echterdingen presented von Zeppelin as a "Promethean hero," a mortal who had been "punished" for bringing flight to mankind.[68] Generally speaking, the idea of human ambition overcoming nature was a major part of the mythology surrounding the Zeppelin and its inventor. A common nickname for the Count and his airships was *Bezwinger der Luft*, subduer of the sky. The Bible outlines the concept of *Dominum terrae*, with God telling humans to go forth and subdue the earth.[69] The power of humankind over nature likely played an important role in the deification of aviation's pioneers: by achieving tasks previously reserved for the divine, early aviators moved one step closer to the heavens.

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[66] Adolf Stolze, "Zeppelin," ILA Krebbel-Zeitung Einziger Jahrgang, Drawer 1, Box 1, Newspaper Cutouts 1900-1914, Zeppelinheim NC.
[67] Thoene, *Eroberung des Himmels*, 12. Original text: "Der alte Ikarustraum, losgelöst von unserer Mutter Erde, dem Adler gleich mit dem Wolken zu segeln, ist erfüllt."
[68] De Syon, *Zeppelin!*, 42.
[69] Genesis 1:28 NIV

These ideas reflected on the German consciousness, speaking to the power of the German nation. The Zeppelin myth, then, was a key part of the German national ambition. If a German man could master the skies, what obstacle could stop the nation?

Icarian and Promethean comparisons aside, von Zeppelin was considered a hero on his own merits. His public image combined basic moral virtues with heroic characteristics. In 1908, Kaiser Wilhelm II named von Zeppelin "Deutschlands größten Mann," or "The Greatest Man in Germany,"[70] and a Karl Escher poem in a 1917 *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* obituary for von Zeppelin declared "As he made the skies serve him, the stars carried back his strength and spirit."[71] Von Zeppelin's opinion was given weight on any argument, regardless of the subject area, and even catching a glimpse of the Count was an achievement—to see him and an airship simultaneously even more so. One photograph of an early Zeppelin landing in Berlin shows the gondola completely overwhelmed by Berlin's citizenry, thousands of whom came to greet the airship.[72] The Count's jolly visage, reproduced in every image or sculpture, showed his twinkling eyes and famous white mustache, a seeming contrast to his perseverance in creating and marketing his airships. His public humility earned him only more accolades from German citizens, who inferred from him a mystique and a "New" German culture, one which reconciled old aristocratic perspectives with the achievements of industrial society.[73]

The celebration of the Zeppelin and its creator was widespread, but not entirely equitable. Women were no less interested in airships and aviation than men, showing up in roughly equal numbers to spectate Zeppelin flyovers and air shows, but the social realities of the Kaiserreich

[70] Newspaper Clipping, LRD, Persönlichkeiten der Luftfahrt, Signatur 00184, ADM.
[71] Karl Escher, "Zeppelin," *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* no. 11, 1917, LRD, Persönlichkeiten der Luftfahrt, Signatur 00184, ADM.
[72] Photograph, LRD, Persönlichkeiten der Luftfahrt, Signatur 00184, ADM.
[73] De Syon, *Zeppelin!* 47.

limited their direct involvement. While the Wilhelmine era saw advancements in women's rights—over 4,000 women were enrolled in German universities in 1914 compared to 137 in 1905—the genders were fundamentally unequal before the law.[74] Lacking the ability to study as engineers, pilots, or other trades pertinent to aviation, the only women involved in the production of the airship were seamstresses, and women travelled almost exclusively as passengers on Zeppelins.[75] The impenetrability of the male airship establishment meant that women had to seek out new avenues to express their appreciation of the vehicles, including spearheading fundraising efforts like the *Spende*, and developing "airship fashion," which provided some women their first socially acceptable opportunity to wear pants.[76] These actions, undertaken almost exclusively by middle-class women, show that despite the patriarchal organization of aviation mythology, women were eager to participate in, and perhaps gain more equality from, the Zeppelin craze.[77] Women of lower classes, who lacked the leisure time or freedom from domestic responsibilities of their bourgeois counterparts, did not have the same luxury. Their exposure to airships would be limited to chance sightings and newspaper articles, which still were written to support mythologization.

Further, the linguistic history and gendering of the word "Zeppelin" is indicative of the patriarchal attitudes towards the airships. During the Zeppelin era, the German language was evolving rapidly to accommodate new terms and technologies, many borrowed from French or English but plenty invented within German linguistic confines. However, the complete novelty of aircraft presented problems. In order to demystify the "new dimensions" aviation presented,

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[74] Kitchen, *History of Germany*, 141.
[75] De Syon, *Zeppelin!* 65.
[76] "Luftschiffer Kleidung," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Luftschifffahrt* 16, no. 7 (April 1910): 29, Drawer 1, Box 1, Newspaper Cutouts 1900-1914, Zeppelinheim NC.
[77] De Syon, *Zeppelin!*, 65. One woman, a Ms. Riotte, did earn an honorary airship pilot's certificate, but otherwise women did not crew Zeppelins.

aeronautic jargon blended "older technical terms from the naval field [like cockpit or rudder] with the poetry associated with open spaces," representing both the technological and the emotional components of aviatic developments.[78] The use of the word Zeppelin to mean airship was born out of a similar relationship. Von Zeppelin, in his patent application, had coined the terms *Luftfahrzeug*, air vehicle, and *Luftfahrtzug*, airborne train, to describe the airship. *Luftschiff*, or airship, could refer to both lighter-than-air and heavier-than-air vehicles, driving the necessity for a more specific differentiation between the two. The term *Zeppelin-Luftschiff* appeared in newspapers until the beginning of the First World War, at which point Zeppelin became the dominant term. Gender remained a problem. German has three genders: masculine, neuter, and feminine. While *Luftschiff* is neuter, the emergence of Zeppelin as the term of choice required a gender decision. Unsurprisingly, especially given the impending war and its resultant military and patriarchal connections, the masculine became the de facto gender for Zeppelin.[79]

The longstanding historical relevance of the Zeppelin, its inventor, and the fervent admiration of the man and his machine cannot be overstated. Within Germany, the Zeppelin represented the mastery of the German Man over nature, the extension of military power into airspace, and the popular groundswell of nationalistic support that accompanied them. General histories of Germany such as those by Blackbourn or Kitchen focus on broader elements of social change, nodding to the roles of advancing technology but rarely naming the Zeppelin itself. Despite this, the Zeppelin hysteria was a craze that fomented mythologization as well as nationalistic and military impulses, reflected in the increasingly warlike language in which Zeppelins were couched and the resultant fear and "Zeppelinitis" felt in Britain and France. The

[78] De Syon, *Zeppelin!* 50.
[79] De Syon, *Zeppelin!* 50. A similar issue existed in French, still spoken in the southwestern components of the Kaiserreich. When Strasbourg was overflown by LZ 4 en route to Mainz, media switched freely between le Zeppelin and la Zeppeline.

myth around the Zeppelins, then, normalized over time, as the Zeppelin evolved from a provincial oddity to a household name. In my view, comprehending German history of the early twentieth century without full knowledge of the role that Zeppelin myth played on the German spirit is impossible.

The cause of the fascination with aviation in Germany began with the Zeppelin, as epitomized by the crowdsourcing campaign of the Zeppelin company in the wake of the Echterdingen crash. What had begun as the scientific workings of a retired nobleman on the shores of Lake Constance came to be a project of the entire German people, who ascribed to the Zeppelin godlike powers. This communalization of achievement fostered mythmaking around the Zeppelin, and the cult of the airship thus became a lasting part of the German consciousness. Ferdinand von Zeppelin became a bridge between German imperial ambition and modern technological culture. This further accelerated his deification by the German nation, who came to think of the elderly Count as a sort of prophet of modernity. Moreover, the Zeppelin craze brought the Germans a new mythology, one that would play a pivotal role during the impending war. As fighter ace Ernst Udet wrote, "One German soldier conquered the sky, and German soldiers will master it."[80]

[80] De Syon, *Zeppelin!*, 184.

Chapter II

Furor Teutonicus: The Rise of the German Flying Ace

While airships played a foundational role in German aviation mythology and would continue to be a part of the national consciousness, their ability as combat vessels in the First World War quickly proved to be less than godlike. As airplanes developed to reach higher altitudes, Zeppelins became shock-and-awe machines, with the emphasis on awe. During Zeppelin raids, Londoners and Parisians were more likely to spectate than to run for cover. The airships "connected the sights and sounds of war with art."[81] However, wars are not won on aesthetic merit. A different aviatic myth took hold as the Zeppelin's lackluster combat efficacy became clear. Airplanes soon became the rulers of the sky, and their pilots the knights of the air. Further, the most noted of the aces were ascribed godlike qualities, and revered as German heroes even in the waning years of the war.

In the opening months of the war, Zeppelins, capable of much higher altitude flights than airplanes, were invulnerable to air attacks. Accordingly, in 1915 they bombed London, safe from airplanes but with limited practical success. As the technical development of airplanes advanced during the war, especially in Britain, the altitude gap was no longer significant and airplanes shot down yet more airships. The susceptibility of Zeppelins to poor weather and uncooperative machinery further diminished their use. By 1918, Zeppelins had caused 557 casualties, averaging about ten per raid, and 81 of 117 wartime Zeppelins were lost to combat or crashes.[82] Airships thus proved to be highly inefficient weapons. As it became clear that airships were no longer technologically dominant, aviation mythology's focus shifted: the cult of the fighter pilot "may have helped offset the psychological effect of the [Zeppelin] losses… the public discovered the

[81] Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 209-210.
[82] De Syon, *Zeppelin!,* 106.

likes of the Red Baron and shifted its attention to the new sky-gods."[83] Along the same lines as von Zeppelin, the adulation and perception of these pilots quickly grew beyond their control. The German nation, bereft of their confidence in airships' military might, needed to keep a hero in the sky. The new fighter aces represented the shifting mythology in aviation, reflecting the national mood in the way they were portrayed, celebrated, and elegized.

Airplanes had thus far played less of a role in the German aviation craze due to the preeminence of the Zeppelin, but their obvious superiority in wartime began to shift the balance. Early airplanes were cumbersome and frail, which earned them the affectionate but accurate nicknames of "box," "crate," and "carton" from notable pilots like Manfred von Richthofen. However, their speed, ease of production, and agility compared to airships made them the better weapon.[84] Even in 1914, a small airplane raid reached Dover on the English coast, undermining the airship's supposed superiority.[85] The largest producers of German airplanes included Fokker, Albatros, and several subsidiaries of the Zeppelin corporation in Friedrichshafen. Overshadowed at the beginning of the war by the focus on Zeppelins, these producers had to play catch-up to the Allied powers. In doing so, the potency of the newest part of aviation mythology, the cult of the air pilot, became clear.[86]

The pilots of the new airplanes, the best of whom were called "aces," attracted significant public attention. The term "ace" has come to mean any pilot who has shot down more than five enemy aircraft. It began with the French term *as*, given to Roland Garros, the first pilot with five confirmed victories. It is an unofficial but aspired-to title among combat pilots. On the German

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[83] De Syon, *Zeppelin!*, 100.
[8484] Manfred von Richthofen, *The Red Air Fighter* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1990), 84. Trans. T. Ellis Barker.
[85] "Der Erste Deutsche Flieger über den Hafenanlagen von Dover," *Kriegstagbuch aus Schwaben* (Stuttgart), Heft 24, 1914. Drawer 1, Box 2, Newspaper Cutouts 1914-1918, Zeppelinheim NC.
[86] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 62.

side, the three most prominent "aces"[87] were Max Immelmann, Oswald Boelcke, and Manfred von Richthofen.[88] Between the three, new rules of engagement and strategies for aerial combat were developed, and their understanding of how a fighter squadron operates permeates military pilot training to the present day. That said, the survival rate of airplane pilots was only marginally better than that of Zeppelin crews: Boelcke and Immelmann both crashed in 1916, and von Richthofen was shot down by an infantryman in 1918. Immelmann was credited with 15 aerial kills, Boelcke with 40, and von Richthofen with 80.[89] These and many other pilots became German heroes, treated as saintlike martyrs in the press, whose legacies resonated for decades in the German public consciousness.

The German newspaper industry played a crucial role in this hero construction. Aviation was certainly relevant to the progress of the war, as at the early Battle of Tannenberg in August 1914 where aerial observations of troop movements allowed German Field Marshall Paul von Hindenburg to triumph over Russian forces. However, so-called dogfights, or combat between fighter planes, contributed little overall, with fighters of both sides downing each other in roughly equal numbers, mirroring the attrition on the ground. These dogfights, and the pilots who participated in and especially won them, presented new heroes to the German people. The novelty of airplanes in war and the creation of individual heroes served to enhance flight's role regardless of its military impact. The news media were quick to recognize this trend (they too were German people, swept up in aviation's appeal) and began focusing attention on pilots and air battles rather than the relatively dreary and static trench warfare on the Western Front.

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[87] See Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 66.

[88] Von Richthofen was a *Freiherr* or baron, and famously flew a bright red triplane, earning him the enduring nickname *Rote Baron* or "Red Baron" among flyers from both sides of the war. Von Richthofen, *The Red Air Fighter,* 120.

[89] Von Richthofen had the most confirmed kills of any First World War flier, making him the "ace-of-aces" of that war.

"Thanks to media and pop culture," historian Michael Paris writes, "the 'superman of the skies' takes hold of the popular imagination and reinforces the idea of the air war as unique and of the airman as courageous."[90] Making accurate kill counts was alien to the ground war—no machine gunner or artillerist could know exactly how lethal he was. Further, death was anonymous on land. Mass graves and battles with millions of casualties reduced infantry deaths to statistics. Fighter pilots had individual actions and deaths, a potentially soothing quality to German families who received little more than a letter informing them of their loss. The preservation of fighter pilot identity, as individuals in the war rather than cogs in the machine, helped cement their heroism in the public eye.

