

# Design and Social Conscience: Nikolaus Pevsner's Ethics of Design in the 1930s

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## Abstract

Partly due to his early political naïvete, which later often led to him being mistakenly accused of being pro-Nazi, Nikolaus Pevsner, a German-born Russian Jew, expressed on multiple occasions, as far back as the early 1930s, a positive view of National Socialism, as he had initially been caught up by the idea that National Socialists could effect positive changes in design enterprises in post-World War I Germany that would ultimately solve problems such as shortage of housing, improved living conditions for ordinary people, etc.

At the same time that Pevsner was stating his overly optimistic view he began to concern himself with the importance of the ethics of design in contributing to the task of improving living conditions and fulfilling practical, everyday needs.

Through an examination of Pevsner's lecture 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', delivered at the Royal Society of Arts in London in December 1935 and published the following month in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, this paper intends to explore the ways in which Pevsner's concern for 1) 'sound' art and design capable of serving the community and 2) art/design education, 'constructive and representative of the contemporary age', was to germinate in the mid-1930s and subsequently develop into his principle of the ethics of design.

**Keywords:** Nikolaus Pevsner; Royal Society of Arts; William Morris; Bauhaus; Art/Design Education

## 1. Pevsner's life in the 1930s

For Nikolaus Pevsner, the 1930s were crucially eventful years.<sup>1</sup> Pevsner was forced to leave his post at the University of Göttingen in 1933 as a result of the enactment of the Nürnberg Race Laws,<sup>2</sup> and subsequently moved to England, where he had to struggle to find an academic position. In 1934, he published a controversial article, 'Kunst und Staat', in *Der Türmer*, an anti-Weimar Republic, pro-Nazi German periodical.<sup>3</sup> He next published his first monumental work *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* in 1936. It was then that his interest in the industrial art of England deepened. In pursuit of this interest Pevsner wrote a series of articles for *The Architectural Review* from April to November 1936 on the theme of 'The Designer in Industry'.<sup>4</sup> This was soon followed by a detailed analytical study of contemporary English industrial design, *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England*.<sup>5</sup> It was also during the 1930s that Pevsner made friendships with members of 'the progressive design establishment and its supporters'.<sup>6</sup> Pevsner was disturbed by the ongoing

political developments in Germany, yet was so active in writing, editing, and lecturing that it seems fair to describe these early days of his career as more than merely formative. It was also during the 1930s when Pevsner's Modernist-Functionalist convictions gradually found expression in his writings and talks.

## 2. Pevsner's RSA lecture: A thread from Morris to Gropius

On the 17th of December, 1935, Nikolaus Pevsner was invited by the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) to its seventh ordinary meeting of that year to deliver a lecture on 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools' (Figure).<sup>7</sup>

By that time Pevsner had been preparing for some years a book on the pioneers of the Modern Movement,<sup>8</sup> as some of the members of the RSA knew. Thus Percy H. Jowett,<sup>9</sup> Principal of the Royal College of Art at that time, introduced Pevsner to the audience with these words: 'Many of you have no doubt heard a good deal about him and what he has done in his research into the question of industrial art in England.'<sup>10</sup>

