Icon of the Month

No 98: The swastika

There is a charming moment in *The Sound of Music* when Gretl, the youngest Von Trapp, wonders why everyone in Austria has been cross since the *Anschluss*. 'Maybe the flag with the black spider makes people nervous,' she suggests.

But even in 1938 the swastika was not so self-evidently sinister as it seems to us today. Indeed, the most shocking thing about *Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl's brilliant chronicle of the 1934 Nazi rally in Nuremberg, is the powerful sense of joy and hope that it conveys. How could it be, we wonder, that all those bright-eyed men and women were unaware that they were marching beneath an emblem of death?

The Nazis adopted the *Hakenkreuz*, or 'hooked cross', in 1920 as a symbol of 'the fight for the victory of Aryan man', after its discovery in the ruins of Troy by the amateur archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann in the 1870s had popularised the idea that it was a specifically Indo-European device.

In fact, it is one of the most universal motifs in human history, as well as one of the oldest. Though it is associated especially with India – which is why Rudyard Kipling put it on the covers of all his books – it has been found on ancient artefacts in Russia and Iran. The Hittites used it, as did the Greeks, the Romans, the Celts, the Chinese of the Tang dynasty, the Aztecs and the Navajo. It even adorns the floors of the third-century synagogue at Ein Gedi and Amiens' 13th-century cathedral.

For different cultures it signifies the wheel of the Sun, the cycle of birth and rebirth or the four corners of the world. Many identify it with good luck. Its Sanskrit name comes from the roots *su*, meaning 'well', and *asti*, 'to be', and is variously translated as 'wellbeing' or – rather ironically – 'Let good prevail!'

For Hindus it is especially holy and auspicious, and it is an essential feature of Jain worship. For Buddhists, it represents *dharma*, the underlying order of nature. (More obscurely, for the Kuna people of Panama it denotes the octopus that created the world.)

After Schliemann, the swastika's positive spin commended it to the Boy Scouts as a proper shape for a 'badge of fellowship'. In 1921, Baden-Powell wrote: 'I want to remind Scouts to keep their eyes open [for] anyone wearing this badge. It is their duty then to go up to such a person, make the scout sign and ask if they can be of service…'

The Russian Provisional Government of 1917 put a swastika on its banknotes, the Finnish Air Force on its planes and the US 45th Infantry Division on its shoulder tabs. In northern Ontario, the town of Swastika, founded in 1908, took its name from the local gold mine.

It is remarkable how subsequent history has turned the swastika into a very icon of human evil. No doubt the colour scheme helps – Adolf Hitler, who designed the Nazi version himself 'after innumerable attempts' while in prison, took the red, white and black from the old Imperial German flag; but to most people today they proclaim danger and death. Likewise, it seems obvious to us now that the swastika is a broken, twisted cross.

It makes a marked contrast with the five-pointed Communist star, under whose baleful influence many more millions have suffered and died even than under the Nazis, and over a much longer span. This has never come to be identified so directly with the forces of darkness in the Western mind, and at times has even been seen as rather chic.

But nothing human is unambiguous. During the Rape of Nanking in 1937-38, when for two months Japanese troops systematically butchered up to 300,000 Chinese, their principal defender was a German man called John Rabe. He sheltered 650 people in his yard and drove the soldiers back as they tried to climb over the wall. All that protected him was his status as a Nazi. 'These escapades were quite dangerous,' he wrote in his diary with quiet understatement. 'The Japanese had pistols and bayonets. I had only … my swastika armband.' **Huw Spanner**