In a related vein, Anton Lübke, a nationalist writer of the 1920s and 30s, claimed that the "war was not decided by infantry, artillery, cavalry, but rather by the airplane."[91] While the claim was far from true—First World War aviation was, in a practical sense, barely more than a sideshow—the air war did have a marked impact on the home front, allowing for romanticization of an otherwise bleak war, in which death tolls in the hundreds of thousands were common and economic costs massive. Large-scale industrial carnage on the ground defied any preexisting notions of warfare, souring the mood of the home front. Aviation provided something of a reprieve to these feelings. Air battles and the aircraft "involved spectators in a display of force" unlike any conflict had ever shown, awing ground observers civilian and military alike.[92] The unanimous fascination with the air war propelled the mythologization of individual fliers. Their deeds, perceived as mythic from the ground, helped create an escape valve on the home front for

[90] Michael Paris, "The Rise of the Airmen: Origins of Air Force Elitism, c. 1890-1918," *Journal of Contemporary History* 28, no. 1 (1993): 124.
[91] Anton Lübke, *Oswald Boelcke: Der Meisterflieger* (Germany: Reutlingen, Enßlin & Laiblin, 1934): 20.
[92] Goldstein, *The Flying Machine*, 77.

the dismal nature of the ground war. The enthusiastic reporting on dogfights only further contributed to this trend.

Furthermore, the shifting attitudes of the German "home front," or the civilian experience of the war, were crucial to the development of wartime aviation mythology. Predictably, Germans were most enthusiastic about the war in its early stages. David Blackbourn notes that "public declarations trumpeted the 'ideas of 1914,' presenting the German war effort as a defense of culture and idealism" against the British and French. [93] He includes that Count von Zeppelin declared that "the whole of England must burn" with a twinkle in his eye. Books on the war, especially those on the new technologies and weaponry, sold rapidly. Von Richthofen's *Red Air Fighter*, for instance, ended up selling hundreds of thousands of copies. Other media such as the press and cinema supported the war in most combatant countries, including Germany.[94] The German press, under complete control of the wartime government, rarely let any news of defeat through. Such measures sought to foment nationalism during the war. Despite this, the mood at home changed as the war—and its impacts on civilians—increased in length, brutality, and deprivation.

As the war continued, morale sank for most Germans. Staggering casualty rates directly affected most families, and women often had to work full-time to bolster military pension payments. Fighting primarily occurred on foreign soil, calling into question the notion of "defending German culture," a common argument by those in favor of the conflict, as a plausible rationale for the war. German war-weariness was further exacerbated by growing logistical problems for a home front that had not been prepared for a war of length. By the end of 1916, "Germany no longer had a realistic chance of winning the war and there was widespread

[93] Blackbourn, *Long Nineteenth Century*, 468.
[94] Ibid., 468.

discontent at home."[95] Issues of manpower and shortages of consumer goods and food, not helped by the Allied blockade of Germany, had a "crucial effect on the social fabric," and probably contributed to Germany's eventual defeat.[96] The resultant strain on the home front changed attitudes of the war, and this wartime trajectory of morale was not without consequences for the public view of aviation.

As with aviation thus far, the war and its concurrent sense of nationalism was supported most ardently by the middle class. They contributed the most to war bonds and other financial donations, and "did most to propagate the metaphysical significance of the war effort."[97] Bourgeois support of both aviation and the early war is not coincidental. Those to whom German strength in the sky appealed would likely find sense in the rationale that the war was somehow a defense of German culture. Despite their initial support for the war, however, the middle classes suffered a great deal from it. The "accumulation of vast wealth in times of suffering" of already rich industrialists offended many bourgeois Germans, who for the first time began sympathizing with leftists and Social Democrats.[98] The decline of middle-class economic standing towards the end of the war would inform the revolutionary culture which followed it,[99] and marked a change in German social structure.

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[95] Kitchen, *History of Germany*, 189.
[96] Blackbourn, *Long Nineteenth Century*, 477.
[97] Ibid., 469.
[98] Kitchen, *History of Germany*, 185.
[99] Economic historian Niall Ferguson points out that while unemployed workers usually turned to Communism, jobless middle-class Germans made up the bulk of nationalist groups. Further, he notes that bourgeois Germans "often seem to have been more shocked" by the economic downturn just after the war. Niall Ferguson, "German Interwar Economy," in Mary Fulbrook: *20th Century Germany: Politics, Culture and Society, 1918-1990* (London: Arnold Publishing, 2001): 40-41.

The first two years of the war saw one predominant air hero, Oswald Boelcke.[100] Though his name is not as well-remembered today as his successor and prodigy Manfred von Richthofen, Boelcke was the center of the airborne myth through 1916. Like Ferdinand von Zeppelin, Boelcke's appeal stemmed partly from his humility. Von Richthofen noted in his memoirs that "Boelcke had not a personal enemy. He was equally pleasant to everybody, making no differences."[101] He became "Germany's Sweetheart," emblematic of German enthusiasm in the first two years of the war. Again following the pattern set by von Zeppelin, Boelcke's success was idolized and communalized. Captions of his portrait in news media were unfailingly captioned *Unser Boelcke*, "Our Boelcke," showing the public embrace of the new flying legend.[102] While he was certainly a celebrity, Germans often treated Boelcke's victories as their own, and his death as the death of a family member. Boelcke's biographer Anton Lübke wrote that upon hearing of the ace's crash, "in the streets from mouth to mouth, from house to house the whisper quickly spread: Boelcke is dead."[103] The personal attachment among Germans to Boelcke supports the idea that celebration of pilots transcended mere fame.

Curiously, the Allies and the Germans both appreciated Boelcke. The French called him the King of the Air, and the "world, friend or foe, celebrated him as a hero."[104] A great deal of this sentiment derived from Boelcke's gallantry, such as when he landed alongside an observer

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[100] Other aces of note such as Max Immelmann existed, but never warranted the same level of public adoration as Boelcke. Immelmann and Boelcke were involved in a much-publicized friendly rivalry, but Immelmann was killed well before Boelcke.
[101] Von Richthofen, *The Red Air Fighter*, 76.
[102] "Unser Boelcke," *Anhaltischer Staats-Anzeiger* (Dessau), Nov. 16, 1916, Luft- und Raumfahrt Dokumentationen, Persönlichkeiten der Luftfahrt, Signatur 00013, ADM. See also "Unser Boelcke," *Vogel-Verlag* (Pössneck) Heft 44, 1926 in the same folder.
[103] Lübke, *Der Meisterflieger,* 93. Original text: "In den Straßen von Mund zu Mund, von Haus zu Haus schnell das Gerücht verbreitet: Boelcke ist tot."
[104] Lübke, *Der Meisterflieger*, 3. Lübke, a nationalist, likely exaggerated, but among aviators on all sides of the war, a certain respect was given to skilled pilots, and honoring enemy dead was common practice. See Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 88-89.

aircraft he had just shot down to check on the welfare of the crew, and later delivered a letter from one of the captured crewmen back over to English lines. Even after his death, a British airplane flew over German territory near Boelcke's funeral, at great personal risk, to drop a wreath with the message "To the memory of Captain Boelcke, our brave and chivalrous foe."[105] In many ways, the front-page spreads garnered by the stories of Boelcke's chivalric approach to combat furthered the idea that he was somehow more than a pilot or soldier. The German government, in complete control of the press, probably encouraged the laudatory comments made by private citizens and the media alike. The use of Boelcke's image by the German media goes beyond propaganda purposes, with a genuine and heartfelt connection between Boelcke and the German people reflected consistently. Every time Boelcke reentered civilian life, he was swarmed by adoring fans; while visiting the Frankfurt Opera, he was besieged by fans at intermission, and one of the actors even hastily wrote and performed a song in his honor. Boelcke "could hardly believe [his] ears," remarking "but you should have seen the audience going raving mad; they clapped, shouted, and tramped their feet."[106]

While many likened fighter pilots to knights, eagles, scythes, or other predatory imagery, the symbolism around Boelcke was less aggressive. He commonly was shown as an angel—his boyish demeanor certainly played into a cherubic interpretation. While Boelcke was certainly a lethal fighter, his nonchalance towards combat figured into his myth. Von Richthofen recalled a conversation with Boelcke about his success, wherein Boelcke quipped "It is quite simple. I fly close to my man, aim well and then of course he falls down."[107] That unassuming attitude made

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[105] Wall text, *Legend, Memory, and the Great War in the Air,* Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C.
[106] Johannes Werner, *Knight of Germany: Oswald Boelcke, German Ace* (Philadelphia: Casemate Publishers, 2009): 164.
[107] Von Richthofen, *The Red Air Fighter*, 59.

Boelcke approachable to the people of Germany. His role as "Germany's Sweetheart" represents a stark shift from the myth surrounding Ferdinand von Zeppelin. The Count represented a grandfatherly figure who had helped prepare the Germans for war. However, during the war, the German public began to favor Boelcke, a young soldier. In Boelcke the Germans saw the best elements of themselves, fighting what was still a generally popular war.[108]

Boelcke's success and growing mythology owed a great deal to the industrialist Anthony Fokker, a Dutch aircraft engineer working in Germany. Fokker not only developed many of the airplanes the Germans utilized during the First World War but also the synchronizer gear, which allowed forward-facing machine guns to shoot through the spinning blades of a propeller. Prior to this invention, guns had to be wing-mounted and were thus less accurate, harder to unjam or modify in flight, and worse for the structural integrity of the aircraft. Fokker's invention allowed Boelcke and his notable compatriots like Max Immelmann to gain an advantage over French and English fighters, moving the term "Fokker Fodder" into the soldiers' lexicon.[109] However, Immelmann was killed when his Fokker monoplane fell apart midflight, and Boelcke's 1916 death in a collision during a dogfight seemed indicative of a reversal in German fortunes of war.

Boelcke thus became a true celebrity, and in many ways a mythologized hero, through his military success. His fame inspired a new generation of pilots. The common refrain was *Ich will ein Boelcke sein*, "I want to be a Boelcke." A German colonel noted that "As long as… this spirit remains alive in our air service, our dear fatherland will be untroubled."[110] A poem written by a Dessau professor when Boelcke made the near-unprecedented achievement of reaching the rank of Captain by the age of 25 called him "Our Siegfried" and tells of "lads/who can't quite

[108] Robert Rennie, "Memory and Mourning: Reconceptualizing German Aviators in the First World War," (presentation, University of Tennessee Knoxville), 2.
[109] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 69.
[110] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 80.

pronounce the word:/propeller./But their eyes/betray the wish:/to be as brave as Boelcke!"[111] Each of Boelcke's forty victories "reaffirmed Boelcke's invincibility and by extension Germany's."[112] That relationship between Boelcke's conquests and the German military reality foreshadowed the problem of Boelcke's death: If Boelcke, the godlike airman who had so enraptured Germany, could be killed, what, then, could Germany expect from the war? The shift in attitudes towards the war and towards pilots in late 1916 is revealing of the power of aviation myth in society.

The mythologization of Boelcke crystallized further after his demise, despite its unglamorous nature. Boelcke and another German pilot collided in pursuit of an Allied airplane, severely damaging Boelcke's wing. Boelcke managed to crash-land, but was wearing neither a seatbelt nor helmet and died upon impact.[113] German media revealed little of the exact circumstances. Rather, newspapers leapt at the opportunity to further the myth of Boelcke by creating in him a martyr. One obituary held "A *mythos* arises! His deeds are undying! His name is immortal! His spirit is our spirit!"[114] Another named him "Young Siegfried, you flying white rose…"[115] A *Simplicissimus* magazine cover honoring Boelcke shows a dove laying a wreath over a fallen angel, explicitly using religious imagery.[116] Several propaganda postcards show Boelcke as an angelic figure, his spirit borne away from his downed airplane by a German eagle.[117] Once again national symbolism became important to the communalization of Boelcke's achievement. In his lifetime, the legend of Boelcke was shared with the German people. In his

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[111] Ibid., 78.
[112] Ibid., 79.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Newspaper clipping, 1916, LRD, Persönlichkeiten der Luftfahrt, Signatur 00013, ADM. Original text: "Seine Taten sind unsterblich! Seine Name unvergänglich! Sein Geist sei unser Geist!"
[115] Paul Grotowsky, "Jung Fliegers Tod," *Anhaltischer Staats-Anzeiger* (Dessau), Nov. 16, 1916, LRD, Persönlichkeiten der Luftfahrt, Signatur 00013, ADM. Originial text: "Jung Siegfried du, du weißes Flügelroß…"
[116] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 81.
[117] Erster Weltkrieg: Fotos berühmter Flieger 1914-1918, LRD, Signatur 00351, ADM.

death, after the pilot could no longer exert his own influence over his story, it belonged entirely to them. However, the continuation of the cult of the fighter pilot required a new hero. Naturally, Boelcke's protégé the Red Baron, Manfred von Richthofen, filled the role.

Like Boelcke, von Richthofen became the preeminent flier of his time. He had flown in Boelcke's squadron as a talented prodigy and had already attracted considerable attention as an ace of his own accord. Von Richthofen's legend took on a character far removed from Boelcke's. As the war developed, however, so too did the German consciousness and its perception of heroes. Boelcke was portrayed as an angel, a jovial figure whom Germans could adore, reflective of the optimism felt in the early war. The declining military status and the attendant pessimism on the home front in the latter stages reintroduced an old hero archetype. Rather than relatable good-naturedness, Germans shifted back to a Bismarckian hero: the arch, militaristic Prussian. Manfred von Richthofen, with his noble pedigree and skill in flight, presented a convenient return to form for Germans. Like Bismarck or Franco-Prussian War Marshall Helmuth von Moltke, two Prussian icons who provided a sense of security in wartimes past, von Richthofen was a comforting presence. As the war began to look unending to Germans, a return to the militarism embodied by the Prussian past or von Richthofen seemed inviting, and harkened towards a victory against the British and French.

Where Boelcke had been as courteous a fighter pilot as possible, von Richthofen was not particularly humble. He wrote "It was a glorious feeling to be so high above the earth, to be a master of the air."[118] Von Richthofen, importantly, was old enough to remember the Zeppelin fervor and the birth of aviation mythology, and happily espoused it. The grimly honest style of his memoirs, describing the burning countryside as "a terribly beautiful picture" and battlefields

[118] Von Richthofen, *The Red Air Fighter*, 45.

as “happier hunting grounds” portrayed the war in a new light. He went even farther to dissociate flight from the bleak realities of war, writing “It gave me tremendous pleasure to bomb those fellows from above” and “It was particularly amusing to pepper the gentlemen down below with machine guns.”[119] Von Richthofen’s use of “from above” and “down below” seems to go beyond altitude. By reasserting the literal superiority of airmen over the armies on the ground, von Richthofen also made clear the impunity of the flier, doubling down on their mythical power.

