



Nazi Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft: Constructing a People's Community

Author(s): David Welch

Source: *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 39, No. 2, Understanding Nazi Germany, (Apr., 2004), pp. 213-238

Published by: Sage Publications, Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3180722>

Accessed: 15/04/2008 20:46

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=sageltd>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We enable the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

David Welch

## **Nazi Propaganda and the *Volksgemeinschaft*: Constructing a People's Community**

Is it possible to talk of public opinion existing in the Third Reich, and if so, how did the Nazi regime attempt to influence such opinion by means of propaganda? What are the key themes associated with propaganda? This article will argue that the concept of a 'national' or 'people's' community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) was a key element in the 'revolutionary' aims of the Nazi regime, and illustrates the remarkably ambitious nature of its propaganda.<sup>1</sup>

Propaganda presented an image of society that had successfully manufactured a 'national community' by transcending social and class divisiveness through a new ethnic unity based on 'true' German values. But was there a gap between the claims trumpeted in Nazi propaganda and social reality? Recent works have suggested that there was, and indeed that the gap between social myth and social reality in the Third Reich grew ever wider. This article will reappraise the effectiveness (or otherwise) of *Volksgemeinschaft* by analysing the response from two sections of the community — the industrial working class and German youth.

Propaganda played an important part in mobilizing support for the NSDAP in opposition and maintaining the party once in power. But propaganda alone could not have sustained the Nazi Party and its ideology over a period of 12 years. There is now considerable evidence to suggest that Nazi policies and propaganda reflected many of the aspirations of large sections of the population.<sup>2</sup> Propaganda in Nazi Germany was not, as is often believed, a 'catch-all'

---

This article was first delivered in 2002 as a Trevelyan Lecture at the University of Cambridge.

1 I first explored this theme in 'Manufacturing a Consensus: Nazi Propaganda and the Building of a "National Community" (*Volksgemeinschaft*)', *Contemporary European History*, 2, 1 (1993), 1–15. Since writing this article I have revised some of my opinions and included new material. I should also point out that while arguing that the appeal of 'national community' propaganda was a potent mobilizing agent (especially before 1933), I am not suggesting that the Third Reich brought about a social revolution. It is important to distinguish between the exaggerated pseudo-egalitarian propaganda that claimed to have transcended class, denominational and political division and the essential continuities in the class structure of Nazi Germany. Empirical research suggests that in real terms there can be no suggestion of a revolutionary transformation of society between 1933 and 1945. Cf. H.A. Winkler, 'Vom Mythos der *Volksgemeinschaft*', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 17 (1977), 488–9; H. Matzerath and H. Volkmann, 'Modernisierungstheorie und Nationalsozialismus' in J. Kocka (ed.), *Theorien in der Praxis des Historikers* (Göttingen 1977), 95–7; B. Stöver, *Volksgemeinschaft im Dritten Reich* (Düsseldorf 1993).

2 Cf. David Welch, *The Third Reich. Politics and Propaganda* (London 2002, 2nd edn) and R. Gellately, *Backing Hitler. Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (Oxford 2001).

process. The 'revolutionary' aim of the nazi regime to bring about the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the true harmony of classes, highlights the remarkably ambitious nature of its propaganda. Nevertheless, the 'success' of propaganda should not be measured purely in terms of its ability radically to change opinions and attitudes. Propaganda is as much about confirming rather than converting public opinion. Propaganda, if it is to be effective must, in a sense, preach to those who are already partially converted. Writing before the second world war, Aldous Huxley observed:

Propaganda gives force and direction to the successive movements of popular feeling and desire; but it does not do much to create these movements. The propagandist is a man who canalises an already existing stream. In a land where there is no water, he digs in vain.<sup>3</sup>

If we look at propaganda as a means of reinforcing existing attitudes and beliefs, then the continuing 'success' of propaganda during the Third Reich in creating a largely acquiescent public points to the conclusion that a 'consensus' of sorts had been achieved. In this sense, the regime's propaganda was pragmatic enough to recognize that its policies could be maintained provided sections of the community who were opposed to nazism remained quiescent. Coercion and terror would play an important restraining role here. But nevertheless, it is my contention that, once the nazis were in power, the economic and social welfare programme they put forward and the insidious use made of propaganda in a 'closed' environment was enough to ensure at least 'passive' support for the regime.

From its very beginning, the Third Reich had set itself the ambitious task of 're-educating' the German people for a new society based upon what it saw as a 'revolutionary' value system. The NSDAP had always rejected the kind of liberal democracy that had evolved in most western European countries by the beginning of the twentieth century. They fervently believed that the only salvation from the 'degeneracy' of the Weimar Republic was the *Völkischer Staat* which would come about in Germany through a National Socialist-type revolution. Coupled with this rejection of democracy which had failed Germany was a growing belief that strong leadership was needed to transcend class and sectional interests and provide a new start.

The point has to be made at once that any attempt to quantify public reaction to nazi propaganda is fraught with difficulties. Accurate measurement of the effectiveness of nazi propaganda is weakened by the absence of public opinion surveys and the fact that in a society that resorted so readily to coercion and terror, reported opinion did not necessarily reflect the true feelings and moods of the public, especially if these views were opposed to the regime. Nevertheless, to state that public opinion in the Third Reich ceased to exist is not strictly true. After the nazi 'seizure of power' in 1933 the Propaganda Minister, Joseph Goebbels, stressed the importance of co-ordinating propaganda with other activities. In a dictatorship, propaganda must address itself

3 A. Huxley, 'Notes on Propaganda', *Harper's Magazine* (December 1936), 39.

to large masses of people and attempt to move them to a uniformity of opinion and action. Nevertheless, the nazis also understood that propaganda is of little value in isolation. To some extent this explains why Goebbels impressed on all his staff at the Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda the imperative necessity constantly to gauge public moods. Goebbels therefore regularly received (as did all the ruling élites) extraordinarily detailed reports from the Secret Police (SD) about the mood of the people and would frequently quote these in his diary. Hitler, too, was familiar with these reports and his recorded determination to avoid increasing food prices at all costs for fear that this would undermine the regime's popularity suggests a political sensitivity to public opinion. To assure themselves of continued popular support was an unwavering concern of the nazi leadership, and of Hitler and Goebbels in particular.

