“Masters or Subjects of the Chemical World?: Gas Masks, Personal Armoring, and Vestiary Complicity in the Third Reich”

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Abstract:

After providing a brief overview of my larger research project, this presentation will examine the ways in which the gas mask served as a technological site of discipline, conformity, and complicity in the envisioned air and gas protection community of the Third Reich. Since the late 1920s, German air and gas experts had debated whether gas masks were necessary for each German civilian in the supposedly imminent aero-chemical attacks of the future. Regardless of a lack of scientific consensus, the Nazis used the gas mask as a material tool in the creation of a compliant and chemically-minded German subject. With masks donned, German civilians entered the 1930s and 40s as technologically augmented soldiers in the struggle for national survival. Indeed, in the eyes of the Nazis, the mask created a physically homogenized society that could survive, if not thrive, in a modernity defined by its toxic environment. Exploring the role of gas mask technology in the creation of a national community predicated on violent exclusions and bodily discipline, this presentation will argue that the average German civilian under the gas mask maintained a complex subjectivity that regularly shifted between perpetrator, bystander, and victim of the Nazi regime.