Using von Richthofen’s memoirs requires some unpacking. He was directed to write them by the government, and did so while on convalescent leave for a minor head injury some months before his 1918 death. However, his manuscript was embellished heavily by the wartime government that also removed allegedly defeatist elements before publication. Von Richthofen himself noted later that even disregarding the propaganda efforts, the text was “too insolent” and that he was no longer the type of person portrayed in the memoirs.[120] Whether this shift in attitude was due to the censorship of his draft or a change in personality in the months between its writing and publishing, the upshot is that the text is more closely reminiscent of the views of the German government towards aces and their attitudes than von Richthofen’s own. Given that the memoirs sold in huge numbers in Germany, von Richthofen became, more than before, an officially-sponsored part of the cult of hero worship.[121]

For both Boelcke and von Richthofen, the war was a localized experience, and stepping into the civilian world and understanding their fame shocked them.[122] Von Richthofen received parades wherever he visited, met and hunted bison with the Kaiser, and to his astonishment was

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[119] Von Richthofen, *The Red Air Fighter*, 49-72.
[120] Karl Johnson, “The Red Fighter Pilot (online edition preface),” *The War Times Journal*, http://www.richthofen.com. There are some lines in the published edition which are almost certainly not the work of an editor, such as “I am in wretched spirits after aerial combat… [the war] is very serious and grim.” Such passages are atypical and probably censor oversights.
[121] Blackbourn, *Long Nineteenth Century*, 468.
[122] Robert Rennie, “Memory and Mourning,” 1.

honored in person at the "Holiest of Holies,"[123] the headquarters of the German General Staff. It is important to recognize that at this late stage of the war, the Kaiser had "vanished from public view" and due to his lack of active leadership, Marshall Paul von Hindenburg was the "Ersatz Kaiser," and more in control of Germany than Wilhelm II.[124] Von Richthofen remarked "Formerly I would never have believed it possible that on my twenty-fifth birthday I would be sitting at the right of General Field Marshall von Hindenburg and that I would be mentioned by him in a speech."[125] Von Richthofen's popularity and importance for morale made him worthy of rubbing elbows with such higher powers, as well as the more public celebrations such as parades in Cologne or Freiburg.

After scoring his fiftieth combat victory, von Richthofen was offered a safe desk job. Keeping him alive became more important than keeping him airborne, at least in the view of the General Staff. Refusing to retreat, saying "I am only a soldier who does his duty," von Richthofen seemed to feel that his presence in the air was more valuable than his life, in terms of military pragmatism and home front morale. Von Richthofen's refusal highlights a potential difference between the man and the classical hero. The pilot wanted to do his job. However, the von Richthofen who lived in the poetry and mythologization of the German media was considered to embody the wartime sentiment of revenge and action against the Allies. For von Richthofen to be put behind a desk would mean he would not succeed in the air. From a mythological standpoint, the ace's grounding would mean Germany was "grounded" as well. If von Richthofen lived on the ground, the myth would die. However, he died in the air, and the

[123] Von Richthofen, *The Red Air Fighter*, 138.
[124] Isabel V. Hull, "Military Culture, Wilhelm II, and the End of the Monarchy in the First World War," in Annika Mombauer and Wilhelm Deist, *The Kaiser: New Research on Wilhelm II's Role in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 236-237.
[125] Von Richthofen, *The Red Air Fighter*, 138.

myth thrived. Much like Boelcke, the worship for the flier only increased in intensity in the afterlife.

Von Richthofen's death was in many ways symbolic of the German defeat. During a low pass over enemy lines,[126] von Richthofen was shot and killed by an Australian infantry machine gunner. The idea that the Red Baron, the German superman of the skies, was instantaneously ended by a single bullet from "below" was a bitter pill to swallow for the military, which avoided publishing the details of von Richthofen's death beyond its occurrence. A Frankfurter newspaper simply said "Richthofen dead! A cloud of sadness has lain itself over the German nation."[127] Von Richthofen's demise was symbolic of more than a military loss but of a heartfelt defeat to the entire German people. The intensity of the loss nonetheless ushered in a new phase in German aviation mythology.

Where Boelcke's death was a glorious tragedy, von Richthofen's was a bitter loss.[128] A poem by Hans Brenneur elegizing the pilot captions an image of a Germanic goddess carrying von Richthofen from his airplane to Valhalla. The poem includes the important line "There will come a day/When England will die away."[129] Such resentment towards England and France near the war's end contributed to the tone of the press after von Richthofen's death. Moreover, the response to his demise was one of anger more than sadness. The German Air Hero was not even originally interred in German ground; Australian troops honored him near his crash site until he

[126] This was a highly unusual move for the cautious von Richthofen. Historians attribute his recklessness to a recent head wound, and the fact that he was attempting to fight alongside his younger brother and squadron member, Lothar. See the introduction by Norman Frank in *The Red Air Fighter*, 24.
[127] "Richthofen," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, April 24, 1918, LRD, Persönlichkeiten der Luftfahrt, Signatur 00144-01 (Familie von Richthofen), ADM. Original text: "Richthofen tot! Eine Wolke der Trauer legt sich über das deutsche Volk."
[128] The *Simplicissimus* cartoon for Boelcke's death showed an angel in an ornate tomb, while von Richthofen's showed a hawk over a simple military grave. See Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 99.
[129] Newspaper clipping, LRD, Persönlichkeiten der Luftfahrt, Signatur 00144-01 (Familie von Richthofen), ADM. Original text: "Einmal kommt der Tag/Da England wird vergehen"

was removed to Berlin later in 1918.[130] As the war continued to rage, the loss of perhaps the last combat hero of the war was felt more strongly on the home front than Boelcke's.[131]

Historian Robert Rennie argues that the differences in the reactions to the deaths of the two aces indicates that there was no singular "German" response to the demise of aviator heroes.[132] However, using aviation myth as a reflection of German society, I propose that there were two "German" responses, differentiated by the time and changing perceptions of the war between the deaths of Boelcke and von Richthofen. This change in tone can be explained by the shift of perception during the war. Combat, especially in the air, changed from the chivalric and indeed novel practice in which Boelcke thrived to the total and protracted war of attrition in which von Richthofen succeeded most. The concurrent mood darkened on the home front, as the war became increasingly unpopular, even among the middle class who had most supported belligerence four years previously. The German experience on the home front at the end of the war, where deprivation and war-weariness were the norm, was incomparable to that of 1914.[133] The evident social differences in the way fliers' deaths were mythologized indicates as much.

Further, there were not many prominent German fighter pilots left by the time of the armistice. Of the 456 pilots with more than three victories, 104 had been killed and twenty-seven were missing by war's end. Twenty-five of the sixty Pour-le-Merite aces were dead.[134] While their survival rates were not hugely different from foot soldiers who lived and fought in much worse conditions, the publicity behind the death of aviators presented them as braver than the infantry. The idea of the First World War as a "Great Crusade," as it was often called, has been

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[130] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 97.
[131] Rennie, "Memory and Mourning," 4.
[132] Rennie, "Memory and Mourning," 1-3.
[133] Kitchen, *History of Germany*, 187.
[134] The Pour-le-Merite was Germany's highest award for individual gallantry. See Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 75.

completely repudiated by the experience of foot soldiers, but the imagery of aces purported by contemporary media "made aviators spectacularly visible to a public familiar with the literature of chivalry."[135] Aces, more than any other segment of the military, were the immediate focus of mythical thought.[136]

The highly publicized nature of the death of the most popular flier played into this process. The demise of aces was perhaps the most notable example of the propulsion of the cult of the fallen. Historian George Mosse writes, "War [is] considered a cosmic process by those who preached its myth. Within this process the cult of the fallen occupied a central position."[137] In postwar magazines, von Richthofen was rarely mentioned independently of Boelcke or Immelmann (and often von Zeppelin, who had died of natural causes in 1917).[138] Newspapers commonly noted the "Todestag," or day of death, of each of the famous aviators. As these anniversaries became further removed from the lifetimes of the aces, embellishments and hyperbole gained more traction. The anniversary of von Richthofen's death on April 21 even became *Luftwaffe-Tag.* With each passing of Boelcke- or Richthofen-Tag, newspapers exaggerated the pilots' deeds, further shaping these men into legends.[139]

This transformation of pilots into "romantic military heroes"[140] often manifested itself through discussions of chivalry and knightliness. Pilots were officers by default, and many, like von Richthofen and his brothers, were aristocrats.[141] This elite status made the leap to proverbial

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[135] Goldstein, *The Flying Machine*: 87.
[136] Fritzsche, "Founding Fictions," 213. See also Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 213.
[137] George Mosse, "National Cemeteries and National Revival: The Cult of Fallen Soldiers in Germany," *Journal of Contemporary History* 14, no. 1 (Jan. 1979): 4.
[138] Drawer 1, Box 2, Newspaper Cutouts 1914-1918, Zeppelinheim NC.
[139] Presse-Bild-Zentrale Photo, LRD, Persönlichkeiten der Luftfahrt, Signatur 00144-01 (Familie von Richthofen), ADM.
[140] Wall text, *Legend, Memory, and the Great War in the Air*, Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, Washington, D.C.
[141] Peter Fritzsche points out that only 27 of 362 German aces were noblemen. However, Boelcke and von Richthofen both were, and their media coverage alone dwarfed that of many lesser aces. See *Nation of Fliers*, 98.

knighthood barely a stretch for readers at home. The airmen over the trenches were fighting a more individualized war, rather than the communal slog of the infantry below, further propelling the knightly image.[142] In a war which otherwise undermined ideals of heroism and chivalry, the aces presented an exception.[143] Von Richthofen boasted, "It is one of the accepted facts of the war that the German aviators have displayed greater chivalry than any other branch of the German services."[144] Dogfights harkened back to an older type of warfare; "the duellings between British and German aces resemble the battles of champions like Aeneas and Turnus."[145] To the men on the ground, who often sent home exaggerated tales of dogfights over the battlefield, the flier was imagined as a mythic hero who brought some purpose and adventure to an otherwise unending war.[146] Rudolf Presber's "*Kampfflieger*" poem was published in a newspaper under an image of an archer riding an eagle, evoking even more classical mythological imagery.[147] German fliers as a whole were given nicknames like "half-knight, half-scythe" and *furor teutonicus*, emphasizing their lethality and chivalry together.[148] Dozens of accounts of military aviation used knightly terms in their titles.[149] In any case, the chivalric imagery of aviation only further played into its romanticization and mythologization in the

[142] The discussion of the "upper ten thousand" was common regarding the air force, the *haute bourgeoisie* of the war who lived in comfortable conditions and had considerable freedom and luxury compared to infantrymen. See Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 85. Fritzsche also quotes German pilot Erwin Böhme, who described aerial combat as "fencing," and an "honorable war among men."
[143] Blackbourn, *The Long Nineteenth Century*, 467.
[144] Von Richthofen, *The Red Battle Fighter*, 10.
[145] Goldstein, *The Flying Machine,* 89.
[146] Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat & Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981): 125.
[147] Rudolf Presber "Kampfflieger," *Deutsch-Amerika* 3, no. 9 (March 1917), Drawer 1, Box 2, Newspaper Cutouts 1914-1918, Zeppelinheim NC.
[148] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 73.
[149] See *Knight of Germany* on Boelcke, *The Red Knight of Germany* on von Richthofen, *Guynemer: Knight of the Air* on the titular French ace, and many others like *Germany's Last Knight of the Air, Knights of the Air,* and *The Knighted Skies*. Laurence Goldstein's *The Flying Machine and Modern Literature* includes a more comprehensive list on page 88.

German press, that could use it to glorify at least one aspect of the increasingly lost cause that was the war.

Individuality played a key role in wartime heroization, despite von Richthofen's and Boelcke's disdain for solo aerobatics.[150] The fact that airplane pilots could be singled out for their combat was likely the single largest enabler for their mythologization. Compared to a Zeppelin captain, who shared praise with his crew, or the infantry, aces could be lauded for their solo actions. Mostly, the individualization of pilots was a result of the media, who ascribed charisma to the aces. Sociologists Edward Berenson and Eva Giloi make the argument that charisma and fame are two different issues: for many people to know of or recognize a given person constitutes fame, but charisma is a "residual" authority which gains its power not from institution or tradition but from some "other" realm. Charisma "seems a kind of gift, an inexplicable, indefinable force that makes those who possess it different."[151] Further, Max Weber described a charismatic individual as "endowed with supernatural, superhuman powers or qualities… not accessible to the ordinary person."[152] Charisma, then, is a quality ascribable only to an individual, and broadly speaking aces were the only individually recognized combatants in the war. The association of charisma, or indeed supernatural qualities, to the pilots indicates a not entirely rational response to their success: mythologization.

The mythic standing of wartime pilots also had important generational ramifications. The children of the immediate postwar era would become the soldiers of the Second World War, and their views of military aviation would be entirely based on second- or thirdhand accounts of the flying heroes. Floyd Gibbons' 1927 book *The Red Knight of Germany*, a wildly fictionalized

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[150] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*¸92.
[151] Edward Berenson and Eva Giloi, *Constructing Charisma: Celebrity, Fame, and Power in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 3.
[152] Ibid.

version of von Richthofen's military career, was a popular read worldwide. Gibbons, who had never met von Richthofen, consolidated the hearsay, hyperbole, and myth surrounding the ace into one story, which for a considerable time was the definitive source on the Red Baron in the English-speaking world.[153] This hagiography and others like it made up an important part of the *zeitgeist* of the era after the war, fostering admiration for wartime fliers in the postwar generation. Crucially, this generation as well as veterans of the war would make up much of the rank and file of the Nazis. Hermann Göring, mid-level war ace who later became the Nazi Air Minister and a major player in the Nazi Party, was the master of manipulating his own legend. While his official aerial victory count was 22, the figure was inflated as time went on. Later descriptions nearly doubled his victory count to 40.[154] Göring and Von Richthofen in particular but also Boelcke, Immelmann, and surviving aces like Ernst Udet thus became key parts of Nazi party propaganda and symbolism.[155]

Ernst Udet, who became the highest-scoring surviving German ace, was cut from a different cloth than his predecessors. While he was a talented pilot in his own right, he owed his life to the chivalry of French pilots who had every opportunity to kill him, and he "remembered the war in terms of these encounters." He was an uncommonly humble pilot, unafraid of mentioning his fear or mistakes in combat. Udet characterized the honor code of pilots, recognizing the uncommon friendliness of fighter duels and the belief that aces did not necessarily want to kill pilots but rather down airplanes.[156] Udet went on to become a Luftwaffe general, but felt so abandoned by the Nazis and Göring in particular that he committed suicide in

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[153] Floyd Gibbons, *The Red Knight of Germany* (New York: Garden City Press, 1927).
[154] "Männer der deutschen Luftfahrt," *Luftreise*, February 1934, LRD, Persönlichkeiten der Luftfahrt, Signatur 00066 (Göring), ADM. For the inflated figure, see Helene Dittmar, "Hermann Göring: Lebensbild eines Kämpfers," in the same folder.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 87.