To this end, a number of different agencies were engaged in assessing the state of public opinion and the factors affecting public morale. The SD, the Gestapo, the Party, local government authorities and the judiciary all made it their business to gauge the mood and morale of the people. Their reports were based on information received from agents throughout the Reich who reported on their conversations with Party members or on conversations they had overheard. It has been estimated that by 1939 the SD alone had some 3000 full-time officials and some 50,000 part-time agents.<sup>4</sup>

For some years now, two key sources have been exploited more fully in an attempt to understand the regime's problems of political control and mobilization. The first is the various reports on civilian morale and public opinion conducted from 1939 by the Security Service (*Sicherheitsdienst* or SD) of the SS and later, under cover, by the RMVP (Propaganda Ministry) itself. The second is the *Deutschland-Berichte* (Sopade) published in 1980, containing underground reports from the Social Democratic Party's contacts, both those stationed in Germany and those travelling through it from outside, who passed on their observations in the form of lengthy monthly reports to the SPD headquarters in exile. These reports, which cover the period 1934–40, encompass every conceivable topic but are particularly concerned with popular attitudes to the regime. Although both sources have their drawbacks and need to be used critically, they have greatly contributed to our understanding of questions relating to the popular base of nazism and specifically to the ongoing debate about the 'power' or otherwise of nazi propaganda. Both of these sources will be referred to in the following analysis.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, it would be an over-simplification to think of the German public as a

4 Cf. J. Noakes and G. Pridham (eds), *Nazism 1919–1945*, vol. 2, *State, Economy and Society* (Exeter 1984), 569, and M. Steinert, *Hitlers Krieg und die Deutschen. Stimmung und Haltung der deutschen Bevölkerung im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Düsseldorf 1970), 43–4.

5 For a selection of SD reports see H. Boberach (ed.), *Meldungen aus Reich. Auswahl geheimer Lageberichten des Sicherheitsdienstes der SS 1939–1944* (Berlin and Neuwied 1965). For the Sopade reports, *Deutschlands-Berichte der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (Sopade) 1934–1940* (Frankfurt-am-Main 1980).

*tabula rasa*, upon which the regime drew whatever picture it wished. In any political system policy must be explained, and the public must either be convinced of the efficacy of government decisions or at least remain indifferent to them. Nazi Germany was no exception, and as with any other political system, public opinion and propaganda remained inexorably linked. That is not to say that all major decisions taken in the Third Reich were influenced by public opinion. Such a statement is clearly absurd; it is rather the case that decision-making and the propaganda justifying policy were conditioned by an awareness of how the public already felt about certain issues. Therefore the 'success' or 'failure' of propaganda was due not simply to the resources and skill of the Propaganda Ministry and its ability (or otherwise) to co-ordinate its campaigns, but it also depended on the prevailing opinions and prejudices of the German public. Too often in the past historians have been concerned only with the organizational techniques of nazi propaganda and not with how it was received by the population, the assumption being, that simply because propaganda played such a disproportionate role in the Third Reich, by implication it *must* have been highly effective. Clearly Goebbels believed this, but the historian needs to be more sceptical. The aim of this article is to provide a balanced picture between the different reactions of the public to propaganda in the context of the declared aims of that propaganda and the manner in which it was disseminated. By breaking down the aims of nazi propaganda into specific themes it is possible to make an informed assessment of the differentiated reactions of the public to various leitmotifs. As a general statement, it is fair to say that propaganda tended to be more effective when it was reinforcing existing values and prejudices than when it was attempting to manufacture a new value system, or, indeed, when it was encountering some resistance.<sup>6</sup> This is an obvious point, but giving greater weight to a scheme of differentiation confirms yet again that the nazi state was no monolith but a mosaic of conflicting authorities *and* affinities.

The nazis saw their *Machtergreifung* (seizure of power) as more than simply a change of government: it represented the start of a revolution which would transform German society in accordance with their ideology. The so-called nazi revolution was essentially compounded of three elements. First, the nazis utilized the legal authority of the state and its machinery to legitimize their control over the civil service, police and the armed forces. All those who were unwilling to submit to this new authority were either dismissed or liquidated. Second, there was the widespread use made of terror and coercion in the absence of law and order that allowed nazi storm-troopers to seize persons and property at will. The pervasive fear of violence should not be underestimated for it undoubtedly inhibited the forces of opposition. The menace of violence, was, to some extent, counter-balanced by the positive image of nazi society presented in the mass media on an unprecedented scale. Propaganda is

---

6 See I. Kershaw's excellent summary 'How Effective was Nazi Propaganda?' in D. Welch (ed.), *Nazi Propaganda. The Power and the Limitations* (London 1983), 180–205.

thus the third element. A society that was still suffering from a deep sense of national humiliation, and weakened by inflation, economic depression and mass unemployment, was perhaps not surprisingly attracted to a National Socialist revival that proclaimed that it could integrate disparate elements under the banner of national rebirth for Germany.

The 'revolutionary' aims of the nazi regime highlight the remarkably ambitious nature of its propaganda. From the moment that the Ministry of Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda was established it set itself the task of re-educating the population for a new society based on National Socialist values. (Shortly after his appointment, Goebbels defined the task of his new Ministry as 'achieving a mobilization of mind and spirit in Germany'.) Although nazism is often thought of as a temporary aberration in the history of a nation, it was, in fact, based upon various strands of intellectual thought that go back at least a century. This was the *völkisch* doctrine, which was essentially a product of late eighteenth-century romanticism.<sup>7</sup> The four major themes that recur in nazi propaganda during this period reflect the roots and antecedents of *völkisch* thought: 1) appeal to national unity based upon the principle: 'The community before the individual' (*Volksgemeinschaft*); 2) the need for racial purity; 3) a hatred of enemies which increasingly centred on Jews and Bolsheviks, and 4) charismatic leadership (*Führerprinzip*). Both the original doctrine and the manner in which it was disseminated by nazi propaganda led inexorably to the mobilization of the German people for a future war. Once in war, these propaganda aims could then be extended in order to maintain the fighting morale of the military and civil population.<sup>8</sup>

The following analysis will be confined to the first theme (*Volksgemeinschaft*) and to the period leading up to the war. The central goal of nazi propaganda was radically to restructure German society so that the prevailing class, religious and sectional loyalties would be replaced by a new heightened national awareness. A considerable degree of mysticism was involved in the displacement of such deeply-held, yet conflicting values, by means of a 'national' or 'people's' community (*Volksgemeinschaft*). This desire for unity drew its strength from an idealized past rather than from the present. In an age of industrialization and class conflict, man (it was argued), had to transform his feeling of alienation into one of belonging to a 'pure' community, or *Volk*. In modern times, this notion can be traced back to the *Burgfrieden*, or the myth of the 'spirit of August 1914' when the Kaiser declared: 'I recognize no parties, but only Germans.' By ending domestic political strife in the name of the

---

7 For an analysis of *völkisch* thought, still un superseded is, G. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (London 1964). Cf. also J. Baird, *To Die for Germany. Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon* (Bloomington and Indianapolis 1990).