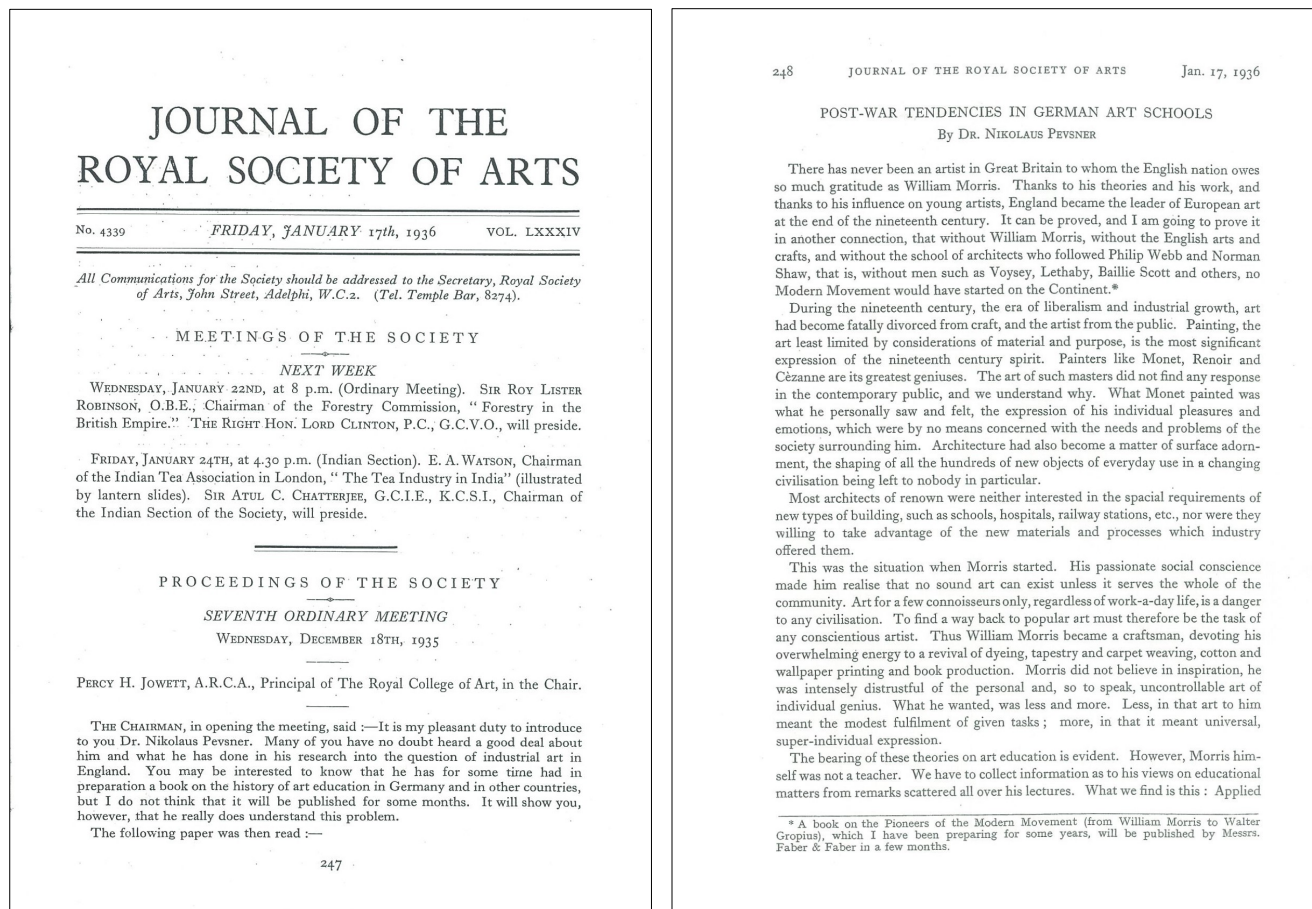


Figure: Nikolaus Pevsner's lecture at the Royal Society of Arts, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', published in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* (January 1936). (Title page and 1st page)

Pevsner began his lecture by stressing the important contribution of William Morris to the rise of the Modern Movement:

There has never been an artist in Great Britain to whom the English nation owes so much gratitude as William Morris. Thanks to his theories and his work, and thanks to his influence on young artists, England became the leader of European art at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

For Pevsner, the historical significance of Morris's Arts and Crafts movement was its challenge to nineteenth-century artists to concern themselves with the needs and problems of society rather than merely express their own sense of aesthetics and their private preoccupations. He declared that 'Art had become fatally divorced from craft, and the artist from the public', in 'the era of liberalism and industrial growth':

Painting, the art least limited by considerations of material and purpose, is the most significant expression of the nineteenth century spirit. Painters like Monet, Renoir and Cézanne are its greatest geniuses. The art of such masters did not find any response in the contemporary public, and we understand why. What Monet painted was what he personally saw and felt, the expression of his individual pleasures and emotions, which were by no means concerned with the needs and problems of the society surrounding him.<sup>12</sup>

Pevsner further pointed out that the same was true for nineteenth-century architecture:

Architecture had also become a matter of surface adornment, the shaping of all the hundreds of new objects of everyday use in a changing civilisation being left to nobody in particular.

Most architects of renown were neither interested in the special requirements of new types of building, such as schools, hospitals, railway stations, etc., nor were they willing to take advantage of the new materials and processes which industry offered them.<sup>13</sup>

'This was the situation when Morris started', said Pevsner, yet Morris himself was 'intensely distrustful of the personal and, so to speak, uncontrollable art of individual genius'.<sup>14</sup> Morris felt that art should be a means for 'modest fulfilment of given tasks'<sup>15</sup> and emphasized the importance of Applied Art in handicraft designed to solve social problems and fulfil public needs over the primary concern of Fine Art with aesthetics. For Pevsner, the crucial aspect of Morris's contribution to European art and to the Modern Movement was in Morris's attempt to turn away from 'art for art's sake' to art for the sake of people and society.