1941.[157] The government concealed the nature of his death and instead laid him to rest as a hero next to von Richthofen in Berlin. The reality of Udet's death perhaps illustrates the uneasy relationship between aces and fascism.[158] Martyred aces were useful for Nazi propaganda, but living ones presented other challenges. The individual achievements of wartime pilots worked squarely against Nazi ambitions of collective work and success.

As foreshadowed by Boelcke and von Richthofen's deaths, Germany lost the war. The armistice, the Treaty of Versailles, and subsequent agreements in the immediate postwar years would shape German aviation from the early Weimar period until the Nazi era. The agreements put a moratorium on military flight and aircraft production, severely hampering German attempts at aviatic development. As stated, however, the Germans found ways for their tradition of flight to continue. The unique circumstances of the German nation after the war forced a unique adaptation, the turn to gliders and gliding culture. Just as the war shifted aviation mythology towards a militant view, the postwar period and the gliding culture created therein would once again change the focus of the myth to one of redevelopment, recreation and resistance.

The First World War thus had a profound impact on the role of aviation in German society. Aircraft had transformed from the harbingers of the future represented by the Zeppelin into weapons of war, and so had their pilots. The jovial image of Ferdinand von Zeppelin was replaced first by Boelcke's boyish charm and then by von Richthofen's severity, just as the German attitudes of the war shifted from optimistic to survivalistic. While their victory counts made them famous, the aces embodied the wartime spirit of the Germans and propelled flight mythology into a new era. Pilots were transformed from dashing adventurers to romantic

[157] Despite his issues with his superiors, Udet was certainly culpable for acceding to the actions of the Nazi regime and should not be pardoned.
[158] Hans Herlin, *Udet: A Man's Life*, trans. Mervyn Savill (London, 1960), 205.

knights, and technical skill in the "inner sanctum" of the cockpit translated to superhuman ability.[159] The disproportionate media coverage of pilots secured the role of the flier into the German public consciousness even further than the Zeppelin craze already had, implying that a Germany without aviation was no longer truly Germany.

[159] Rieger, "Modern Wonders," 160.

Chapter III

We'll Fly Without Them: *Gliding in the Weimar Republic*

Oskar Ursinus, the editor of the popular aviation magazine *Flugsport*, wrote in 1919 that "German aviation lay in ruins, crushed and underfoot." In a rare moment for aviation journalism, Ursinus was not embellishing.[160] The end of the war and the provisions against aviation in the Treaty of Versailles ensured that there was little airworthy equipment left in Germany.[161] Motors were smashed and melted down, and aircraft wings were sawed to pieces. An image of a destroyed Zeppelin hangar outside Frankfurt probably is the most telling; when the Zeppelins could not fly, neither could Germany.[162] Ursinus was the man who conceived a solution. As the story goes, he stayed in the countryside one weekend and watched buzzards fly, which prompted him to ask "Why should we be prohibited from doing what the birds do? If after Versailles we can't fly with motors, then we'll fly without them."[163] He started developing his plan, one which hoped to lift Germany's Icarus back out of the sea. Gliding would serve as a timely surrogate for German aviation mythology, and precipitated a transition towards gliding and aviation as inherently nationalist activities, with undertones of civil disobedience to Versailles and one-upmanship to the Allies.

Germany did not fare well in the years immediately following the First World War. The harsh requirements of the Treaty of Versailles, which required huge cutbacks in military size and strength, as well as significant materiel reparations such as 40 million tons of coal per year and

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[160] *Flugsport* 1919, no. 3, Zeitschriften 1918-23, Frankfurt Airport Historical Archive IFM-IS2, Fraport AG. This archive will henceforth be abbreviated "Fraport Archive."
[161] See Treaty of Versailles, Part V, Section III, Articles 200-208. Articles 201 and 202 lay out the direct ramifications most clearly: "During the six months following the coming into force of the present Treaty, the manufacture and importation of aircraft, parts of aircraft, engines for aircraft, and parts of engines for aircraft, shall be forbidden in all German territory." Article 202 dictates that all "aeronautical material" had to be delivered to the Allied powers.
[162] Drawer 2, Box 1, Newspaper Cutouts 1918-1933, Zeppelinheim NC.
[163] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 104.

ten percent of German cattle, further stressed the already overburdened German economy. The announcement of the amount of reparations also caused the number of Weimar supporters in the Reichstag to plummet. Attempts at wage and tax reform sparked what became a spiral of hyperinflation in 1922, causing marks to lose essentially all value.[164] Further, political strife including general turmoil in late 1918 due to a famine and violence, a 1920 coup attempt called the Kapp Putsch, and a revolving door of chancellors and ministers lent no credible stability to early Weimar. High-profile political assassinations such as that of foreign secretary Walter Rathenau in 1922 also indicated anti-Semitic and anti-left sentiments rising within the political right.[165] Germany between 1918 and about 1924 was thus a tumultuous country. Social seams already loosened by the war frayed even further, calling into question whether aviation's unifying tradition at least among the middle class could have any impact.

A crucial part for the understanding of German gliding culture is that there was no evidence whatsoever that gliding was conceived as a nationalist activity. Ursinus, who was the lead organizer of gliding activities for the better part of a decade, left no trace in his correspondence in 1919 or 1920 that he was intending gliding to become a nationalist or militaristic endeavor.[166] He desired it to be a sport rather than a means to a military or otherwise revanchist end, and was content with peace so long as aviation could continue unabated.[167] It was also not entirely clear yet in 1919 how drastically the Allies intended to hamper German aviation. The 1921 London Ultimatum and its renewals were the main obstacles to German airplane and Zeppelin manufacturing, which would "cast aviation as an evocative symbol of

[164] Niall Ferguson, "German Interwar Economy," 36-40.
[165] Kitchen, *History of Germany*, 203-205.
[166] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 104.
[167] Evelyn Zegenhagen, *Schneidige deutsche Mädel: Fliegerinnen zwischen 1918 und 1945* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2007), 348-49.

German defiance."[168] Ursinus' motivation sprang from a scientific standpoint. As a civil engineer, he noted that the war and the increases in airplane power and weaponry had tunnel-visioned aircraft designers away from the study of aerodynamics and efficiency. To construct airplanes that would actually constitute progress in technology and design, Ursinus believed, gliding was a necessary development. It was thus in the interest of sport and science that Ursinus pushed for gliding after the war, unaware of the political developments that would transform it into something else entirely.[169]

Given aviation's already mythological status, gliding was a relatively easy sell to Germans. Unlike von Zeppelin, whose fame exploded overnight, gliding started small and built into a popular spectacle steadily over a dozen years.[170] In the bleak days after the war, Germans, especially educated middle-class ones, had an intense nostalgia for the "good times" of the prewar era. This nostalgia coincided with increasing impatience in the weak democratic governance of early Weimar.[171] Among the middle class, "there was a widespread feeling that 'bourgeois society' had been dealt a crippling blow in the war," and, further, there was "no political party that represented [middle class] common values and aspirations."[172] The middle-class desire for cultural representation in some form manifested itself partly with flight, with a return to scientific progress and cultural tradition resurfacing as the driving force behind aviation mythology. As written in the popular aviation magazine *Luftweg* in January 1920, "Each improvement of transportation, of these most important cultural factors [air and time], brings a

[168] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 106. See also Zegenhagen, *Schneidige deutsche Mädel,* 348 for a discussion of the London Ultimatum.
[169] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 105-106.
[170] Zegenhagen, *Schneidige deutsche Mädel,* 347.
[171] *Der Luftweg* 1921, no. 4, Zeitschriften 1918-23, Fraport Archive.
[172] Kitchen, *History of Germany,* 214.

changeover in the lives of the people."[173] Many Germans thus found gliding to be both a solace from the Weimar Republic's early instability and also a means of moving forward in the face of Allied restrictions.[174]

German organized gliding found its haven in the hilly Rhön valley, whose highest mountain, the *Wasserkuppe*, was an ideal location for glider takeoffs. A Darmstadt University aviation club found the broad slopes before the outbreak of the war, and had several successful gliding trips there. Ursinus chose the same site as the basis for the gliding rally of 1920. Student groups and other enthusiasts from across the country came to design, build, and test their machines and eventually compete. Though the rally was well-attended, only three of eleven registered gliders completed flights, and with meager results. The record for duration of a glide, set by Orville Wright in 1911, was 9 minutes and 45 seconds, while the Wasserkuppe gliders could not manage a minute. A university group from Aachen, accompanied by a veteran pilot, salvaged the rally at the eleventh hour, setting an unofficial distance world record of almost two kilometers in a two-and-a-half-minute flight. This news gave Ursinus the necessary media coverage to organize another rally the following summer.[175]

The 1921 and 1922 rallies more concretely linked the established aviation mythology to the pursuit of gliding by introducing a competitive dimension. World records were broken time and time again, and with the discovery of updrafts over the top of mountains, glider flights of over three hours' length became possible, and garnered increasing media attention. By the late 1920s, gliders starting at the Wasserkuppe were capable of flights of hundreds of kilometers,

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[173] *Der Luftweg* 1920, no. 7, Zeitschriften 1918-23, Fraport Archive. Original text: "Jede Verbesserung der Verkehrsmittel, dieses wichtigsten Kulturfaktors [Raum und Zeit], bringt eine Umwälzung in das Leben der Menschen." The use of the word *Umwälzung*, which I have translated as changeover, is interesting. Literally, it means a mechanical revolution, such as that of a propeller spinning.
[174] Zegenhagen, *Schneidige deutsche Mädel*, 347-348.
[175] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 107-108.

landing in France, the Netherlands, or Czechoslovakia. "A small city" sprang up on the side of the Wasserkuppe, home to hundreds of the bohemian "gliding gypsies"—students, veterans, and others who were happy enough in ramshackle living conditions—who made up the bulk of the participants. The achievements at the Wasserkuppe garnered increasing media attention, and spectators began coming to witness glider flights. One paper proclaimed the glider altitude record as "3000m über der Zugspitze!" and featured the faces of the "*Vogelmänner*," Birdmen, who had broken records in 1922.[176] Journalists wrote of the gliding spectacle as one that had "restored their faith in Germany."[177]

Much to Ursinus' satisfaction, gliding did indeed produce important technological results. Numerous well-known aeronautical engineers gained experience at the Wasserkuppe, most notably Hugo Junkers, Willy Messerschmitt, and Hanna Reitsch, all of whose experiences building or flying gliders would impact their later service and notoriety during the Second World War. The experience pilots gained through gliding would inform military and civilian flight techniques. Perhaps the most significant technological legacy is that of the monoplane. During the war, most combat airplanes were bi- or triplanes, with multiple wings "stacked" to produce more lift. However, gliding at the Wasserkuppe produced the undeniable insight that monoplanes, airplanes with a single wing, were more efficient in a glide and thus aerodynamically superior. Airplane design still follows this precedent. Further, the results of the Wasserkuppe rallies showed that Ursinus and his cohort had legitimate scientific aspirations with gliding, and that it was not until later that nationalist interests began to sway the culture of the rallies in a new direction.

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[176] *Der Jungflieger*, LRD, Sportflug, Signatur 00722, ADM. The Zugspitze, in the Bavarian Alps, is the tallest peak in Germany.
[177] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 109.

In many ways, the "birdmen" at the Wasserkuppe filled a vacuum in mythology, carrying forward the early popularity of glider pioneer Otto Lilienthal. The myth surrounding aviation had been so strong throughout the First World War that the German media seemed barren without it in the intervening years. The reintroduction of aviation, even in the simplified form that gliding presented, allowed a resurgence of the myth in the media. Even technically oriented aviation journals, which were generally well-informed enough to avoid the hyperbole around flight and fliers, occasionally introduced fragments of mythologization in articles on gliders. When discussing one record-breaker, a magazine quipped "Like Apollo himself he alit into the morning light,"[178] adding yet another classical figure to the already extensive pantheon of aviation gods. Even in 1921, when the gliding rallies were not yet explicitly nationalist, the youths at the Wasserkuppe often earned the nicknames of "eagles" or "dragons" in aviation publication. Despite their makeshift tents and bohemian spirit, the glider enthusiasts began to attract the mythological spirit that had been so powerful before and during the war. As the most-publicized aviation activity in early Weimar, gliding filled a spiritual void that had been missing in the tumultuous immediate postwar years, and stayed well away from government meddling which had tainted many citizens' view of the Weimar era. Ursinus coined the term *Rhöngeist*, Spirit of the Rhön, to name the techno-cultural mood and progress made at the gliding rallies in spite of Allied repression.[179]

The Wasserkuppe rallies, then, helped morph aviation from a more broadly mythological construct to something distinctly German. The state of German society in the aftermath of the First World War supported a new perspective on aviation. Gliding became not only scientifically

[178] *Der Jungflieger*, LRD, Sportflug, Signatur 00722, ADM.
[179] Fritz Stamer, *12 Jahre Wasserkuppe* (Berlin: Reimar Hobbing, 1933), 12.

important but a "national duty" by the mid-1920s.[180] Unpowered flight developed "strength of purpose, foundational practice, courage, and resolve" for the Fatherland.[181] At the same time, nationalistic advertisements appeared proclaiming "*Luftfahrt ist Not,*" which can be translated either as "aviation is necessary" or "aviation is in need."[182] Both interpretations became the status quo. Though the Allied powers were largely uninterested in the gliding rallies, the Germans began to see the experiences at the Wasserkuppe as a form of resistance to aviatic restrictions imposed after the war. Glider pilots invented the portmanteau "fudenzu," short for *für um die Entente zu uzen*: to anger, or mock, the Allies.[183] Gliding's cultural role, and the strength of the myth surrounding it, allowed it to be a defiant symbol of the German people's need for aviation.

