

Regime Change

In 1938 Arno Breker made two sculptures of male nudes, one holding a flaming torch, the other a sword, for the courtyard entrance of Adolf Hitler's newly constructed Reich Chancellery in Berlin. Called *The Torch Bearer* and *The Sword Bearer* by Breker, the larger-than-life sculptures were renamed *The Party* and *The Army* by Hitler, identifying them with these two cornerstones of the Reich's spirit and power. The sculptures remained in place during the war years but were removed, it is believed, before the war-damaged Chancellery was demolished. Their current whereabouts are unknown, and although nothing has been heard about them it is still conceivable that, if they were hidden for political reasons, they may yet be found.

Dissatisfied with Berlin's eighteenth-century chancellery buildings, Hitler asked his chief architect Albert Speer to design a new chancellery complex in the late 1930s. In his memoirs Speer recalled his meeting with Hitler in January 1938:

'I have an urgent assignment for you', he said solemnly ... 'I shall be holding extremely important conferences in the near future. For these, I need grand halls and salons which will make an impression on people ... I am placing the whole of Voss Strasse at your disposal. The cost is immaterial. But it must be done very quickly ... Can you be done by January 10, 1939? I want to hold the next diplomatic reception in the new Chancellery.' I was dismissed.

Speer quickly selected artists to create a suite of decorative works for the New Reich Chancellery. Having already undertaken many public commissions for the regime, Arno Breker was a natural choice. Born to a stonemason father in 1900, Breker had studied in Wuppertal and Düsseldorf before spending much of the 1920s in Paris. Here he was influenced by the great French sculptor Auguste Rodin and made works based on numerous studies of the human form. Awarded the Rome Prize by the Prussian Academy in 1932, Breker spent six months in Mussolini's Italy, where he and other prize winners were visited by Joseph Goebbels, later Hitler's Minister for Propaganda. Breker later recalled Goebbels' encouragement to the young artist to return to Germany, 'where a great future awaited'. From this point Breker developed an overtly neo-classical style based on an idealised vision of the human figure.

Breker returned to Germany in 1934 and received his first public commissions the following year. However, it was with the Berlin Olympics of 1936 that he first came to the attention of the party elite. His sculptures for the Olympic Park, *The Decathlete* and *The Champion*, were awarded silver medals in the sculpture competition organised by the International Olympic Committee. His oversized sculptures of athletic figures were

Arno Breker 1900–1991
The Torch Bearer and The Sword Bearer
(also known as *The Party and The Army*) 1938
Bronze, Height c.3 metres,

based on classical models but, emphasising muscularity and power, came to symbolise the Nazi regime's vision of a Germanic super race. In 1937 Breker joined the Nazi party and was appointed to the judging panel of the *Great German Art* exhibition. Held in the new House of German Art in Munich, these annual exhibitions were designed to showcase art approved by the regime. Speaking at the opening of the first of these shows, Hitler declared in 1937:

National Socialist Germany ... wants again a 'German art' and this art shall and will be of eternal value ... What does it really mean to be a German? ... to be a German is to be clear ... to be logical ... and also, above all, to be true ... art cannot be a fashion.

Between 1937 and 1944, over forty of Breker's works were exhibited in these shows and in 1941 he became vice-president of the Reich Chamber for the Visual Arts.

Breker was approached by Speer in late 1938 and given just eight days to produce ideas for a range of works to decorate the New Reich Chancellery. The sculptor later recalled, 'On this day ... my fate was decided ... in my capacity as an artist I could hardly reject artistic commissions, especially those from leading personalities in the Third Reich.' In addition to his courtyard sculptures, Breker made a series of reliefs for inside the Chancellery buildings. The interiors were among the grandest state rooms in Europe.

Soon after they were installed in the New Reich Chancellery courtyard, Hitler gave Breker's large figure sculptures the names *The Party* and *The Army*. 'I have chosen two pillars upon which each state is built,' he said, 'the man of spirit, represented by the torch, and the defender of the Reich, by the man of the sword.' At this point Breker's place as the Nazi party's preferred artist was cemented. His works were promoted across the Reich – and beyond – as the embodiment of National Socialist cultural policy. In 1940, for example, Breker and Speer were chosen to accompany Hitler on his victory tour of Paris as representatives of National Socialist culture. Breker was the only German artist to exhibit in occupied France, with a show at the Musée de l'Orangerie des Tuileries in 1942.

While modernist and Jewish artists were persecuted, imprisoned and in some cases murdered by the Nazi regime both in Germany and occupied countries during the war years, Arno Breker ran an extremely large and profitable studio. His personal wealth soared as commissions flooded in. The mass-production side of his workshop, the Arno Breker Works, made millions of Reichsmarks per year. He also received lavish gifts from Hitler, being given a newly refurbished castle in the Brandenburg countryside for his fortieth birthday. In 1944, as the war entered its final and bloodiest stages, Arno Breker was included on the list of 'God Gifted' artists drawn up by Goebbels, which ensured that he was exempted from military service as an indispensable contributor to German culture. That same year, the documentary *Arno Breker: Hard Times, Powerful Art* was produced by the film company of Leni Riefenstahl, another favourite of the regime. Inevitably, Breker was seen as a traitor by many of his fellow artists, particularly those who were persecuted by the Nazi regime.

Arno Breker 1900–1991

The Torch Bearer and The Sword Bearer
(also known as *The Party and The Army*) 1938
Bronze, Height c.3 metres,

As the war drew to a close, Breker and his wife fled to Bavaria, where they survived the German surrender. In 1948, at his denazification hearing, Breker was judged to have been merely a ‘fellow traveller’ to the Nazi regime and was ordered only to pay a small fine. The board considered his famous New Reich Chancellery sculptures but found that he had created them in a spirit of apolitical classicism, arguing that Hitler, not the artist, was responsible for their political message when he renamed them *The Party* and *The Army*.

Despite the evidence of his close personal and financial involvement with the regime’s leadership, Breker controversially denied a political reading of his sculptures to the end of his life, writing in 1990:

I have never intended to glorify any system of government through my artistic work ... if I glorify anything, it is beauty. The beauty of the human being, the beauty of the human body ... I have striven for the ideal ... no one who looks at my artistic work and judges it objectively can in good conscience suspect that it served to promote fascist ideology. The depiction of the human image in my way of thinking is a clear denial of everything inhuman.

Breker’s decorations for the New Reich Chancellery buildings were badly damaged by Allied bombing. A symbolic centre of the hated Nazi regime, the New Reich Chancellery was pulled down by Soviet occupying forces around 1946. Soviet troops removed the building’s contents and used its valuable stone and marble to construct East Berlin underground stations and the Soviet War Memorial that still stands in Berlin’s Treptow Park.

Ironically, however, Breker’s style fitted with both fascist and communist ideologies. The Russian leader Stalin approved of Breker’s work, offering the sculptor a commission in 1946. Although Breker refused – famously claiming ‘one dictatorship is sufficient for me’ – many of his sculptures, including works from his Berlin studio and workshop, were taken by Soviet forces to Moscow after the war. Photographs by Allied soldiers of the Chancellery courtyard indicate that Breker’s sculptures were removed before the building was destroyed by Soviet forces. It is just conceivable that *The Torch Bearer* and *The Sword Bearer* have survived. They are widely considered ‘missing’ rather than ‘destroyed’.

Text—

Jennifer Mundy