8 For a discussion of these issues see my contribution, 'Goebbels, Götterdämmerung, and the Deutsche Wochenschaun' in S. Dolezel and K. Short (eds), *Hitler's Fall. The Newsreel Witness* (London 1988), 80-99.

*Burgfrieden* the nation was apparently united behind the banner of a fully-justified war of self-defence. In August 1914 it seemed that the war had created a new sense of solidarity in which class antagonisms were transcended by some entirely fictitious 'national community'. The *Burgfrieden* could not, however, survive a long war, just as the reconciliation of class tensions was dependent on a swift military victory.<sup>9</sup> In reality, the superficial harmony of 1914 was a far cry from the *Volksgemeinschaft* invoked by the nazis. Nevertheless, the nationalist fervour of 1914, the spirit of a united nation ready and eager for a justifiable war, remained a potent force for the German Right throughout the interwar period and appeared to have found fruition in the 'fighting community' of 1933. The NSDAP overcame the potential divisions between nationalism and socialism which had polarized Weimar politics by coupling notions of *Volk* (ethnic people) with *Gemeinschaft* (community) into a homogeneous and harmonious 'national community'. The concept was defined by those excluded — largely on racial grounds — but also included 'shirkers' and 'spongers' not prepared to make the necessary individual sacrifices.

In order to manufacture a consensus where one did not previously exist, the nazi propaganda machine would constantly urge the population to put 'the community before the individual' (*Gemeinnutz vor Eigenmütz*) and to place their faith in slogans like 'One People! One Reich! One Führer!' To this end, the political function of propaganda was to co-ordinate the political will of the nation with the aims of the state — or if this proved impossible with certain groups (for example, sections of the industrial working class and Bavarian Catholics), to establish at least passive acquiescence. Propaganda was intended to be the active force cementing the 'national community' together, and the mass media — indeed art in general — would be used to *instruct* the people about the government's activities and why it required total support for the National Socialist state. Fundamental in the propaganda presentation was the attempt to forge an awareness of the notion of 'experience' (*Erlebnis*) as the spiritual bond that cemented individuals to this new all-embracing ethnic community. The conscious experience of 'inclusion' as a comrade of the community (as opposed to being an 'outsider') was a critical part of the pseudo-religious vision of a 'national awakening'. In the years leading up to the war — partly as an antidote to the increasing use of coercion and for the subsequent loss of liberty — propaganda eulogized the achievements of the regime. The press, radio, newsreels and film documentaries concentrated on the more prominent schemes: the impact of nazi welfare services such as the *National-sozialistische Volkswohlfahrt* [NSV], Strength Through Joy (the Labour

---

9 For a further discussion of the significance of the *Burgfrieden* and the first world war, see D. Welch, *Germany, Propaganda and Total War, 1914–1918. The Sins of Omission* (London and New Brunswick, NJ 2000) and J. Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914. Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge 2000).

Front's agency for programmed leisure), and Winter Aid. Posters proclaimed the benefits of 'Socialism of the Deed', newsreels showed happy workers enjoying cruise holidays and visiting the 'People's Theatre' for the first time, the radio bombarded the public's social conscience with charitable appeals, and the press stressed the value of belonging to a 'national community' and the need for self-sacrifice in the interests of the state. Cheap theatre and cinema tickets, along with cheap radio sets (*Volksempfänger*) and the cheap 'People's Car' (*Volkswagen*) — even the 'People's Court' (*Volksgesichtshof*) — were all intended to symbolize the achievements of the 'people's community'. A famous propaganda poster of 1936 showed one of the new cheap radios dwarfing a vast crowd of people with the slogan: 'All Germany listens to the Führer on the People's Radio'.

Propaganda presented an image of society that had been successfully re-organized into a *Volksgemeinschaft*. How justifiable were such claims? Was there a gap between the nazi propaganda image and social reality? Recent works have suggested that there was, and indeed that the gap between social myth and social reality in the Third Reich grew ever wider. The argument suggests that propaganda of the 'national community' failed to break down objective class and social divisions and, more importantly, failed to destroy an awareness of these divisions.<sup>10</sup> Two sections of the population in particular who are singled out as 'resisting' the blandishments of 'national community' propaganda are the industrial working class and Catholics. We shall, therefore, concentrate first of all on the relationship between the regime and the industrial working class and, by way of contrast, look at the response from another important section of the 'community', German youth.

The late Tim Mason argued vociferously that the German working class remained largely resistant to the nazi regime and its ideology.<sup>11</sup> This view has been shared and perpetuated by the political Left. We shall try to show that while workers (and in this case the industrial working class) retained a healthy scepticism about nazi propagandistic claims to have transcended social and class divisions, they were nevertheless impressed by some of the achievements of the new regime and prepared to accept and co-operate with the nazis (if it was in their self-interest to do so).

The basis for the system of labour relations in force when the nazis came to power in 1933 had been established during the first years of the Weimar

10 Cf. Kershaw, 'How Effective was Nazi Propaganda?', op. cit., 189–91. More recently, Kershaw has referred to the notion of *Volksgemeinschaft* as 'vague' and 'ultimately negative'. See *The Nazi Dictatorship. Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London 2000, 4th edn), 172.

11 Cf. T. Mason, *Nazism, Fascism and the Working Class* (ed. J. Caplan, Cambridge 1995) and Mason, *Social Policy in the Third Reich: The Working Class and the National Community* (Oxford 1993). See also T. Siegel, 'Whatever was the Attitude of German Workers? Reflections on Recent Interpretations' in I. Kershaw and M. Lewin (eds), *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison* (Cambridge 1997), 61–77.



Republic. The right of workers to join trade unions was incorporated in the Weimar Constitution of 1919 and the same year a new law guaranteed workers a degree of participation in the running of factories by setting up works councils made up of both employers and workers. The divisions within the trade union movement had established themselves in three separate areas: the Free Trade Unions which were the largest union and closely associated with the Social Democratic Party; the Catholic Christian Trade Unions linked with the Centre Party and influential in the predominantly Catholic industrial areas; and the smaller Hirsch-Düncker unions which traditionally aligned themselves with the Liberals.

