

The Swastika

An ancient symbol of peace – now a symbol of violence and racism

Every culture around the world has its own set of symbols. Symbols are objects and signs that remind us who we are, and where we have come from. One popular type of symbolism is religious symbols: the cross for Christians, the crescent moon for Muslims, and the Star of David for the Jews, just to name a few.



Flags and national anthems are symbols of national pride, and help identify our nationality and the values that our society holds. Even logos for products and sports teams are symbols, and tell something about what we value.

But, not all symbols are a source of pride. Some are grim reminders of past cruelties, even though the symbol was not always associated with despair. The swastika is one such symbol.

The swastika is the one symbol most often identified with the Nazi party – the ruling party of Germany from 1933 to 1949. The swastika is an ancient symbol found in many cultures throughout the world, and was once used as a symbol of life, strength, prosperity, power, laughter, and good luck.

Today, as a result of the attitudes and actions of the Nazis during World War Two, the swastika in any form is associated with evil, death, horror, and racism. Its appearance anywhere, in any form, is repulsive to most people.

The ancient swastika was basically two crossed lines with their ends pointing either to the right (representing life and health) or to the left (a sign of misfortune in the cultures that used it.) One of the oldest known swastikas was painted by early cavemen at least 10 000 years ago. Symbols similar in shape to swastikas have been found all around the world. Every culture, religion, and continent honoured one form or another of the swastika. Known by different names in different cultures, the symbol was used by the First Nations peoples of North America, Hindus, Buddhists, Greeks, Romans, Celts,

Anglo-Saxons, Mayans, Aztecs, Persians, and early Christians. Swastikas have even been found in ancient synagogues (Jewish temples) side by side with the Star of David!

In the 1800s, the swastika was adopted by a growing number of German nationals who believed in the supremacy of the German people and nation. In 1910, a German poet suggested that the swastika be adopted for all organizations who hated the Jews. When the Nazi party was formed in 1919, it adopted this ancient symbol. Because of the actions of the Nazis before and during the Second World War, the swastika has taken on the worst meanings possible.

In 1935, the black swastika on a white circle with a red background became the national symbol of Nazi Germany. The major difference between the Nazi swastika and the ancient swastika symbol is the slanted representation. The arms of the ancient swastika rested flat.

Because of the Nazis, the swastika has become a symbol of hate, violence, death, and murder. Today, whenever the ancient symbol is used, it is automatically assumed by most people that it is a Nazi symbol. When the Nazis adopted the ancient symbol, they erased the good meaning of the swastika – the symbol of purity and of life. Racist people today further degrade the meaning of the ancient swastika by spray painting the symbol on people's homes and cars, and even on schools and churches.