

Before the Nazis started using it and ruined it for everyone, the swastika had a long history throughout the world. Archaeologists have found evidence of the symbol’s use everywhere from Europe to Africa to Asia, going back thousands and thousands of years to the Iron and Bronze Ages.

According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the swastika [came back](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007453) into wide use in Europe in the late 1800s following “extensive archeological work such as that of the famous archeologist Heinrich Schliemann.” “Schliemann discovered the hooked cross on the site of ancient Troy,” the museum says, and linked it to similar shapes found on German artifacts. He concluded that it was a “significant religious symbol of our remote ancestors.” After those discoveries, the swastika became a common symbol of good luck in Europe and abroad. “Pretty soon swastikas were everywhere, rotating both clockwise and counterclockwise,” Sarah Boxer [wrote](http://www.nytimes.com/library/arts/072900tank-swastika.html) in the New York Times. They popped up in Rudyard Kipling’s signature, on Coca-Cola pendants, Carlsberg beer bottles, American army shoulder patches, and even Boy Scout merit badges.

At the same time, certain individuals and groups adopted the symbol for less wholesome reasons. German nationalist movements saw the swastika as the Germans’ link to the Aryan “master race” and a “symbol of ‘Aryan identity’ and German nationalist pride,” the Holocaust Museum says, and it soon “became associated with the idea of a racially ‘pure’ state.”

Hitler [wrote](http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200601.txt) inMein Kampfthat the Nazis’ emblem needed to be both a “symbol of our own struggle” and “effective as a large poster,” and the swastika, as the nationalist movements were using it, fit the bill. The Nazis officially adopted a red flag with a white circle and black swastika in 1920. Hitler wrote of the flag (emphasis of the author),

“We National Socialists regarded our flag as being the embodiment of our party programme. The red expressed the social thought underlying the movement. White the national thought. And **the swastika signified the mission allotted to us—the struggle for the victory of Aryan mankind** and at the same time the triumph of the ideal of creative work which is in itself and always will be anti-Semitic.”

After millions of people were systematically killed under swastika flags by men wearing swastikas on their uniforms, the symbol become one of genocide, fascism, and racism, and any other connotations it might have had were lost in the West. Like the Chaplin-esque toothbrush mustache that Hitler wore, the swastika is pretty much off limits, though some people are trying to rehabilitate it.