The nazis invested enormous energy in regulating the labour market. Determined to control the organization of labour without compromising, they carried out the destruction of the trade unions in various stages. The Free Trade Unions were the first to be 'co-ordinated' (*gleichgeschaltet*) on 2 May 1933. A few days later, the Hirsch-Düncker unions 'voluntarily' co-ordinated themselves, while the Christian Trade Unions were given a temporary reprieve, since the new regime was in the middle of negotiating a Concordat with the Vatican. Once this had been secured at the end of June, then they, too, were disbanded. Meanwhile on 6 May, Dr Robert Ley, the head of the Political Organization of the Party, had announced the creation of the German Labour Front (*Deutsche Arbeitsfront* — DAF) which not only provided a National Socialist substitute for the trade unions but also served to neutralize the radical Nazi Factory Cells Organization (NSBO) which had been founded to enable the movement to defeat Marxism on the shop floor. The second phase began in December 1933, when the DAF was reorganized to allow blue- and white-collar sections to be replaced by so-called Reich Plant Communities. The reorganization of industrial relations was brought about by the 'Law for the Ordering of National Labour' of 20 January 1934 and the dissolution of the still autonomous economic interest organizations. The main aim of the new law which governed labour in the Third Reich was to establish a system of labour relations based on the concept of the 'plant community' (*Betriebsgemeinschaft*), formed by the 'plant leader' (employer) and his 'retinue' (employees) with Councils of Trust replacing the former works councils. The first clause of the new law stated: 'The employer works in the factory as leader of the plant, together with employees and workers who constitute his retinue, to further the aims of the plant and for the common benefit of the nation and State.' The intention was to replace industrial conflict with trust and co-operation based on the common ethic of *Volksgemeinschaft*. To this end, DAF assumed an increasingly powerful role in the sphere of industrial relations and social policy. DAF had initially been financed from the confiscated funds of trade unions and although membership was in theory voluntary, by the late 1930s the vast bulk of the work-force had been forced to join under pressure from employers and the state.

The nazis viewed trade unions as a vehicle of the class struggle and were determined that they should be depoliticized. By 'co-ordinating' trade unions

into the Labour Front they were transforming organized labour into an organ for vocational representation that placed strengthening the national economy above self-aggrandizement. The document enshrining the principles of the Labour Front stated that:

Within it (DAF) workers will stand side by side with employers, no longer separated into groups which serve to maintain special economic or social distinctions or interests. . . . The high aim of the Labour Front is to educate all Germans who are at work to support the National Socialist State and to indoctrinate them in the National Socialist mentality.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, by encompassing employers as well as workers, DAF was intended to become the 'symbol of the nation', to act, in Hitler's own words, as an 'honest broker' between the classes. It was referred to by a decree of 24 October 1934 as 'the organization of creative Germans of brain and fist'.

In order to sell *Volksgemeinschaft* in the absence of a concerted labour policy, the nazis chose to appeal to abstract emotions like pride and patriotism and focus less on the worker and more on the ennobling aspects of work itself. Slogans proclaimed that 'Work Ennobles' (*Arbeit adelt*) and more grotesquely, 'Labour Liberates' (*Arbeit macht frei*). An idealized image of the worker was invoked in an attempt to raise his status (if not his wages) and fulfil the psychological assimilation of the 'the worker' into the life of the nation. New national holidays were invented with predetermined rituals imitating the Christian calendar: Accession to Power Day, Labour Day, Harvest Day, Memorial Day, Hitler's Birthday. State-sponsored art had an important function recording the 'achievements' of the 'people's community'. Work was seen not as a chore nor as a world of exploitation. Unlike Soviet propaganda that glorified modern technology, National Socialist propaganda insisted that technology and industry serve the wider interests of the community. In November 1942, the monthly art magazine *Die Kunst im Deutschen Reich*, stated: 'The measure of all things is no longer man or machine but *Volk* and community.' Artists felt duty-bound to record the magnitude of Hitler's genius and the achievements of his regime. Carl Protzen painted the grandiose building schemes in 'The Führer's Roads' (1940); Julius Paul Junghans captured the nobility of the rural peasant life in 'Hard Work' (1939); Arthur Kampf ennobled sweat and toil in 'In the Steelworks' (1939); and Otto Hirth's 'The House of German Art and its Extension' (1940) celebrated the monumental scale of nazi neo-classical architecture. Postage stamps highlighted economic and social achievements such as the construction of the autobahns or the building of viaducts that opened up the country and improved public transport.

Hitler himself took the lead in raising the status of the 'ordinary' worker. The following question and answer was part of an 'ideological' catechism:

---

12 The agreement which was signed on 27 November 1933 by Ley, Seldte (Ministry of Labour), Schmitt (Economics), and Hitler's representative for economic affairs, Keppeler, can be found in Noakes and Pridham (eds), *Nazism 1919-1945*, vol. 2, op. cit., 338-9.

‘What professions has Adolf Hitler had?’ ‘Adolf Hitler was a construction worker, an artist and a student.’ In the numerous publicity films and posters produced by the *Propagandaamt* of DAF to advertise the ‘victory of the battle for work’, Hitler was referred to as the ‘first worker of the nation’. May Day was transformed from a traditional socialist celebration of working-class solidarity into the ‘National Day of Labour’, a reaffirmation of the national community when employers and workers would parade side by side throughout Germany and listen to a speech from Hitler. To further demonstrate the Third Reich’s esteem for its working population, the press, under the rubric ‘Workers of the head and hand’ (*Arbeiter der Stirn und der Faust*), would celebrate the ‘nobility of hard work’ (*Adel der schweren Arbeit*), when ‘unfashionable’ workers such as rubbish collectors would be interviewed in a positive way. Posters and photographs showed happy *Volksgenossen* (‘comrades of the people’, a term the nazis invented to replace ‘citizen’) — both blue- and white-collar workers — sharing an *Eintopf* (one-pot meal) in a public display of solidarity. The whole notion of *Volksgemeinschaft* implied that every ‘pure’ German had some claim to equality, regardless of their social background or occupational position. This sometimes rested uneasily with other notions like *Leistungsgemeinschaft* (‘community based upon achievement’) which inferred that equality of status was to extend to equality of opportunity. DAF and the press were only too eager to extol the virtues of merit, highlighting workers who had advanced from humble beginnings. ‘The worker is even more aware’, a functionary of the Labour Front announced on the sixth anniversary of Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor, ‘that he has the opportunity to reach the highest levels in his plant commensurate with his merit.’<sup>13</sup> Indeed, despite the heavily-regulated labour market, workers still seized opportunities offered by the new structures to manoeuvre for new jobs and personal advancement.

By assimilating workers into first the ‘factory community’ and then the ‘national community’, the Labour Front was able to boast that it had successfully overcome both the alienation and exploitation felt by many modern industrial workers and at the same time provided an opportunity for advancement based on performance and not social background. DAF’s problem, however, was that in view of the priority of concentrating the nation’s resources in rearmament, strict limits were imposed on wage increases, which would have been the obvious way of attempting to win (or bribe) the support of the working class.