Although Pevsner was a great admirer of Morris as a craftsman and Morris's emphasis on art with a social conscience, he was well aware of the danger of excessive devotion to handicraft. As much as Pevsner admired the handicraft movement, he believed that art needed to concern itself with the changing needs and problems of the twentieth century and could not detach itself from modern means of production. Pevsner emphasized in his RSA lecture that Morris's theories should be updated and modernized in response to the effects of mechanical production on society.

Pevsner did not pioneer this view: it had already been expressed in the Bauhaus manifesto. Pevsner noted in his lecture the significance of Bauhaus methods of education, which emphasized the importance of study of materials and the means of production. While pre-1920s art education 'left the young artist without any contact with the realities of materials, technique and economy',<sup>16</sup>

the Bauhaus curriculum included instructions in the uses and qualities of materials and construction, amongst many other practical subjects.

At Bauhaus, Pevsner said, Gropius had also admirably succeeded ‘in combining the principles of handicraft with those of machine-production’<sup>17</sup>:

His [Gropius’s] conviction is that the creative designer for mass-production must be trained to carry out a model of any article that concerns him, completely by himself. Experimenting must be done by means of handicraft in a studio which is half a workshop and half a laboratory. Proceeding from the useful and well-balanced shape of an article worked out in the studio, the designer can later on develop a satisfactory model for mass-production. The lamps, chairs, pots and cups, and wallpapers created by the Bauhaus, and put on the market by German factories, prove that all this was not mere theory.<sup>18</sup>

Bauhaus aimed to forge ‘a constructive unity between creative art and industry’ and, in doing so, foster ‘the creative designer for mass-production’.<sup>19</sup> In the quest for an ideal system of art education for twentieth-century industrial society, Bauhaus was not alone: ‘a new reunion of Fine Art with handicraft and industrial art’ were, according to Pevsner, ‘the general tendency’ of German art education between 1919 and 1933.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. ‘The National Revolution of 1933’

It is worth noting here that Pevsner regarded the years between 1919 and 1933 as significant. In design history this period is commonly referred to as the age of Bauhaus, bracketed by revolutionary changes and influenced both by the establishment of the Weimar Republic and the subsequent, democratic rise of National Socialism, described by Pevsner in his RSA lecture as ‘The National Revolution of 1933’.<sup>21</sup>

As for the nature of this revolution, which took place a few years before the RSA lecture, Pevsner seemed to fail to realize at the time the brutal nature of this revolution, which soon became evident to the world at large. The only reference to National Socialism Pevsner made in the RSA lecture was its influence on German art and art education. Pevsner asserted that ‘the National Revolution of 1933’ brought ‘a new change of direction’ in the field of art and design in its promotion of a retrospective appreciation of handicraft and an emphasis on *Volk* art rather than post-World War I German acknowledgment of the vital importance of mass production and mechanical industry and design.

Pevsner also seemed unaware of the rising tide of anti-Semitism in Germany, or at least not sensitized to it, since the only thing he said about the departure of Gropius from Bauhaus and the subsequent Nazi suppression of Bauhaus was that

... in 1928, Gropius left the Bauhaus, which, under his successor, went Communist for awhile, so that, in spite of the efforts of its last Director Mies van der Rohe, it was dissolved after the political change of 1933.<sup>22</sup>

Although intellectuals such as theologian Ernst Troeltsch had foreseen the rise of anti-Semitism in Germany and its subsequent consequences long before 1933, Pevsner seemed almost totally unaware of what was about to happen to his family in Germany as he gave his RSA lecture. In this, however,

he was not alone, as many other German-born Jewish elites of that time also failed to see what lay ahead, incredible as that might seem to us today, in hindsight.<sup>23</sup>

It is ironic that, at the same time that Pevsner was stating his view of the rise of National Socialism, his own name was included, along with 2,820 other names, in Hitler's Black Book, the 'Special Search List G.B.', a blacklist that neither Pevsner nor many others even knew existed.<sup>24</sup>

It was not until after 1938 that Pevsner became aware of the ultimate consequences of the 1933 German revolution.<sup>25</sup> Pevsner's correspondence with his relatives and friends in Germany, now held by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, reveal to us the extent of Pevsner's initial lack of awareness and his belated realization of the danger his family in Germany was facing.