The attachment many Germans felt to the gliders is supported by the sheer logistics of the rallies. Even in 1923, with the hardships of hyperinflation still in full swing, thousands of visitors journeyed to the Rhön Valley to see the gliders perform, causing the local railroads to add extra lines and trains to service the influx of guests. Government officials had a paved road built up to the gliding grounds.[184] By 1926, the once-makeshift tents and buildings at the rally site had become a functioning city with municipal amenities, such as a post office, theatre, and hotel. There was "even dancing. Even bobbed hair!"[185] The attraction to gliders was so great that during one of the worst economic crises in German history, the Wasserkuppe remained a boomtown. Such was the strength of aviation's *mythos* after the war.

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[180] Königsberger Hartungsche Zeitung, no. 86, 13 April 1932, Zeitschriften 1929-1933, Fraport Archive.
[181] Evelyn Zegenhagen, *Schneidige deutsche Mädel*, 347-348. Original text: "...Zielstrebigkeit, Praxis auf geistiger Grundlage, Mut und Entschlossenheit."
[182] *Der Luftweg* 1925, no. 2, Zeitschriften 1924-28, Fraport Archive.
[183] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 110.
[184] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 109.
[185] *Luftfahrt* no. 30, August 1926, LRD, Sportflug, Signatur 00722, ADM.

During the consecration of an air veterans' memorial on the Wasserkuppe, thirty thousand Germans crowded the mountaintop, including luminaries such as former General Erich Ludendorff and Kaiser Wilhelm II's brother, Prince Heinrich of Prussia. The scale of that event became common during the gliding rallies in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The inscription on the statue, commonly quoted in contemporary books on aviation, reads "We dead fliers/ remain victors/ by our own efforts/ Volk, fly again/ and you will become a victor/ by your own efforts."[186] The connection between the martyred war aces and the gliders at the Wasserkuppe became solidified in the German consciousness, furthering the legitimacy of the mythology surrounding gliders. Former aces often formed the backbone of gliding groups, lending their aeronautic experience to the aviation novices. Glider pilot Max Kegel, who discovered thermal updrafts, for example, had been a flier in the war. The convivial nature of the early years at the Wasserkuppe meant that war stories must have been exchanged between the veteran pilots and shared with the novices, keeping some element of the wartime aviation myth alive. At any rate, the tradition of aviation "acquired lineage as a new generation of aviators was educated."[187]

In literal terms, the largest erroneous belief about the gliding tradition was that the Allies were irritated by the "loophole" utilized by the Wasserkuppe fliers. The German media, especially those with nationalist leanings, emphasized the stringency of Allied restrictions on civil aviation. While the actual restrictions on aircraft size and performance were onerous, powered civil aviation was never banned. As historian A. Bowdoin Van Riper notes, press stories tended to conflate the much stricter ban on military aviation with civilian aviation. Nationalists were able to play up this rhetoric for years, such as when the Nazis erected a

[186] A. Bowdoin Van Riper, *Imagining Flight: Aviation and Popular Culture* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2004): 44.
[187] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 111.

monument to German aviation at the Hamburg airport. The statue consisted of a battered airplane motor strapped to the ground by heavy chains, with the inscription "Versailles, 1919."[188] The dissemination of the idea that the Allies were actively trying to "ground" all German flight fed into nationalist rhetoric, which was heavily based on resentment towards the Allies. Anybody who stopped or hindered German aviation, the argument went, was an obstacle to Germany itself. Those who participated at the Wasserkuppe saw themselves, incorrectly but earnestly, as thorns in the Allies' sides, clever utilizers of a loophole in Versailles and the London Ultimatum. While this self-perception is crucial to the aviation myth in Germany, the activities at the Wasserkuppe were not prohibited, explicitly or implicitly, in any of the postwar aviation agreements, and there is little to no evidence of any Allied government showing the slightest concern over the gliders and their achievements.[189]

The nationalist depictions of glider rallies went even deeper than perceived civil disobedience. Gliding enthusiasts "believed that it developed in its participants the very qualities that would make Germany great again: physical strength, mechanical aptitude, self-discipline, self-confidence, and a sense of purpose."[190] Gliding and aviation, among those who followed their myth, presented an opportunity for national rebirth. Van Riper's use of "Make Germany great again," repeated twice in a paragraph, is a coincidence but one not far removed from the cries of current American nationalists, who, like their German counterparts of the 1920s, desperately desired a return to the "glory days" of their nation's past.[191] For the Germans, that meant the Zeppelin era, a time where aviation was the pride and joy of the German spirit. In the

[188] Van Riper, *Imagining Flight*, 41.
[189] Treaty of Versailles, Section III, Articles 200-208. See also the London Ultimatum: "Allied Ultimatum to Germany," *The American Journal of International Law* 16, no. 4 (1922), 214-215. Versailles stripped Germany of military aviation, London prohibited civil manufacture as part of a reprisal for Germany's failure to completely demilitarize flight as laid out in Versailles.
[190] Van Riper, *Imagining Flight*, 43.
[191] *Imagining Flight* was published in 2004, so the connection is probably coincidental, but not insignificant.

postwar era, when their manifest superiority was not readily visible in the skies over Lake Constance, nationalists could see echoes of those emotions in gliding.

The popularity of gliding was not limited, however, to nationalists, or even the middle-class. The demographics of gliding enthusiasts included engineering and science students and small-town artisans—typical constituents of the Social Democrats. Quite unlike many other youth-oriented organizations of the late Weimar era, glider groups roughly represented the social stratification of the German populace. However, Ursinus' idea of the *Rhöngeist,* which eschewed social bigotry or class differences, avoided politicizing the gliders.[192] The nonpartisan appeal of the glider mythology was important to its early development, as a sanctuary from the political anxiety that wracked the early years of the Weimar Republic. This lack of politicization in a politically fractious era, on the other hand, made gliding an easy target for those with political ambitions. Nationalists, the Nazis and their aviation apparatus under Hermann Göring transformed that nonpolitical sentiment into an antidemocratic one, paving the way for a transition for airborne Nazism.

A great deal of the propaganda legwork for shifting gliding to a purely nationalist activity took place well before Nazi interference. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, a huge portfolio of glider-based songs, poems, and literature emerged, reflecting on pilot and spectator experiences at glider camps like the Wasserkuppe and the newer camps which emulated it.[193] This corpus, reminiscent of the similar works surrounding the Zeppelin before the First World War, further developed the public and especially the youth interest in gliding as a national sport. One such song whose title lauds several hubs of gliding, "Rossitten-Grunau-Rhön," concluded "The

[192] Stamer, *12 Jahre Wasserkuppe*, 14.
[193] Oskar Ursinus, *Rhön-Zauber: Segelflieger-Erinnerungen* (Frankfurt, 1931). First edition available at Fraport Archive.

gliding spirit flies/ into the German dawn! /Let it ring and echo: Up to the slopes! / The spirit lives in us all!"[194] The glider camps themselves also represented resistance to Weimar urban culture. Where Weimar was a materialist, mass-culture society, "gliding fortified nostalgia for a purer, simpler time without machines."[195]

The rustic camps in many ways were a reactionary response to the social changes presented by the Weimar Republic, especially in the urban-dominated Golden Twenties. Historian Jeffrey Herf makes the important case that such combinations of the rustic idyll and technology were problematic: "Had the pastoral vision vanquished technological advance, German modernity would not have led to the German catastrophe."[196] Gliding is an inherently technological exercise, and to say that glider groups escaped the prevalence of technology as a cultural factor during Weimar is to ignore the complex engineering behind gliding. Oskar Ursinus himself wrote that gliding created more aviators with "dirty fingernails," rather than the well-off hobbyist fliers of the prewar era.[197]

Gliding was also a distinctly cooperative exercise, despite the friendly competition at the rallies. Air clubs obtained materials and tools together, tracked each other's developments and emulated the best ones. When gliders had to be hauled uphill for launch, everyone helped. Each sacrificed for the group, and benefitted from the group's success. These traits began to espouse the nationalist ideal of a German: "self-sacrificing and filled with a sense of purpose."[198] The harmony of the glider groups at the Wasserkuppe would in many ways become the purported ideal of Nazism. Nazi officials like Göring linked the alleged "resistance" to the Treaty of

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[194] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 123.
[195] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 123.
[196] Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1-3.
[197] Oskar Ursinus, "Flugsport XIX. Jahrgang: Gedanken Anfang 1927," *Flugsport* 19 (Jan. 1927): 2, Fraport Archive.
[198] Van Riper, *Imagining Flight*, 43.

Versailles of the early glider rallies to the Nazis' "outright flouting of it."[199] German writer Georg Cordts would later summarize that the *Luftgeist*, or spirit of the air, of the Wasserkuppe gliders translated without much difficulty into Nazi rhetoric.[200] The mythology of gliding would be among the first elements of aviation mythology harnessed by the Nazis for political gain. The "elbow-grease" mentality played directly into Nazi-supported ideals of hands-on, communal hard labor for the good of the nation. According to those sentiments, the individual was meaningless, and the German race was all-important.

Despite the eventual transformation of gliding into a Nazi activity, Weimar Germany cannot be so easily reduced into the transition between the First World War and the Third Reich, nor was gliding the only standout aviatic event of the period. While gliding and its popularity dominated the German aviation scene for the first half of Weimar, the long-distance flights of the LZ 126 and of Charles Lindbergh represented transnational modernism and a crystallization of aviation mythology, and the duality in late Weimar of nationalist and republican tones.

[199] Van Riper, *Imagining Flight*, 44.
[200] Georg Cordts, *Junge Adler: Vom Luftsport zum Flugdienst 1920-1945* (Esslingen: Bechtle, 1988), 141.

Chapter IV

Gift to the Future: Transatlantic Flights and the Golden Twenties

The defining aviatic trait of the Golden Twenties was the transatlantic quest, or a nonstop flyover of the Atlantic Ocean.[201] Two such flights, one by a Zeppelin and one by an airplane, would prove to be cultural milestones in the "Golden Twenties," the era of relative prosperity in Germany between 1924 and 1929. The flights of the German-built Zeppelin LZ 126 from Germany and of Charles Lindbergh from the United States, indicated the strength of the appeal of aviation in the two countries. The relationship between Germany and America in that era is key. Furthermore, the mythologization of transatlantic flights presents an important counterpoint to the idea that flight was inherently nationalistic, or that celebration of flight in Germany could only result in fascism. Aviation mythology, then, was not the sole cause of the rise of Nazism, but in some ways simplified and supported its rise. Aviation mythology existed on its own merits and those who seized it for their politics would shape German political reality.

The United States and Germany shared a number of aviatic parallels. The American Wright Brothers invented the airplane, and the German von Zeppelin the first dirigible. In both cases, exactly twenty-four years passed between invention and a successful nonstop transatlantic flight.[202] Both countries also had their own forms of aviation mythology. The German *Ikarustraum*, laid out in this study, was based heavily on classical myth, whereas the American "Winged Gospel" drew more from Christian narratives. American aviation mythology was a largely peaceful movement, a "happy restatement of the American dream." [203] The American

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[201] Joe Jackson, *Atlantic Fever: Lindbergh, His Competitors, and the Race to Cross the Atlantic* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012): 8.
[202] The LZ 1 first flew in 1900, and the LZ 126 crossed the Atlantic in 1924. The Wright Flier's maiden voyage was in 1903, and Lindbergh's crossing was in 1927.
[203] Joseph Corn, *The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). See also Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 134.

tradition of flight did not "foresee brave, new political communities based on exclusion," but in Germany, "the elective affinities between innovations in technology and sterner modes of politics were… more dangerously partisan."[204] Both nations cared deeply for aviation, but in different ways.

Further, popular culture in both countries developed during the 1920s in a similar way: new movements in art, fashion, mass culture, and social turmoil presented themselves as the alternative to the prewar "Belle Époque." History, proclaimed contemporary thinker Jacques Bainville, was dead. The 1920s were "the age of the forecaster, the seer, the technocrat."[205] Officials were not blind to this trend, recognizing during the Golden Twenties the importance of the "visual mediation of politics," the use of symbols and myth to further political ambitions in the era of mass media and culture.[206] Moreover, the culturally experimental societies of the 1920s allowed for the sort of technocultural exploration that bolstered the public interest in aviation, creating a better environment for aviation mythology to grow.

The relative prosperity of the latter half of the decade in the Weimar Republic is crucial to understanding the reaction to aviation as well. The Stresemann government implemented a new currency called the *Rentenmark* in late 1923, stabilizing the German currency market which had undergone rapid hyperinflation since the end of the war. The concurrent Dawes Plan from the United States allowed reparations to take the form of long-term loans, permitting an immediate state of economic recovery.[207] The Germans based much of their subsequent industrial development on the American production models of Taylorism and Fordism. Historian

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[204] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 134.
[205] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 133.
[206] Kathleen Canning, "The Politics of Symbols, Semantics, and Sentiments in the Weimar Republic," *Central European History* 43, no. 4 (Dec. 2010), 567-580.
[207] Ferguson, "Germany Interwar Economy," 36-56.

Mary Nolan points out that the flood of American business strategies into Germany and their acceptance by Germans indicated enthusiastic support for American styles of production and modernization.[208] These technologically-oriented approaches to industry fed further into support for aviation, as scientific development became a large part of industry.

The attitudes of German mass media were another key component of the relative goodwill between the two countries that fostered aviation-based parallels. Significantly, the United States controlled the only sizable helium deposit in the world. Germany coveted American helium, not least because unlike its volatile cousin hydrogen, helium is inert and safe in airships. The German government, at the Zeppelin Corporation's chief Hugo Eckener's urging, thus ensured that language towards Americans and the American government in the media was almost never negative, in the hopes that the United States would allow Germany access to helium.[209] While this trend reflects a form of censorship, the result was a generally positive attitude towards the United States, at least where aviation was concerned. If we assume that the unanimous attitudes of the German press reflected societal feelings, it is no stretch to say that many air-minded Germans had a favorable view of the United States in the 1920s, especially compared to their European rivals France and Britain.[210] Even if this assumption is incorrect, the press disseminated its government-directed representation of Germany's foreign policy, which included tolerance of America, to the German people.