Hitler’s war plans for full mobilization and rearmament (described succinctly by Jeremy Noakes as ‘pursuing a Blitzkrieg strategy in the *military* sphere, wherever possible, but a total war strategy in the *economic* sphere’) had, by

---

13 Quoted in Schoenbaum, *Hitler’s Social Revolution. Class and Status in Nazi Germany* (London 1967), 82. Hitler subscribed to the meritocratic notion of equality of opportunity and in a revealing interview in 1934 chose the metaphor of a dynamic community providing individuals with a ‘ladder’ of opportunity. M. Domarus (ed.), *Hitler. Speeches and Proclamations 1932–1945* (London 1990–7) vol. 2, 444, dated 25 March 1934.

1938, led to reductions in civilian consumption, rationing, and shortages.<sup>14</sup> There was no question that workers would be given butter before guns or indeed that the government had any intention of allowing discontent to change their policies. A secret memorandum from the British embassy in Berlin suggested that Hitler was aware of workers' feelings but remained determined to divert 'surplus earnings' away from 'a demand for consumable goods'.<sup>15</sup> Nazi propaganda had a dual role to play here by persuading the population that short-term sacrifices were necessary to guarantee future prosperity, and to publicize, as a means of compensation, the measures being introduced by the regime. Therefore, inducements of a different kind were sought, and when DAF was reorganized on 27 November 1933, two new organizations were established within its ambit; they were 'Beauty of Labour' (*Schönheit der Arbeit*) and 'Strength through Joy' (*Kraft durch Freude*). Both can be seen as an attempt to improve status and working conditions as a substitute for wage increases and for the growing demand for consumable goods. It was also typical of the nazis to exploit organizations and institutions for the purpose of demonstrating to 'national comrades' how they could constructively contribute to the *Volksgemeinschaft*. 'Beauty of Labour' initiated a series of propaganda campaigns with slogans coined to publicize good working practices such as 'Fight against noise', 'Good ventilation in the work place' and 'Clean people in a clean plant'. These were designed to persuade employers to improve working conditions and they would be backed up by official government figures showing, for the benefit of the workers, the increased number of factory inspections and the way in which this had led to improved facilities within the workplace. For example, the campaign 'Warm Meals at Work' led to the introduction of canteens in factories. Propaganda films such as *Beauty of Work* celebrated these improvements and contrasted them with the poor conditions of the past. The campaigns to improve the working environment did not always find favour with managers who viewed them as interference in their own affairs. On the other hand, Sopade reports suggested that workers, while remaining cynical about such incentives,

<sup>14</sup> J. Noakes (ed.), *Nazism 1919–1945*, vol. 4, *The German Home Front in World War II* (Exeter 1998), 186. Emphasis in the original. Consumption as a share of national income fell from 71 per cent in 1928 to 59 per cent in 1938. Consumer goods output increased 38 per cent between 1932 and 1938, while output of capital goods increased 197 per cent. Figures taken from R. Overy, 'Germany, "Domestic Crisis" and War in 1939' reprinted in C. Leitz (ed.), *The Third Reich: The Essential Readings* (London 1999), 100. For a more detailed analysis of nazi economic policy see R. Overy, *War and Economy in the Third Reich* (Oxford 1994) and R-D. Müller, 'Die Mobilisierung der deutschen Wirtschaft für Hitlers Kreigführung' in B. Kroener, R-D. Müller and H. Umbreit, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 51: *Organisation und Mobilisierung des deutschen Machtbereichs. Kriegsverwaltung, Wirtschaft und personelle Ressourcen 1939–1941* (Stuttgart 1988), 371–412. Both Overy and Müller reject the conception of the Blitzkrieg economy which is now widely viewed as flawed. For analysis based on the Blitzkrieg strategy see A. Milward, *The German War Economy* (London 1965).

<sup>15</sup> Bank of England, Central Bank Papers (Germany), OV 34, ix, memorandum from the British Embassy Berlin, 'Germany: Financial Position', 21 July 1939, 10–11, cited in Overy, 'Germany, "Domestic Crisis" and War in 1939', op. cit., 114–15.

were nevertheless impressed that measures to improve working conditions were being implemented.<sup>16</sup>

Called at first 'After Work', 'Strength through Joy' was to organize the leisure time and activities of the German labour force. Intended to compensate for the loss of trade union rights, the inadequacy of wage increases, and the increasing regimentation of life, 'Strength through Joy' prescribed in detail the correct methods, time and content of leisure for the sole purpose of enhancing the workers' productivity. Typical was the annual efficiency competition for young apprentices. Furthermore, plants developing the most successful vocational training schemes received from Dr Ley an 'efficiency' medal. The design was a cog-wheel enclosing a swastika above a hammer with the initials 'DAF' and below the words 'recognized vocational plant'.<sup>17</sup> Such awards were also used to encourage a sense of community spirit. The reduction of leisure to a mere auxiliary of work was the official philosophy of the Labour Front, although it preferred, of course, to concentrate on the achievements of organizations like 'Strength through Joy' in allowing ordinary workers to participate in a wide range of sporting activities and in luxury pursuits such as sea cruises ('You too can now travel') and the prospect of owning one of the new 'people's cars' (*Volkswagen*). Posters urged workers to 'Save five marks a week and get your own car'. Workers responded enthusiastically and paid millions of marks into the saving scheme to buy a *Volkswagen*, but they received no cars. Nevertheless, in 1940 a Party official felt confident enough to write:

It is no exaggeration to say that for millions of Germans 'Strength through Joy' has made the world beautiful again and life worth living again . . . the idea of 'Beauty of Labour' has ensured that the factories are once more worthy of a human being. This too has a deeper significance. People can produce more in clean, airy and bright workplaces.<sup>18</sup>

These, then, are some of the measures implemented to secure the loyalty or acquiescence of the industrial working class. How did workers respond to these programmes? Tim Mason has suggested that nazi social propaganda was

---

16 Cf. C. Friemert, *Produktionsästhetik im Faschismus: Das 'Schönheit der Arbeit' von 1933 bis 1939* (Munich 1980). For a highly critical analysis of Hitler's road-building programme see E. Schulz and E. Gruber, *Mythos Reichsautobahn. Bau und Inszenierung der 'Strassen des Führers' 1933-1941* (Berlin 1996).

17 According to nazi figures, in 1938 the 'Strength through Joy' theatres were attended by 14 million, libraries numbered 5260, sporting activities were attended by 22.5 million, and 10 million took advantage of state excursions. Quoted in F. Neumann, *Behemoth. The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (London 1942), 426, n. 43.