After he had settled in London in 1933 and until the outbreak of World War II, Pevsner returned to Germany on several occasions.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, in the summer of 1938, he and his wife Lola, who had joined him in London by mid-1937 with their three children, sent their children to Leipzig for 'a short holiday'.<sup>27</sup> They undoubtedly made these arrangements because they were unaware of the terrible changes latently occurring in Germany at the time. Historians have, as a matter of fact, noted that in 1937 'violence against Jews was not endemic, but remained confined to Nazi gangs', 'few were able to imagine the extremes to which it might go this time', and 'most Jews still had faith in the legal process as a means of defending themselves'.<sup>28</sup>

Even when the political situation became critical after September 1939, Pevsner managed to contact his relatives and friends in Germany 'fairly regularly'. But in the spring of 1941 Pevsner suddenly lost contact with his mother, Annie Pevsner, in Leipzig. Susie Harries, the author of *Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life*, writes:

... by January 1942 Pevsner had not had a word directly from her for nine months, and he was becoming desperately anxious.<sup>29</sup>

By that time, it was obvious that the situation of Jewish people not only in Leipzig, but everywhere under the control of the Nazis, was becoming increasingly dire: Hedwig Kaufmann, a friend of the Pevsners, wrote to Nikolaus on September 23, 1941, just after he arrived in London from the Continent,

As to your mother, I have been in the very best terms with her during the last two years and I am really proud to be her friend. You easily will understand, that it is her most intense wish to change her residence and if you see the slightest chance to get her out, please let me know it, perhaps your uncle in the Middle East could find a way out.

Amongst all people I had to leave in Europe, it is the fate of your mother, which concerns me mostly and for her sake I should be glad to get in touch with you.<sup>30</sup>

Pevsner's correspondence with people in Germany at that time was made possible by means of the British Red Cross and Comité International de la Croix Rouge Genève. These letters and messages reveal how desperately Pevsner sought information about his mother. Pevsner confessed to his son Thomas Pevsner on 1 February 1942 that

Oma [Grandmother] especially worries me a lot. She could write, and we write regularly. Why does she not? ... It is a crying shame, the amount of misery Adolf has brought over everybody.<sup>31</sup>

Nine days after Pevsner said this, his mother committed suicide in Leipzig on the night of February 10th, rather than be deported to a concentration camp. She was sixty-five years old. The terrible news reached Pevsner on 13 May 1942 in a message sent to him on 10 April 1942 by a neighbor of his mother, G. Nathansen:

PEVSNER NICHOLAS  
JHRE MUTTER IST  
LEIDER AM 11 FEBRUAR  
1942 VER SCHIEDEN  
NACHBAR G. NATHANSEN.<sup>32</sup>

#### **4. Pevsner's Narrow Focus on Design in 1935 and the Derivation of His Principles of the Ethics of Design**

Our knowing in hindsight what was to happen to Pevsner and his family makes the following comment in his RSA lecture seem woefully optimistic and somehow shortsighted:

The National Revolution of 1933 brought a new change of direction. It would be rash and unfair to take new departures started within the last two years as definite, but one fact seems conspicuous enough to be mentioned. While the chief interest between the first and the second revolution was industry and design, the enthusiasm of the new leaders is directed towards handicraft.<sup>33</sup>

This lack of awareness stems from Pevsner's narrow focus on design and on William Morris's 'passionate social conscience'.<sup>34</sup> It was this social conscience which made Pevsner a great admirer of Morris and led Pevsner to his belief that 'no sound art can exist unless it serves the whole of the community'.<sup>35</sup>

Since the direction of 'the new leaders' of the National Revolution of 1933 was drawn 'towards handicraft', these leaders seemed to Pevsner to be similar in vision to Morris. Like Morris, National Socialism had 'little sympathy with mass-production, but much with the honest craft of the small workshop in town and village':

Thus Germany seems to be nearer to William Morris now than it was fifteen years ago, and farther away from Gropius than parliamentary England and Fascist Italy are to-day.<sup>36</sup>

Pevsner did not approve of this 'Morrisian' tendency of the leaders of the National Revolution of 1933 to be passive towards, if not critical of, the introduction of modern means of production: in his view they rowed against the stream and denied the progressive 'general tendency' of German art education during the period of 1919-1933, which Pevsner thought should have been praised. Art schools in post-World War I Germany had been more progressive than those of Britain in acknowledging the necessity of introducing modern means of mass production in the field of industrial art, and this was something that Pevsner felt post-World War I German art schools should have boasted about to the world:

... the German art school after the war was more progressive in acknowledging the vital importance of mass-production for modern industrial art. As early as in 1914, Muthesius had pleaded before the Werkbund for standardisation. There cannot be any doubt that industry to-

day badly wants the trained designer who is not an artist-craftsman only, but also an expert in modern materials and modern processes. English art schools have so far not done much for this. The spirit in German art education since 1919, above all in some of the splendid Monotechnics such as those at Munich, certainly tended more in that direction.<sup>37</sup>

The enthusiasm of the leaders of National Socialism for handicraft appeared to Pevsner to be anachronistic and sentimental. For Pevsner, the teaching of Morris, according to Pevsner's own ethics of design, had to be modified, altered, and renewed to fit current times. Pevsner thus felt that the lack of support the leading National Socialists showed for mechanical mass production was a problem: he could not see how ordinary people could reject substandard living conditions and live culturally progressive and modern Western lives without the use of modern materials and means of production.<sup>38</sup>

In 1935, Pevsner still had faith in the ability of the National Revolution of 1933 to build a nation where modern needs and problems would be solved with modern solutions. He rather optimistically hoped that the new regime's art policy would turn to a more progressive vision of the future. Not until July 1937 did Pevsner come to realize that the National Socialists were, instead, 'violently anti-modern'. Hitler's speech, delivered on July 18, 1937 at the inauguration ceremony of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst in Munich,<sup>39</sup> is said to have made Pevsner realize that National Socialism would renounce modernism.

## 5. Towards Art Constructive and Representative of the Twentieth Century

At the very end of his RSA lecture, Pevsner referred to the subject of 'reforms in art education' in England, earnestly addressed by the British Government at that time, and expressed his expectation that 'the land of William Morris'<sup>40</sup> and 'the land where the Modern Movement started in the 'nineties'<sup>41</sup> would find her own new 'course' in art and art education, constructive and representative of England in the 1930s.

Pevsner believed that, if art education is not 'constructive and representative' of the age, the productions of its artists cannot serve the whole community. Those who stubbornly persisted in handicraft with little support of mass production and who opposed modern means of production would not be able to foster reasonable and sound architecture and industrial art products capable of fulfilling needs and solving problems.

Pevsner seems to have considered the defeat of Germany in World War I as a golden opportunity for German art education to liberate itself from traditional curricula and teaching methods and to begin a new era which acknowledged the vital importance of modern means of mass production and sought a new way of teaching and creating constructive industrial art representative of the twentieth-century. Thus Pevsner praised the post-World War I German spirit:

... the spirit after 1919 was so revolutionary in Germany that slums, damp and dark schools, hospitals or art schools seemed intolerable, and an amount of money was spent on improvements for the common good which appeared excessive to less adventurous countries.<sup>42</sup>

He then alleged that

Stronger even than in the buildings, this revolutionary spirit expressed itself in the style of the works produced by teachers and students. No compromise with tradition seemed to be conceded.

Back to fundamentals in art and architecture was the motto, to straight lines and unrefracted colours, to simple answers for simple questions.

This is above all what has given to the German art schools after the war their particular characters. And this is at the same time so inseparably linked up with the German national mentality...<sup>43</sup>

Being overly optimistic about recent political developments in Germany in the 1930s, Pevsner initially had faith in the progressive post-World War I German mentality, in which ‘the vital importance of mass-production for modern industrial art’<sup>44</sup> and ‘for the common good’ was fully acknowledged. It is from this stance that Pevsner ultimately derived his Modernist-Functionalist convictions, i.e., his ethics of design, that: 1) ‘sound’ art and design serve the whole community; 2) in order to serve the community in the twentieth century, one cannot ignore modern means of production; 3) in order to produce ‘sound’ art and design which can serve the whole community, art/design education which is constructive and representative of its time is vital.