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[208] Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 14-18.

[209] It was the failure of this deal under the Nazi government that would later contribute to the 1937 explosion of the Hindenburg, which was originally designed to be a helium airship. See De Syon, *Zeppelin!*, 199.

[210] The confluence of Taylorism and Fordism, which together presented technology as a solution to social troubles in Germany, as well as mass media and other American cultural propagation, contributed to this phenomenon. Contemporary scholar Otto Alfred Palitzsch claimed in 1928 that "in cultural terms Berlin had become a suburb of New York." See Günter Berghaus, "Girlkultur: Feminism, Americanism, and Popular Entertainment in Weimar Germany," *Journal of Design History* 1, no. 3/4 (1988): 208.

The luxury of leisure time with the improved economy gave middle-class and proletarian citizens the opportunity to look skyward. Along with other recreational pursuits, aviation benefited from the perceived stability of the Golden Twenties. Peter Fritzsche writes, "Weimar Germans gathered around airplanes and pilots as much as they crowded socialist picnics and nationalist parades."[211] The grand spectacles of the Weimar era presented relief from reality. Gliding, as previously discussed, provided one good diversion. Airshows were another. Ernst Udet, the former First World War ace-of-aces, made his career in the interwar years as a stunt pilot. His barnstorming flights, where he demonstrated the precision of flight to pluck a handkerchief off the ground with a wingtip, proved a popular spectacle. At one such rally in 1926, about 60,000 spectators witnessed Udet and other stunt pilots. Such attendance was not atypical.[212] Zeppelins contributed even more to this spectacular approach—an airship appearance at any such airshow could nearly double the spectator count, despite the relative simplicity of their flight.[213] The spectacles of aviation in Weimar Germany helped reestablish civil aviation as the dominant part of aviatic myth. The establishment of a single German airline, Luft Hansa, in 1925 and the end of postwar aviation restrictions in 1926 fostered the civil side of aviation further yet.

Despite the return of economic growth after hyperinflation, Germany was still saddled with reparations from the First World War. Reparations took various forms beyond cash payments. Among the reparations "in kind" that Germany paid to the United States was a Zeppelin, the ZRIII *Los Angeles*, known in Germany by its model number LZ 126.[214] The LZ

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[211] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 135.
[212] Hans Herlin, *Udet: A Man's Life*, 173.
[213] De Syon, *Zeppelin!*, 144.
[214] A note on terminology: Many texts use "ZRIII" as the designation of choice to refer to the LZ 126. However, while it was still crewed by Germans on its maiden flights, LZ 126 is perhaps a more accurate title. Once it was transferred to the U.S. Navy, ZRIII would be the correct term. See Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 138.

126's destination was the source of some tension. Germans keenly remembered the story of the French *Dixmude*, another German airship owed to France in a similar reparations deal. Shortly after the transfer, the *Dixmude* crashed at sea, an incident captioned in German newspapers with the grim headline "German Inventions in the Hands of Foreigners."[215] The *Dixmude* and the pain of reparations stirred a German distrust of foreign control of German technology. While it may not have been exclusively nationalist, the German aviation myth did not extend to faith in the skills of in French fliers. That said, due to the modeling of German mass culture on American precedents, as well as the American concessions on German reparation payments during the mid-1920s, a level of confidence in Americans existed that was not extended to the French.

Before the LZ 126 could be transferred to the Americans, however, it navigated a publicity tour around dozens of German towns and cities. The reappearance of Zeppelins in German skies—photographs of the airship over the Brandenburg Gate or other local landmarks were mainstays of contemporary newspapers—was a balm to the postwar German spirit, which Modris Eksteins describes as fundamentally anxious.[216] The airship's presence was a memory of the perceived simplicity of the prewar days, especially compared to the hustle of urban Weimar Germany. Further, such sights as the LZ 126 over the Brandenburg Gate "caused an explosion of generational nostalgia" and reignited the prewar excitement around aviation.[217] The young adults who had been taken in by the first Zeppelin flights in the early 1900s were now a major percentage of the German populace, and their renewed enthusiasm reflected in the accolades heaped upon the LZ 126. Zeppelins, in any case, were representative of the positive aspects of

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[215] Drawer 2, Box 1, Newspaper Cutouts 1918-1933, Zeppelinheim NC. Original text: "*Deutsche Erfindungen in fremder Hand*."
[216] Modris Eksteins, *The Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 255.
[217] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 140.

the Kaiserreich. The temporary absence of Zeppelins only strengthened their central place in the German spirit.

The transatlantic flight of the LZ 126 in October 1924 was not only a major event in the history of Zeppelin flights, but constituted the first-ever nonstop transatlantic flight. The feat was a major risk: Zeppelin technology had been vastly improved thanks to the war and designers at the Zeppelin firm such as Ludwig Dürr, but a storm over the North Atlantic could have easily crippled the airship and forced it down at sea. The crossing was thus a mark of confidence in German engineering and crewing of airships. Despite the hardships on aviation that the postwar years had induced, Germans still saw themselves as the supreme aviators of the world. Furthermore, the flight of the LZ 126, which given the serene pace of airships took about three days, was one of the first events in media history to be "livestreamed," that is, extra reports were released several times a day on the airship's progress. Even though little of interest besides westbound movement was occurring on the LZ 126, the nation was taken in by the stories. Front-page headlines of major newspapers blared out the location of the LZ 126 at any given time, when finally, in the late afternoon of October 15, 1924 the airship landed in Lakehurst, New Jersey, before a massive crowd of American spectators.[218]

In spite of the tensions surrounding reparations, Germans proved to be more proud of their achievement than resentful towards the United States. A frequent German caption to images of the LZ 126 underway was *Wärmsten Glückwünsche*, or "Warmest well-wishes," indicating that the Germans were more gladdened to see a symbol of their pride in the air than saddened by its transfer to the Americans. Politicians quickly attached themselves to the airship in both states. Hearst correspondent Karl von Wiegand announced "Reporters from the democratic Left to the

[218] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 138. Lakehurst was the United States' prime airship port, and the exact spot where the LZ 126 moored would be the site of the *Hindenburg* disaster.

extreme Right welcomed the sense of national self-confidence that accompanied the flight of the ZRIII [the American designation for the LZ 126]" in Germany. One of New York City's largest ticker-tape parades welcomed the LZ 126, and American president Calvin Coolidge, a notoriously stoic figure, was photographed smiling broadly while shaking Eckener's hand, and reportedly asked Eckener a number of fascinated questions about the airship.[219] In any case, the LZ 126 provided a diplomatic triumph, allowing Germany its first victory since the end of the First World War by crossing the Atlantic, while also providing the United States with a useful military vessel.[220] However, the social consequences of those events in many ways proved more far-reaching than initially thought.

In the case of the LZ 126, Hugo Eckener, like von Zeppelin before him, became one of the most popular men in Germany after the voyage. A 1926 poem by Willi Stolze in the aviation magazine *Der Jungflieger*, entitled "Eckener-Geist," or "The Spirit of Eckener," included the line "You are the man who builds the Golden Bridge." The poem protrays Eckener, and really the LZ-126, as a futuristic force, and ultimately the connector of the Old World to the New. The poem went so far as to call him "the most well-known man who walks the Earth" upon his landing in Washington.[221] His resurgent popularity allowed him to launch the *Zeppelin-Eckener-Spende,* a fundraising drive aimed at further revitalizing the airship industry. The success of Eckener's *Spende* allowed the creation of the *Graf Zeppelin,* the first Zeppelin to make regular commercial transatlantic voyages, and later the *Hindenburg,* which prior to its demise was

[219] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 139.
[220] Newspaper clipping, LRD, Persönlichkeiten der Luftfahrt, Signatur 00049 (Eckener), ADM. German newspapers proclaimed that "Deutschland hatte die erste Schlacht nach dem Krieg gewonnen," or "Germany has won its first battle since the war."
[221] Willi Stolze, „Eckener-Geist," *Der Jungflieger,* 1926, LRD, Persönlichkeiten der Luftfahrt, Signatur 00049 (Eckener), ADM. Original text: Du bist der Mann, der gold'ne Brücken schlägt," and "Eckener ist heute der bekannteste Mann, den die Erde trägt."

poised to be the flagship of a profitable line of luxury airliners.[222] All these investments were the direct result of the enthusiasm for a German transatlantic flight. Without the LZ 126's voyage, the Zeppelin firm may well have withered on the vine. It was the grand spectacle of the transatlantic flight that propelled the newfound success of the Zeppelin. The spectacle of aviation was one of the most important symbolic underpinnings to understanding Weimar Germany—on some level, it was already present in the glider rallies and other air shows. These spectacular displays were a profound part of the Weimar era's culture.

Another newcomer to the aviation *mythos* in the Golden Twenties was the "new woman," the American cultural export who took the form of the female pilot. Previously, aviation had been almost entirely a male pursuit—every pioneer, hero aviator, or stunt pilot listed in this study has thus far been male. However, "For the 1920s New Woman, the aviator represented a long-sought sexual equality… Gender did not matter in the cockpit, only skill."[223] In a short period of time, then, women went from spectators of aviation to active participants. This indicates a somewhat radical change in the culture and myth surrounding aviation. Paradoxically, allowing women to take flight liberated them from traditional gender roles but simultaneously swept them into a myth that was patriarchal and nationalist in character. The paths of these woman fliers were similarly divergent; Hanna Reitsch was an accomplished flier and became one of the most devoted followers of the Nazi Regime. As the 1945 Battle of Berlin raged and Hitler hid in his bunker, Reitsch flew into a hidden airstrip and attempted to evacuate him.[224] Meanwhile, other aviatrixes like Amelia Earhart, Elly Beinhorn and Thea Rasche made efforts through their own

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[222] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 141.
[223] Jackson, *Atlantic Fever,* 21.
[224] Reitsch even referred to the *Führerbunker* as "the Altar of the Fatherland." See Hanna Reitsch, *The Sky My Kingdom: Memoirs of the Famous German WWII Test Pilot,* (Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania: Casemate Publishers, 2009), 206.

flights to modernize the culture around aviation, at least attempting to escape the masculine hold of the myth.[225]

Another transatlantic flight, this time by the American Charles Lindbergh, shows the best contrast between the national mythology of aviation created in Germany and the transnational appeal of the enterprise. Lindbergh, not unlike Ferdinand von Zeppelin, was effectively a nobody who turned into one of the most well-known figures in the world in an overnight transition. As Eksteins notes, "He was literally worshiped and adored… His sudden and fabulous fame, overnight, has not been matched."[226] By completing a marathon 33.5-hour flight from Long Island to Paris, nonstop and solo, Lindbergh achieved an aerial feat probably unparalleled in public fascination until the moon landing in 1969. However, just as the LZ 126 and its flight had deeper ramifications, the ripples of Lindbergh's flight were reflected in German and American society. In a unique manner, Lindbergh, a somber, disciplined, and polite young man, bridged the gap between prewar social decorum and the modern technology that had taken the 1920s by storm. "No statesman," quips Eksteins, "no politician, not even Woodrow Wilson… had ever done so much for the American image in Europe."[227] The German social atmosphere proved conducive to this understanding of Lindbergh.

In one sense, then, the LZ 126 and Lindbergh were both diplomats, "air ambassadors" sharing notions of peace and prosperity through their celebrated flights. A 1928 photograph of Eckener and Lindbergh shaking hands and smiling shows perhaps the two most important international aviation figures of the 1920s.[228] The LZ 126 under Eckener was the "first ambassador of goodwill" to America after the war, and Lindbergh popularized Americans even

[225] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 161.
[226] Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 247.
[227] Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 249.
[228] Photograph, LRD, Persönlichkeiten der Luftfahrt, Signatur 00049 (Eckener), ADM.

more in Europe.[229] Lindbergh's father had even served in the U.S. Congress for Minnesota and had been a strong voice against American intervention in the First World War, strengthening Lindbergh Junior's position as a peaceful pioneer even further.[230] The two flights, perhaps more than any other events or actions, helped to replace negative tension with enthusiasm and fear with hope for the future. The unrestricted positive attitudes towards both flights, despite the controversial situations especially surrounding the LZ 126, is indicative of their strength of goodwill.

Americanization in Weimar culture contributed to Lindbergh's appeal. Loosely speaking, Americanization refers to the expansion of the influence of American social thought and culture on the Weimar Republic. German historian Detlev Peukert identifies the 1920s as the high tide of Germans appropriating modernity, technology, and spectacle from American cultural presence.[231] Despite the relatively isolationist foreign policy of the United States in the 1920s, American economic growth caused a swell of interest from other states, and it was perhaps the weak status of the German economy combined with the helium-based positive media relationship that made Germany particularly susceptible to American cultural exports, such as jazz, Hollywood films, and modes of capitalism such as Fordism. Historian Thomas Saunders, who argues that "America figures as the primary foreign element in Germany's development" during the Weimar Republic, cites "preoccupation with American achievements" as a major factor of Americanization in interwar Germany.[232] Charles Lindbergh's flight, one of the crowning American achievements of the era, certainly fits the bill. Modris Eksteins mentions that in

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[229] Newspaper clipping, LRD, Persönlichkeiten der Luftfahrt, Signatur 00049 (Eckener), ADM. Original caption: "Z R III: Erster Botschafter des guten Willens nach dem Krieg."
[230] Bley, *Sie Waren die Ersten*, 137.
[231] Detlev Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, trans. R. Deveson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992): 178-190.
[232] Thomas J. Saunders, "How American Was It? Popular Culture from Weimar to Hitler," in Agnes C. Mueller (ed.), *German Pop Culture: How 'American' Is It?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004): 52-53.

Weimar "the [national] self-doubt was most profound, and America capitalized on this doubt, both figuratively and literally," while novelist Hermann Hesse succinctly noted "Germany today is a kind of America."[233] The level of interest which many Germans had in the American perspective was higher than anywhere else in Europe, and media discussion of flight was no exception.