18 G. Starcke, *Die Deutsche Arbeitsfront* (Berlin 1940), 124, quoted in Noakes and Pridham (eds), *Nazism 1919-1945*, vol. 2, op. cit., 350. Walter Benjamin has talked about the 'aestheticization of politics' whereby the nazis appeared to be offering workers widening opportunities in the workplace yet at the same time denying them the chance to assert their rights. Indeed the slogan 'the common good precedes individual good' subordinated any possibility of individual rights. W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt 1974), 506-8.

an unmitigated failure among industrial workers. Ian Kershaw, in his detailed analysis of Bavaria, has persuasively argued that the ‘national community’ idea had little impact on changing behavioural patterns which continued to be determined by material considerations.<sup>19</sup> But historians like Mason and Kershaw may be giving too much weight to the claims that the nazis themselves made about their propaganda successes. For while ‘national community’ propaganda did not achieve its ‘revolutionary’ goal of destroying class and religious loyalties, there is evidence to suggest that it did have some success (by default, in many instances) in creating a new heightened national awareness, and that this was in itself sufficient to secure for the regime a considerable degree of stability and social integration. Many sections of the community, particularly the petty bourgeoisie and those who were formerly unemployed, viewed *Volksgemeinschaft* not necessarily in terms of a radical restructuring of society involving fundamental social change, but more as an acceptable insurance policy against the alternative, Marxist-Leninism — or as an opportunity for self-advancement. According to Alf Lüdtke, ‘The vast majority of industrial workers tried to pursue their immediate interests by obtaining jobs and earning higher wages.’<sup>20</sup> Workers quickly realized that the best opportunities for personal aggrandizement occurred when they could demonstrate how effectively they were ‘working towards the “national community”’.

Reports from the Sopade, the Social Democrats’ exile organization, reveal a mixed response to community propaganda and the nazis’ social welfare measures. Workers were clearly aware of the many contradictions that existed. Reports show that social facilities like factory sports fields and swimming baths offered by DAF had some impact on working-class perceptions of the regime, yet at the same time workers complained that very often they were ‘compelled to build these facilities in their spare time without pay’.<sup>21</sup> The ‘Beauty of Labour’ was seen by many as simply a continuation of paternalistic German business practices and the vogue of the 1920s to increase productivity through modern ‘scientific management’ techniques. Similarly, for many workers, increased real wages could only be earned through large amounts of

---

19 See T. Mason, *Arbeiterklasse und Volksgemeinschaft* (Opladen 1975); *Sozialpolitik im Dritten Reich* (Opladen 1977), English translation, *Social Policy in the Third Reich. The Working Class and the National Community*, op. cit.; idem, ‘Labour in the Third Reich’, *Past and Present*, vol. 33 (1966), 112–41; idem, ‘The Workers’ Opposition in Nazi Germany’, *History Workshop Journal*, no. 11 (Spring 1981), 120–37. Cf. Kershaw’s work on Bavaria, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent. Bavaria 1933–1945* (Oxford 1983).

20 A. Lüdtke, ‘The Appeal of Exterminating “Others”: German Workers and the Limits of Reason’, reprinted in Leitz (ed.), *The Third Reich*, op. cit., 156. Lüdtke makes the interesting connection between the appeal of new, well cared-for plant machinery in the factories and workers’ aspirations of restored national greatness. When Germans referred to ‘German quality work’, the emphasis was on ‘German’ and ‘quality’ — a sense of pride that united not only workers but most Germans against the ‘other’. See also Lüdtke, *Eigensinn: Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus* (Hamburg 1993).

21 *Deutschland-Berichte der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands 1934–1940* (hereafter *Sopade-Berichte*), vol. 5 (February 1938), 175.

overtime. Sopade reported that this had an impact on productivity and on morale which in turn led to rising absenteeism and sickness rates.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Sopade was acknowledging in 1939 that ‘Strength through Joy’ was very popular. ‘It cleverly appeals to the petty bourgeois inclination of the unpolitical workers who want to participate in the pleasures of the “top people”’.<sup>23</sup> Although few workers could afford to go on the prestigious foreign cruises to Madeira and Scandinavia, by introducing cheap package tours, ‘Strength through Joy’ skilfully exploited a latent consumerism and won a good measure of approval in the process. Similarly, reports suggested that the decision to build a ‘people’s car’ and the setting-up of the *Volkswagen* saving scheme, met with an enthusiastic response and had the dual advantage of overcoming the problem of restricted consumerism by removing money that might otherwise be spent on goods that could not be supplied, and secondly, achieving a clever diversionary tactic in the sphere of domestic politics: ‘This car psychosis, which has been cleverly induced by the Propaganda Ministry, keeps the masses from becoming preoccupied with a depressing situation.’<sup>24</sup>

For many workers, then, ‘national community’ propaganda represented more than simply a cosmetic exercise. While recognizing the cynical intentions behind the propaganda, workers were nonetheless prepared to take advantage of the various schemes and benefits and moreover to give the regime some credit for introducing them. The National Socialist Welfare Organization (NSV), for example, was widely perceived to have successfully introduced common welfare standards and remained a popular nazi organization throughout the war. Ubiquitous posters declared: ‘I am a member of the NSV — and you?’ Sopade recorded the ‘passivity’ of workers who did not wish to engage in active opposition to the nazi regime. But ‘toleration’ and ‘acceptance’ of nazism were equally common responses, as the following report reveals.

One can discern not only widespread toleration of nazism but also an increase of its positive acceptance since 1934 among the workforces of large companies of heavy industries in the areas of the Rhine and the river Ruhr . . . the mining industries of the Ruhr, and also at one of the largest companies of the chemical industry (Bayer at Leverkusen).<sup>25</sup>

The other side of the coin was that workers who failed to respond in the appropriate manner might be denounced by fellow workers and/or castigated in the media as unpatriotic ‘slackers’ and ‘saboteurs’ of the national community. Demoralized and fearful of Gestapo reprisals, many workers chose

22 *Sopade-Berichte*, vol. 6 (July 1939), 757–78.

23 *Ibid.*, vol. 5 (February 1938), 172.

24 *Ibid.*, vol. 6 (April 1939), 489.