## Notes

1. See Ariyuki Kondo, ‘To Design Well is a “Moral Duty”’: Nikolaus Pevsner’s *Modern-Medievalist Appeal*’, *Aesthetics* (The Japanese Society for Aesthetics), No. 20 (2016), pp. 75-76.
2. Since the winter of 1929-1930, Pevsner had been a ‘Privatdozent’ at Göttingen University.
3. Nikolaus Pevsner, »Kunst und Staat«, *Der Türmer*, No. 36, 1934, pp. 514–17.
4. See Ariyuki Kondo, ‘Nikolaus Pevsner on the Dignity of “Anonymity”’: An Artistic Challenge in the Age of Mass Production’, *Ferris Studies*, No. 50 (2015), pp. 24-26.
5. *An Enquiry into Industrial Art in England* was published by Cambridge University Press in 1937.
6. Susie Harries writes: ‘... Pevsner seemed able to relax and enjoy himself at the farewell dinner for Gropius, who was leaving for America. Held at the Trocadero on Piccadilly on 9 March 1937, the dinner represented a roll call of the progressive design establishment and its supporters. Pevsner found himself sitting with Julian Huxley, Henry Moore, H. G. Wells, Ove Arup, Sigfried Giedion and Gordon Russell, studying a menu whose cover had been designed by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.’ Susie Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life*, London: Chatto & Windus, p. 232.
7. The lecture took place at the Royal Society of Arts on 18 January, 1935. It was published in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* in January 1936. Nikolaus Pevsner, ‘Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, Vol. 84, No. 4339, 1936, pp. 248-262.
8. Pevsner published *Pioneers of the Modern Movement: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* from Faber & Faber in September, 1936.
9. Percy H. Jowett, a well-known watercolorist and teacher, born in Halifax in 1882, had been appointed as Principle of the Royal College of Arts earlier that year.
10. Pevsner, ‘Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools’, p. 247.



11. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 248.
12. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 248.
13. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 248.
14. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 248.
15. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 248.
16. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 252.
17. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 253.
18. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 253.
19. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 253.
20. Pevsner observes that the unity between the training of painters and craftsmen was 'certainly stronger at the German schools' compared to that in Britain, for 'the idea was new in Germany, while it was old-established' in Britain. See Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 255.
21. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 254.
22. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 251.
23. See, for instance, Ariyuki Kondo, 'Quiet, Humane and "Anonymous": Pevsner's art-historical response to wartime', *Ferris Studies*, No. 51 (2016), pp. 60-62.
24. The 'Special Search List G.B.', prepared by the SS. in 1940, is the list of people whom the Nazi intended to arrest immediately upon their future invasion of Britain.
25. At the end of 1941, Pevsner published a critical note on Nazi architecture in *The Architectural Review*. See Kondo, 'Quiet, Humane and "Anonymous"', pp. 58-59.
26. For instance, Pevsner went back to Leipzig in August 1938 with his wife Lola to see her father who was in critical condition at that time, suffering from cirrhosis of the liver. Harries records that this visit was, 'though he could not have guessed it, the last time that Pevsner was to see his parents'. See Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner*, p. 237.
27. Harries writes: 'That summer [1938] Uta, Tom and Dieter went to Leipzig for a short holiday with their Pevsner grandparents. In hindsight, it is hard to understand why Pevsner and Lola felt so little sense of danger. Restrictions on Jew were tightening all the time — identification cards would be introduced in August 1938, making it impossible for Jews to pass undetected in any sphere of life — and it was already becoming necessary for some to take shelter ...' (Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner*, p. 237.)
28. Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner*, pp. 235-236.
29. Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner*, p. 312.
30. Letter from Hedwig Kaufmann to Nikolaus Pevsner, dated September 23, 1941. The letter is now held in the special collections (Pevsner Papers) at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA, USA.
31. Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner*, p. 312.

32. 'Nicholas' Pevsner's enquiry regarding his mother (Frau Annie Pevsner), which was made through the British Red Cross and Comité International de la Croix Rouge Genève (The enquiry was first made on February 2, 1942 and the answer was received on May 13, 1942). The enquiry sheet is now held in the special collections at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA, USA. (Nikolaus Pevsner Papers, Series VI, Box 135.)
33. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 254.
34. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 248.
35. This was how Pevsner summarized William Morris's conviction in art, which became Pevsner's own conviction. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 248.
36. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 255.
37. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 255.
38. The attainment of high standards of living for ordinary people and how creative art and design can contribute to this task were Pevsner's life-long concerns and academic themes.
39. What Hitler insisted on in this speech is summarized by Harries as:  
... this was a Jewish notion. Art was the expression of the *Volk* or People, and could never date. The art of today must be the art of the German people, not modern art. The German *Volk* did not understand modern painting, with its green skies and blue grass. (Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner*, pp. 232-233.)
40. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 256.
41. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 256.
42. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 256.
43. Pevsner, 'Post-War Tendencies in German Art Schools', p. 256.
44. See note 37.

## Author Biography

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