The news media in Germany at the time of Lindbergh's 1927 flight was at its high-water mark. There have never been more sources of the printed word as in the late 1920s.[234] The press certainly amplified and reverberated Lindbergh's fame, though it did not spark the passion felt for the young American. Realistically, the journalists were just as reactive as the rest of the Western world towards Lindbergh's flight. Lindbergh received almost no press coverage whatsoever until his plane was sighted over Ireland, and despite that "the sensational story blossomed in people's minds before it reached the front pages, while Lindbergh was over the Atlantic."[235] Laurence Goldstein remarked, "The minds of humanity in an instant surged and flowed into one great, common ocean in which anxiety and pride were intermingled."[236] As with the LZ 126, the event received as many updates as papers were capable of printing, some nearly hourly, and those who had access to radios listened intently. So enamored were the Germans, and indeed most Europeans, with Lindbergh and his progress that they could hardly bear not to have precise information on his whereabouts and wellbeing. Despite the longing for information on Lindbergh, for about twenty hours nobody save for the pilot himself could accurately define his status. The press published and broadcasted stories nonetheless.[237]

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[233] Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 271.
[234] Ibid., 249.
[235] Ibid., 250.
[236] Goldstein, *The Flying Machine*, 97.
[237] Corn, *The Winged Gospel*, 20.

To many in Germany, Lindbergh represented the strange balance of modernity and nostalgia which had characterized much of the Weimar era. Like the Wasserkuppe gliders, who operated in charmingly rustic conditions despite making great scientific leaps, Lindbergh's personality represented the perceived purity and simplicity of the prewar years. He was single, abstinent, teetotal, and did not smoke or gamble.[238] In other words, he was not at all a product of the Roaring Twenties but his deed nonetheless excited the modern consciousness, proving man and machine could accomplish any task together. His flight also established the "true" nature of the airplane "as a figure of the triumphant modern spirit."[239] In short, Lindbergh as much as any other aviator represented the mythology of aviation, evolving from the "old" culture of the Zeppelin craze and the early development of aviation as a cultural narrative, where flight still existed to the public as a supernatural endeavor. Flight was not just a source of enthusiasm but a partial explanation for this cultural evolution within German society.

Furthermore, the excitement created by both transatlantic flights was not just the sense of technological achievement won by accomplishing a heretofore unthinkable task. The greater reward in the eyes of the general public was the sublime righteousness of them. Crossing the Atlantic was not just a means to an end but in some ways an *acte gratuite*, a free act, whose meaning came from "its own inherent energy and accomplishment."[240] French war minister Paul Painlevé called Lindbergh's flight "an aesthetic triumph, a thing so beautiful that it has gone straight to the heart of the world as only beauty and beauty alone can."[241] Much the same can be

[238] While Lindbergh would have a future of dubious morality (including support for the Nazi regime and America First and at least one secret family), the Lindbergh of 1927, especially in the media, was hailed as a paragon of virtue. His future misdeeds do, however, indicate the disconnect between how aviators were portrayed and their actual personalities.
[239] Goldstein, *The Flying Machine*, 110.
[240] Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 251; referencing André Gide's *Les Caves du Vatican.*
[241] Robert Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1920-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 25.

said of the LZ 126. Referring to Esposito's definition of myth, "Narrative that constitutes community by associating what [the community] regards as true, good, just and beautiful… and associating it with a supreme value or being," there is perhaps no better crystallization of modern myth than with transatlantic flights. The universally-admired flights constituted a world community, unified by the belief that the acts Lindbergh and the LZ 126 had performed were uniquely beautiful in a tense global atmosphere.

The harnessing of this symbolism by the involved parties further proved its significance. Lindbergh received hundreds of requests to use his name for commercial enterprises and advertisements, and despite his categorical refusal, Lindbergh-based products sprang up throughout the Western world. In Germany, regardless of commercial implications, Lindbergh's flight was a welcome respite from political polarization: "The conservative right was as charmed as the socialist and communist left. And the liberal press was ecstatic."[242] As Kathleen Canning notes, "in Weimar Germany there was little room for the unpolitical citizen of the prewar era,"[243] a point supported by the Nazification of the Wasserkuppe. Nonpolitical events simply could not last. The political atmosphere was one of "discontinuity and flux," even in the Golden Twenties, and Weimar Germany served as something of a laboratory for democracy and political consciousness.[244] Just as with the LZ 126, Lindbergh's transatlantic aviation proved itself to be an endeavor popular enough for any political party to appreciate and harness; nearly every German party at the time used flight imagery in some way. Thus, the confluence of Lindbergh's

[242] Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 249.
[243] Canning, "Politics of Symbols," 567.
[244] Peter Fritzsche, "Landscape of Danger, Landscape of Design: Crisis and Modernism in Weimar Germany," in *Danger on the Volcano: Essays on the Culture of the Weimar Republic*, ed. Thomas W. Kniesche and Stephen Brockemann (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994), 37-44.

unifying appeal and Weimar Germany's love for symbolic gesture made his narrative a valuable piece of the political landscape.

German fans of Lindbergh's, regardless of their politics, wrote to him with poems, well-wishes, and occasionally a few dollars or marks. One such letter from Germany declared to Lindbergh that "You have a future before you like a golden dream," and enclosed a then-worthless 10,000-mark coin from the era of hyperinflation "as a souvenir of the bad times that Germany went through, and a reminder of the good to come."[245] This use of Lindbergh as a beacon for the future was common. Once again, poets and writers invoked classical mythology, using Promethean analogies like "Look on this hero risen/Up from our earthly star/And know that men need hardly be/Less than the angels are." Robert Wohl notes that "Daedalus, Icarus, Apollo, Ulysses, Galahad, Bayard, and Lohengrin also make frequent appearances [in literature] as earlier incarnations of Lindbergh's daring and nobility."[246] Nazi writer Peter Thoene proclaimed "We are flying with Lindbergh… We flew six thousand kilometers over the ocean."[247] Part of our understanding of mythologization stems from the association of an act or person with a higher power, and the comparisons of Lindbergh to gods and classical heroes qualifies.

Further emphasizing Lindbergh's universal appeal, playwright Bertolt Brecht lyricized a short opera telling Lindbergh's story. Brecht's radio opera, now known as *The Flight over the Ocean*, is perhaps the best example of the dramatization and hero worship surrounding Lindbergh in the German-speaking world. Brecht, an avowed and prominent socialist, was taken

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[245] Letter to Charles Lindbergh, 1927, Group 325, Series 11, Box 44, Folder C44 0001, Charles Augustus Lindbergh Papers, Yale University Manuscript and Archive Library, Yale University Libraries. Henceforth, this archive will be abbreviated "Lindbergh Papers."
[246] Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight,* 30-31. Laurence Goldstein adds Christ, Hermes, Bellerophon, David, Moses, Roland, Lancelot, Adam, Columbus, and Beowulf to this pantheon. See *The Flying Machine*, 104.
[247] Thoene, *Eroberung des Himmels,* 3. Original text: „Wir fliegen mit Lindbergh… Wir sind sechstausend Kilometer über den Ozean geflogen."

in completely by Lindbergh's actions, rather contrary to the notion that aviation was a nationalist enterprise.[248] Brecht's relationship with aviation probably started earlier in the 1920s, where when considering air rallies he remarked that metropolitan spectacle and technology "were as much a part of aviation as individual courage." He reproduced this aspect of aviation over the radio, overlaying a constant static of long-range radio communication and other sound effects to keep listeners "in the moment." Over the course of the opera, the chorus acts as a number of personified obstacles, such as the fog or a snowstorm, presenting Lindbergh as heroically defying nature and his own tiredness to accomplish his goal. Upon his landing, the enthralled ensemble shouts "He has conquered the ocean, he has conquered the airways, he has found his way, his way to us."[249] Brecht's understanding of German society and Lindbergh's impact on it was a rare contemporary understanding of the depth of aviation mythology. "The flyer," remarks American historian Joe Jackson on the play, "was mankind's hope for the future. Who better than an aviator to solve society's ills? He saw farther than most, and sat like Prometheus above the clouds."[250]

German historians have long considered and reconsidered the meaning of Lindbergh's flight. Guillaume de Syon argued that unlike Lindbergh's flight, the voyages of the LZ-126 were "commercial enterprise, not just a show,"[251] a potentially unfair claim given that Lindbergh had commercial backers and stood to gain $100,000 from the Orteig Prize offered to the first eastbound nonstop transatlantic flight. Peter Fritzsche, whose academic focus is on German

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[248] Importantly, Brecht changed the lyrics of the opera to remove the line "My name is Charles Lindbergh" after the flier showed sympathy to the Nazi regime in the 1930s. The rest of the plot was unchanged, perhaps highlighting the importance of the deed in spite of the failures of the man. See Bertolt Brecht, *Der Lindberghflug*, LRD, Persönlichkeiten der Luftfahrt, Signatur 00144 (Lindbergh), ADM.
[249] Ibid. Translation to English by Lys Symonette.
[250] Jackson, *Atlantic Fever*, 174.
[251] Guillaume de Syon, *Zeppelin! Germany and the Airship, 1900-1939* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 186.

fliers, cites a few newspaper articles from well after the crossing which dismiss the flight as "a matter of luck" or which ignore it entirely.[252] However, practically every German newspaper on the day of Lindbergh's flight devoted a large front-page spread to the new hero. While some were certainly skeptical of Lindbergh, the German response was not the tepid one Fritzsche makes it out to be. Modris Eksteins is one of the few to indicate the importance of Lindbergh to the European consciousness overall, and I argue that Lindbergh's traits and deeds made him specifically interesting to the Germans. According to Robert Wohl, Lindbergh "carried a message of liberation from the sordid materialism of an age… 'untouched by finer dream or thought.'"[253] One letter to Lindbergh went so far as to proclaim, "You have annihilated distance… there are no more foreign countries."[254] This message of peace in a Germany whose past decades had been characterized by political restlessness and violent conflict had a particular effect.[255]

Germans saw much of themselves in Lindbergh. The flier's Swedish roots and Upper-Midwestern upbringing presented him as the epitome of the heartland American. That region was dominated by Germanic immigrants, and so culturally there was only a slight distance between someone born and raised in Frankfurt and the Minnesotan Lindbergh. He was stoic, disciplined, famously polite, and raised on a stern moral code which appealed to German sensibilities.[256] German poet Ivan Goll, in Paris at the time of Lindbergh's landing, wrote "the blonde smile of

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[252] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers,* 146-147. Fritzsche also harshly criticizes Lindbergh and other transatlantic fliers as detracting from the development of world air transportation. This is counterfactual. Most of Lindbergh's post-crossing professional career was dedicated to establishing airlines, and part of his rationale for the crossing in the first place was to prove that transoceanic flight was possible in a relatively short timeframe. See Charles Lindbergh, *We,* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927); Lindbergh, *The Spirit of St. Louis,* (New York: Scribner's, 1953).
[253] Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight,* 32.
[254] Letter to Charles Lindbergh, 1927, Group 325, Series 11, Box 44, Folder C44 0002, Lindbergh Papers.
[255] Eksteins, *Rites of Spring,* 263.
[256] Newspaper clipping, LRD, Persönlichkeiten der Luftfahrt, Signatur 00144 (Lindbergh), ADM. One German newspaper called Lindbergh a "tree-tall," tenacious, blonde hero.

your youth blinds us like the searchlights of Roosevelt Field."[257] A Freiburg newspaper described him as "A German son away from home,"[258] and more than one journalist claimed that the dream of Icarus had been fulfilled. Goll's usage of the term "blonde smile" indicates the racial component of Lindbergh's success—he resembled Germans in appearance and demeanor. Lindbergh's Nordic appearance and upbringing both contributed to the affection given him in Germany; in short, the American Lindbergh was reflective of all that German society wished it could be.

Importantly, Germans also saw in Lindbergh echoes of their past air heroes. Before his flight, he earned the nickname *Fliegende Narr* or Flying Fool,[259] the same moniker bestowed upon Ferdinand von Zeppelin prior to his successes. Lindbergh's kindness and generosity of spirit evoked Boelcke, and his seriousness towards aviation reminded of von Richthofen. Even his pursuit of technological development harkens towards the gliders at the Wasserkuppe, who were garnering more and more popularity even as Lindbergh flew. Germany hardly had a monopoly on Lindbergh-worship, but the figures of its aviatic past brought out an understanding of Lindbergh that was perhaps unique. Neither America nor France had the same genealogy of heroes and societal craving for aeronautics which characterized German aviation. Simply put, the myth of aviation had a much longer history in Germany than perhaps anywhere else, and heroes even from other nations were often evocative of German aviation.

The longstanding aviation mythology in Germany shows in the differing reactions to the LZ 126 and to Lindbergh. The LZ 126 was welcomed by the Americans with a sort of

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[257] Ibid., 267. The full poem was published in the *Berliner Tageblatt*, May 25, 1927. Roosevelt Field was the airstrip in Long Island from which Lindbergh began his crossing.
[258] "Geglückter Transozeanflug," *Freiburger Zeitung*, May 23, 1927, Drawer 2, Box 1, Newspaper Cutouts 1918-1933, Zeppelinheim NC.
[259] "He is the Flying Fool; a fact which the world instinctively recognized even through his hot denials—and loved him for it." See Wohl, *Spectacle of Flight*, 37.

uncondescending superiority, not unlike an older sibling meeting their new brother or sister. The United States had some minor tradition with airships, but not one that had so encompassed their national identity, so consumed their media, or so influenced their military strategy as that of Germany. German citizens, having seen their airship overhead, experienced a wide range of emotions already discussed above. Americans were excited, but not ecstatic. Lindbergh's reception in the entire Western World but not least Germany was one of overnight heroism. One German well-wisher wrote to Lindbergh "With your flight we are all brought across the Atlantic. We are today citizens of Lindbergh's world, watching you as we watch the Sun in its course."[260] The sentiment underlines the important difference in Germany between Lindbergh and his airship predecessor: he was the harbinger of the future while the LZ 126 was a remnant of the past. As Nazi writer Wulf Bley later noted, "Some stand quietly and move backwards—we stride "forwards!"[261]

Any discussion of the German transatlantic aviation experience is incomplete without mentioning the flight of the *Bremen*, a 1928 westbound undertaking manned by two Germans, Baron von Hünefeld and Hermann Köhl, along with their Irish companion Jim Fitzmaurice. This was the first transatlantic airplane flight undertaken by Germans, and a significantly different carrier of the German aviation myth. While the *Bremen* crash-landed ignominiously in a Newfoundland bog, the flight was an incontrovertible example of German success where the British and French had failed.[262] The *Bremen*, unlike the LZ 126 or *Spirit of St. Louis*, was an avenue for nationalistic tendencies. Franz Ludwig Neher, a Nazi writer, drowns out Lindbergh's achievements in favor of the flight of the *Bremen* in his 1937 text *Das Wunder des Fliegens*,

[260] Letter to Charles Lindbergh, 1927, Group 325, Series 11, Box 44, Folder C44 0001, Lindbergh Papers.
[261] Bley, *Sie waren die Ersten*, 141. Original text: "Jene stehen still und treten ruckwärts—wir schreiten vorwärts!"
[262] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 147. Shortly before Lindbergh's flight, the French duo Nungesser and Coli went missing while attempting a similar westbound trip.

indicating the clear ethno-elitism espoused by his party.[263] The June 1928 *Scientific American* heralded the "Modern Vikings of the Air" and the great risk they took in their westbound passage.[264] Germans pointed out it was "caution and thorough planning that brought the fliers success. Thanks to these virtues, Germans possessed a special affinity for technical challenges."[265] Furthermore, Germans saw the *Bremen* as more than a diversion, but a "powerful affirmation of German honor and German destiny." While Lindbergh was the first to fly across the Atlantic, the German airplane accomplished the harder task of flying against prevailing winds, and Germans gushed with enthusiasm.[266] The *Bremen* was thus another important part of the German national confidence regenerating during the 1920s.