25 *Ibid.*, vol. 4 (1937), 777. See also Lüdtké, ‘The Appeal of Exterminating “Others”’, *op. cit.*, 160. For an interesting analysis of how the regime combined coercion and strategic concessions to maintain workers’ discipline during the war see S. Salter, ‘Structures of Consensus and Coercion: Workers’ Morale and the Maintenance of Work Discipline, 1939–1945’ in Welch (ed.), *Nazi Propaganda*, *op. cit.*, 88–116.

not to confront the regime head-on.<sup>26</sup> On the whole, however, the Sopade reports in the period leading up to the second world war lend support to the work of the Cambridge economist, C.W. Guillebaud, who visited Germany and emphasized the significance of social welfare in the Third Reich, claiming that notions like *Volksgemeinschaft* strengthened support for the regime among the working class.<sup>27</sup> Guillebaud, and indeed many other contemporary economists, emphasized the solid economic achievements of the regime in solving the twin problems of mass unemployment and economic stagnation.<sup>28</sup> In 1933 well over one-third of the working population was unemployed, a figure reduced to 74,000 by the summer of 1939, by which time there were over a million job vacancies. When Hitler came to power in 1933, the national income had fallen by 40 per cent during the previous three years and total industrial production by only slightly less. Wholesale prices had fallen by between 15 and 35 per cent, and the real incomes of those who had retained their jobs had fallen by 10 to 15 per cent. The nazis approached the 'Battle for Work', as it was called, as a political rather than an economic problem. In order to restore confidence and give the impression that something positive was being done, priority was given to reducing the number of unemployed. The first step during the course of 1933 was a cynical book-keeping manoeuvre which allowed the nazis to strike nearly a million engaged in voluntary or temporary works schemes from the unemployed register. By the autumn of 1933 the real programme of government-financed work creation was started, albeit on a modest scale. Of the £200 million spent on public works until the end of 1934, over half had been agreed by Hitler's predecessors. The increasing expenditure on armaments, together with the general recovery of the world economy, combined to bring down the number of registered unemployed to 1.7 million in August 1935. The 'Battle for Work' was won after a fashion, and business confidence, as a result of Schacht's economic and fiscal measures, was gradually restored. That is not to say that such a 'victory' could not have been won more quickly and efficiently.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the experience of the

26 See, for example, R. Gellately, 'The Gestapo and German Society: Political Denunciation in the Gestapo Case Files', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 60 (1988), and idem, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy 1933–1945* (Oxford 2001). See also Mary Nolan's thoughtful overview, 'Work, Gender and Everyday Life: Reflections on Continuity, Normality and Agency in Twentieth-Century Germany' in Kershaw and Lewin (eds), *Stalinism and Nazism*, op. cit., 311–42. Michael Burleigh has condemned the apathy of German workers in characteristically forthright fashion: 'A full plate, work and a wage packet considerably reduced people's interest in their fellow man.' *The Third Reich. A New History* (London 2000), 812.

27 C.W. Guillebaud, *The Economic Recovery of Nazi Germany 1933–1938* (Cambridge 1939). Cf. also Guillebaud, *The Social Policy of Nazi Germany* (Cambridge 1941).

28 For examples of contemporary economic reports see Overy, 'Germany, "Domestic Crisis" and War in 1939', op. cit., 109, n. 36.

29 For a penetrating empirical study of the relationship between capitalism and fascism, see H.A. Turner, *German Big Business and the Rise of Hitler* (Oxford 1985). An excellent account of the effects of the economic crisis on nazi economic theory can be found in H. James, *The German Slump. Politics and Economics 1924–1936* (Oxford 1986). On the 'primacy of politics' approach to the nazi economy, see T. Mason, 'The Primacy of Politics — Politics and Economics in National



Depression had shaped the minds of a generation of workers, and the continuing provision of full employment and the manner in which it was celebrated in the mass media continued to offset many of the negative features of the regime. Moreover, despite Göring's attempts to impose a wage freeze in 1938, real incomes generally increased in the period leading up to the outbreak of war, although workers' experiences varied markedly between individual sectors of the economy.

Closely linked to the idea of *Volksgemeinschaft* was the regime's desire to maintain social conformity. By creating a new series of public rituals to celebrate important days in the Nazi calendar, 'national comrades' (*Volksgenossen*) were expected to attend parades and speeches and show their enthusiasm by hanging out flags. The integration of the people more fully into the community required positive and active devices that publicly expressed the national community in being to Germans themselves and to the outside world. To this end the Nazis initiated the 'Winter Help' (*Winterhilfe*) Programme for collecting money, food and clothing for distressed families who had suffered as a result of mass unemployment. Winter Aid had actually been pioneered by Brüning's government in 1931, but the Nazis took full credit for its inauguration. Hitler talked about 'socialism of the deed' and the need for the *Volk* to demonstrate that the word 'community' was not a hollow phrase, but a meaningful 'inner obligation'.<sup>30</sup> The feedback reports suggest that during the first years of the regime, *Winterhilfe* not only brought genuine relief to many but also functioned as a means of social integration by encouraging the more affluent members of society to aid the poor on the grounds of national and racial affinity. During the war, collections for 'Winter Help' (renamed the 'War Winter Aid Programme') rose impressively from 631.58 million Reichsmarks (RM) in 1939/40 to 1.587 billion RM in 1942/3.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the *Eintopf* ('one pot') meal encouraged families once a month during the winter to have only one dish for their Sunday lunch and donate what they had saved to collectors who came to the door. Propaganda posters referred to the *Eintopf* as 'the meal of sacrifice for the Reich' and urged all *Volksgenossen* to increase the size of their donations as a sign of their gratitude to the Führer. Hitler was often shown in posters and press photographs enjoying a one-pot meal with his guests — although being a vegetarian this did not constitute a great sacrifice on his part! Rituals like 'Winter Help' and the 'one-pot' meal were intended to represent a vivid expression of the

---

Socialist Germany' in H.A. Turner (ed.), *Nazism and the Third Reich* (New York 1972), 175–200. More general surveys can be found in R. Overy, *The Nazi Economic Recovery 1932–38* (London 1982; revised 2nd edn 1996); A. Sohn-Rethel, *The Economy and Class Structure of German Fascism* (London 1987), and A. Barkai, *Nazi Economics* (London 1990).

30 M. Domarus (ed.), *Hitler. Speeches and Proclamations*, vol. 2, speech inaugurating the October 1935 Winter Help programme, entry of 8 October 1935, 717.