Unfortunately, the flight of the *Bremen* exposed some ugly nationalist undercurrents which had been gaining momentum. One nationalist party newsletter rejected the American culture sweeping Berlin, stating "while Berlin *Klockschieter* slept, dreaming of jazz bands and n***** dances, the silver bird rose in the air and flew westward."[267] Such language countered the pro-American sentiments in German culture. Taking a different character than Lindbergh's flight, the *Bremen* was the harbinger of the newest phase in German flight mythology, one which spurned nostalgia in favor of a cold, technocratic, utopian air-society. Aircraft were not just a hint of the future, but the future themselves. The "postwar aviator," remarks Peter Fritzsche, "was increasingly an ally of builders, technicians, and workers,"[268] rather than a solitary hero

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[263] Franz Ludwig Neher, *Das Wunder des Fliegens* (Munich: Curt Pechstein Verlag, 1937): 147. Neher's title page is a painting of Icarus' death, and he speaks in highly nationalist terms towards almost every subject of this project.
[264] "From the Scrap-book of Science—Camera Shots of Scientific Events, June 1928" *Scientific American* 138, no. 6 (1928), 487.
[265] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 153.
[266] Ibid., 151.
[267] F. Holz, "Ozeanbezwinger Stresemann," DNVP Schriftenvertriebstelle, no. 451, Political Documents, Fraport Archive. The DNVP, or German Nationalist People's Party, tried to enlist the flier Hünefeld for a Reichstag campaign. Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 150-161.
[268] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 161.

rising above the clouds. This was the nationalist air mythology, one in which Germans of all stripes would work together towards superiority in the air. Just as the glider rallies at the Wasserkuppe became more strictly regimented after 1929 rather than relaxed bohemian gatherings, German aviation was falling into the trend of nationalist sentiment in the late 1920s. This was the "reactionary modernism" Jeffrey Herf describes at length. German reactionary modernists "taught the German Right to speak of technology *and* culture," rather than treat them separately.[269] In this way, aviation myth became increasingly fused with German right-nationalist culture.

Moreover, the transatlantic flights of the 1920s display a different attitude towards aviation than had previously been popular in Germany. The mythologization of the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean, a feat once reserved for the great pioneers of the Age of Sail, saw a new phase with the various crossings by air discussed above. The LZ 126 served as a confidence booster to the German public, revitalizing their attention to aviation, while Lindbergh showed that celebrations of aviation did not necessarily have to live within the frame of nationalism or national pride—Germans could find pride in his achievement just as well as Americans. On the other hand, the *Bremen* and the utilization of German pilots by far-right parties like the DNVP or the NSDAP to further their political ambitions showed that flight mythology still had a large role to play in the political changes happening at the end of the 1920s.

[269] Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 4-5.

Conclusions

Nationalism Takes Flight

Aviation played a major role in the German turn towards extreme nationalism. Ever since its inception in the early twentieth century, aviation was almost always a patriotic, if not explicitly nationalist, pursuit in Germany. The well-being of the country appeared to many as tied to its strength in the air, and cultural phenomena like the Zeppelin were omnipresent throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. Aviation played a politically significant role in Germany, suggesting that aviation mythology held a central place in the German national identity in the first two decades of the twentieth century. That role was not lost on the Nazi propaganda apparatus that was able to harness aviation's power. Simply put, the mythology surrounding aviation helped create a straightforward avenue for fascism to succeed, but did not cause it. Indeed, elements of aviation existed in stark contrast to Nazi and fascist aims.

As Peter Fritzsche notes in his article on German "Machine Dreams" in the run-up to the Nazi era, authoritarian impulses were not at all unique to Germany at the time, but German "nationalists readily reconciled themselves to machines to recharge the authoritarian projects."[270] The prevalence of aviation since the invention of the Zeppelin presents a key argument as to why this was the case. In Germany, where the development of aviation mythology changed frequently but was one of the very few constants of German life between 1900 and 1933, the use of machines, flying or otherwise, as a means towards a political end hardly comes as a surprise. Even the final line of von Richthofen's 1918 memoir does not discuss the war, or the state of German affairs, but rather aviatic development: "Who can tell what machine we shall employ a

[270] Peter Fritzsche, "Machine Dreams: Airmindedness and the Reinvention of Germany," *The American Historical Review* 98, no. 3 (1993), 691.

year hence in order to perforate the atmosphere?"[271] Germans could rely on flight and the mythology surrounding it as one of the few cultural mainstays of the first three decades of the century.

Some nationalist narratives considered aviation in both war and peace to be an unending battle for supremacy in the air. Lothar von Richthofen, pilot and younger brother to the famous ace, died in a plane crash in 1922. There is no reason to suggest the crash was the result of anything other than mechanical failure, but one Nazi writer remarked "so too died Lothar von Richthofen, not in doubt and hopelessness. He gave his life in the struggle for a new German standing."[272] Such a narrative played well into the postwar *Dolchstoßlegende*, stab-in-the-back legend, proposed by the military leaders von Hindenburg and Ludendorff and supported by nationalist parties. Any attempt to restrict aviation, according to these nationalists, would be an act of warfare against the German nation. The primacy of aviation mythology allowed for this type of "spin," as the martyr complex of fallen air heroes had been well established during the war. By extension, the Nazis became the party of flight, and the captors and beneficiaries of the myth that had originated decades earlier.[273]

On some level, however, aviation mythology opposed fascism. The most notable aspect of this conflict was Zeppelin mania, the ever-present cult of machine and personality which had remained a prevalent factor of German culture. The Zeppelin's cultural appeal may well have been the best rival to Nazism's rise in the first years of the 1930s. Hugo Eckener, as the most recognizable representative of the democratic and populist support Ferdinand von Zeppelin enjoyed, stood firmly against Nazism's antiglobal policies, earning newspaper articles simply

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[271] Von Richthofen, *The Red Air Fighter*, 140.
[272] Stamer, *12 Jahre Wasserkuppe*, 13. Original text: "so starb auch Lothar von Richthofen nicht in Verzweiflung und Hoffnungslosigkeit. Er gab sein Leben im Kampf um neue deutsche Geltung."
[273] Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight*, 227.

titled *Eckener gegen Autarkie*, Eckener against Autarchy.[274] Even after the Nazis' successful rise to power, Eckener resisted using the Zeppelin as a pro-Nazi emblem. Despite repeated requests, he refused to christen an airship *Adolf Hitler*, and would not replace both standard black-white-red flags of Germany on the tail fins of the *Graf Zeppelin* and *Hindenburg*; after government pressure, he consented to having one flag switched over to swastikas, but made certain to present the non-Nazi side whenever the airships saw spectators. These were nominally legal but symbolically bold rejections of Nazi mastery of the air.[275] Even Nazi aviation fanatic Peter Thoene completely ignored the LZ 126's Atlantic crossing in his aviation timeline—Hitler's own newspaper, the *Völkische Beobachter*, grudgingly gave the first voyage of the *Hindenburg* a small front-page article well below a discussion of a successful Hitler rally in Berlin.[276]

While teleological interpretations of the situation would infer that aviation's cultural influence pushed Germany to the right, the reality was that the Germany that could produce so fundamental an attraction to aviation created a culture in which technocratic fascism would thrive. Jeffrey Herf's argument of "reactionary modernism" is key to this understanding; the combination of far-right politics with enthusiasm for science in Germany meant that as the nation modernized, elements of fascist and other ultraconservative parties could grow stronger. Quoting German author Ernst Jünger, Herf summarizes "Flying was more than a triumph of science and functional reality; it was the 'living expression of a powerful life force… Its soaring flights stake out the districts of a *cultic* world.'"[277] Furthermore, flight's metaphorical power gave political

[274] Newspaper Clipping, Drawer 2, Box 1, Newspaper Cutouts 1918-1933, Zeppelinheim NC.
[275] De Syon, *Zeppelin!*, 175-176.
[276] Thoene, *Eroberung des Himmels*, 91. See also wall display, *Völkischer Beobachter*, Zeppelin Museum, Friedrichshafen, Germany.
[277] Herf, *Reactionary Modernism*, 84.

power to the reactionary modernists, who saw technology as a "masculine and courageous flight into the German future."[278]

Moreover, the findings of this study are a probe into the rich vein of historical inquiry that aviation history constitutes, and into modern mythology and how its consequences shaped the character of the German nation. The mythological inquiry of this project is perhaps the most important, for it differentiates this study from examinations of German aviation history like those of Peter Fritzsche, Guillaume de Syon, and Robert Wohl. All of the above are foundational texts within aviation historiography, presenting necessary insights into the role of flight within society. However, what differentiates this project from such works is the proposal for an overall reason for aviation's social appeal and success. The use of mythology as an explanation for German aviation's imprint on culture is one attempt to understand the endeavor's popularity. Germans, compared to other nations with significant aviation industries, showed an enduring and constant attraction to aviation, making it a crucial tool for answering questions about German national identity. The advent of the Zeppelin presented a new component to German culture, and introduced the importance of airborne supremacy to a nation that had been late to unification, colonization, and other forms of asserting national dominance. The aces of the First World War, as well as the use of airships, fostered a hero-martyr complex which most directly compared to classical mythology—the sons of Icarus were the new German demigods. The development of gliders in the aftermath of the war presented aviation mythology in a new light, first as a means of continuing the myth via scientific development and later as a way of crystallizing nationalism through flight. Simultaneously, transatlantic flights presented a different component of aviation mythology, wherein aircraft and aviators were the ambassadors of goodwill and peace in a world

[278] Ibid., 209-210

rife with fears of conflict. The duality shown between the gliders and the transatlantic flights is indicative of a German ambiguity—a nation torn between the Americanizing Weimar culture and the militarizing nationalist one. Aviation was thus one of the representative elements of the strain inherent to 1920s Germany.

This study suggests that scholars must depart from any view that aviation was a sideshow, or a field of history best left to the "buffs" on Internet fora. Peter Fritzsche notes "the air age was both fabulous and horrible,"[279] and it is this dichotomy, a culture divided between the promises of the future which flight technology brought and the long-reaching negative consequences of those promises, which presents a crucial avenue for deeper historical inquiry. Indeed, the premise of the "Air Age" is one which should become more prominent within historiography, as no other technology so dominated the minds and cultures of the era. While Germany is a relevant case study and perhaps the nation where the idea of an epoch of flight took hold the most, aviation should become a stronger lens through which historians can examine the past. Doing so invites possibilities of broader research into technological impacts on history, the concept of modern mythology, celebrity and hero culture, the aesthetics of machinery, and myriad other extensions of aviation's place in historiography. The first decades of the twentieth century saw aviation, a groundbreaking technology, burst into public awareness and excitement. Its use for understanding society and culture should not be underestimated in historical research.

Furthermore, aviation satisfies Esposito's understanding that myth is created when a community takes that which it considers wholly good and associates it with the supernatural or supreme. This study has established the unifying appeal of aviation among the German community, and the tendency to perceive aviation as something greater, through links to classical

[279] Fritzsche, *Nation of Fliers*, 218.

mythology and the descriptions of fliers as literally and figuratively "above" humanity. While Germans were initially fascinated by aviation's novelty, the speed and totality with which they came to mythologize the enterprise compared to any other nation shows that Germans believed more completely in the goodness of aviation from the outset. This belief stemmed from the need for a national enterprise and the communalization of aviation after Echterdingen. The wholehearted German embrace of aviation is what created the mythology, not mere fascination or excitement. This insight opens the door to other applications of modern mythology, as they could relate specifically to propaganda, political enterprise, other technologies, or cultural elements like art and music. Nonetheless, aviation as a basis for mythology still merits further study, and is a promising avenue for such examination.

Because of its strange mixture of technological modernity and social nostalgia, there was a relatively longstanding period where aviation was one of the few institutions on which Germans could agree, providing a continuity to German society as it changed and developed over the decades discussed in this study. The findings of this project point to a number of social reflections on this constant. For one, Zeppelin hysteria evoked prewar militarism, while the Rhön gliders reflected a postwar sense of rebuilding and national rediscovery. The development of nationalism through aviation also presents the option of a different result than Nazism, a culture more strongly based on the Americanized Weimar Germany and its transatlantic flights. While aviation was hardly the central catalyst for the national development for or against fascism, aviatic mythology in some ways defies the *telos* that Germany was destined only for a nationalist future, presenting a popular social alternative to the rigid National Socialist culture that would come to define the Germany of the 1930s and 40s.

To conclude, the mythologization of aviation in Germany reflected profound social attitudes and changes, and shows one significant example of the power of modern myth on the course of a nation. Germany, in its search for a modern culture and international power, found itself in the sky. Looking up, Germans saw their chance at superiority in fliers and machines. Airships, war aircraft, gliders, and commercial flight all showed themselves to be emblems of the German national consciousness, and so enthralled the public that they ascribed mythic powers to fliers and flying machines. The Age of Flight in Germany, then, was not merely a technological era, but a profound part of the German spirit in the first third of the twentieth century: a generation of eyes turned skyward.

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