31 E. Hansen, *Wohlfahrtspolitik im NS-Staat. Motivationen, Konflikte und Machtstrukturen im 'Sozialismus der Tat' des Dritten Reiches* (Augsburg 1990), 28; Noakes (ed.), *Nazism, 1919–45*, vol. 4, op. cit., 278. Much of the finance for the activities of the NSV, and in particular the 'Mother and Child' programme, came from the Winter Aid Programme.

newly-created 'national community' and proof of loyalty to the regime. League tables based on data compiled from local NSV branches revealed the sums collected (with contributors invited to guess totals for prizes) and, in turn, these figures were used to shame under-performing branches into improving their results. Increasingly, however, as unemployment ceased to be a problem and 'voluntary' donations were diverted to pay for selected welfare measures and the rearmament programme, these compulsory gestures of conformity and 'political reliability' met with resentment, to which the authorities responded with tough measures. At the start of the war, the nazis employed 'guilt mobilization': shaming recalcitrant citizens in the name of soldiers sacrificing their lives at the front. In November 1939, for example, a party official issued the following letter to those whose contributions were deemed inadequate:

I . . . draw to your attention the fact that examination of the One Pot lists has produced an unsatisfactory amount compared with the level of donation that was required. The donation made by you in no way corresponds to your circumstances. If you consider that every day thousands of comrades risk their lives at the front, you ought to be ashamed of your unwillingness to make sacrifices. I expect you to re-examine your donation and your willingness to make a sacrifice to ensure that your donation corresponds to your circumstances and represents a real sacrifice.<sup>32</sup>

In 1940, the collections of the Wartime Winter Aid Programme were sufficiently buoyant to convince Goebbels that the German people would not 'shirk their duties' when the very existence of the Third Reich was at stake. Pointedly, however, he added that the extent to which they were willing to make sacrifices depended on a swift and victorious end to the war.<sup>33</sup> Later, on the occasion of his anniversary address on 30 January 1942, Hitler referred to the collection campaigns as a 'plebiscite' adding: 'While others talk about democracy, this *is* true democracy.' On 23 December 1942, after defeat at Stalingrad, Hitler issued an order threatening execution to all those who 'enriched themselves by means of articles collected or intended for collection'. The growing pressure on the population brought about by these repeated collections persuaded the Wehrmacht in 1943 to issue the following directive aimed at all its members involved in Winter Aid collections:

The collections can only fulfil their two special tasks of influencing and educating the population propagandistically and of informing the leadership if the *voluntary principle is absolutely adhered to*. Recognition of this fact is part of the political alphabet of every national comrade who has anything to do with the political leadership.<sup>34</sup>

As the war dragged on, with no apparent end in sight, the tendency of the authorities to resort to threats and coercion substantiates (to some extent) the

32 D. Rebentisch (ed.), *Das Dritte Reich zwischen Parteipolitik und 'Volksgemeinschaft'. Fünf Gemeinden in Dokumenten aus der Weimarer Republik und der NS-Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1984), 154, cited in Noakes (ed.), *Nazism 1919–45*, vol. 4, op. cit., 280.

33 E. Hansen, op. cit., 41.

34 The directive, dated 16 September 1943, was prepared in the Party Chancellery. Hansen, op. cit., 42 and cited in Noakes (ed.), *Nazism 1919–45*, vol. 4, op. cit., 281. Emphasis in the original.

argument put forward by historians who stress the limited effectiveness of nazi propaganda and the collapse of any form of consensus in Germany. Historians like Mason and Kershaw are surely right when they highlight the failure of the nazis to achieve *complete* social conformity. The evidence from the various public opinion-gathering agencies suggests that Germans were not automatically persuaded to put the community before their own self-interest — or at least, not all the time. Equally, however, by looking for examples of grumblings about and resistance to ‘national community’ propaganda, it may be that historians are applying different criteria when analysing the bases of consent and resistance in the Third Reich from those applied to other European societies of the period. During the 1930s and 1940s, such discontent can be found in all the modern industrial nations and was certainly not unique to National Socialist Germany. The obvious danger of citing examples of social dissent (as opposed to resistance) is that this may be at the expense of stressing the significance of *Volksgemeinschaft* in terms of integration and stability. As we have seen, the response of the industrial working class to the implementation of the ‘national community’ and the manner in which it was portrayed in the media were both varied and complex.

One section of the population which proved particularly receptive to the notion of a ‘national community’ was German youth. The assault on the individual, so characteristic of the regime, was directed primarily at youth with the intention of enveloping the individual at every stage of development within a single organization by subjecting him to a planned course of indoctrination. To inculcate service and obedience, the individualism and enthusiasm of German youth had to be controlled by instilling a sense of belonging to an exclusive (racial) community. Addressing the Nuremberg Party rally in September 1935, Hitler proclaimed:

What we look for from our German youth is different from what people wanted in the past. In our eyes the German youth of the future must be slim and slender, swift as the greyhound, tough as leather, and hard as Krupp steel. We must educate a new type of man so that our people is not ruined by the symptoms of degeneracy of our day.<sup>35</sup>

To this end the teaching profession represented one of the most politically reliable sections of the population and from a very early stage was justly regarded by the NSDAP as a vanguard for their propaganda. Party control over the teaching profession was initially secured through the Führer Decree of 24 September 1935 which allowed political vetting by the nazis for all Civil Service appointments. Teachers were also mobilized and controlled by means of their own professional association, the National Socialist Teachers’ League (NSLB) which had been established as early as 1929. The NSLB provided political references for all appointments and promotions within the teaching

---

35 *Völkischer Beobachter*, 15 September 1935.

profession and generally attempted to maintain the political reliability of teachers through a process of ideological indoctrination. By 1937, the NSLB claimed a membership of over 95 per cent of all teachers.<sup>36</sup>

In *Mein Kampf* Hitler laid great stress on organization, including the organization of leisure time. Indoctrination in schools was therefore reinforced by the 'new comradeship' of the Hitler Youth (*Hitler Jugend*, HJ) and its female counterpart, the League of German Girls (*Bund deutscher Mädel*, BDM). By 1935, 60 per cent of all German youth belonged to the Hitler Youth. Surprisingly, membership was not made compulsory until the Hitler Youth Law of 25 March 1939. Writing in 1937, the historian Stephen Roberts, who had spent over a year in Germany observing the system, referred to the 'triumph of Nazi propaganda over teaching':

Again and again in Germany, even in Catholic Bavaria and the Black Forest, I found cases of children whose Roman Catholic parents tried to keep them in the few struggling Church societies that still exist for children. In every case the children wanted to join the *Hitler Jugend*. To be outside Hitler's organisation was the worst form of punishment. The resultant worship was too distressing. Their attitude of mind is absolutely uncritical. They do not see in Hitler a statesman with good and bad points; to them he is more than a demigod. . . . It is this utter lack of any objective or critical attitude on the part of youth, even with the university students, that made me fear most for the future of Germany. They are nothing but vessels for State propaganda.<sup>37</sup>

Such contemporary impressions were certainly encouraged by the German government. In a celebrated speech delivered in 1938, Hitler set out in stark terms the future awaiting Germany's youth under the Nazi regime:

These boys join our organisation at the age of ten and get a breath of fresh air for the first time, then four years later, they move from the Jungvolk to the Hitler Youth and there we keep them for another four years. And then we are even less prepared to give them back into the hands of those who create class and status barriers, rather we take them immediately into the SA or into the SS. . . . And if they are there for eighteen months or two years and have still not become real National Socialists, then they go into the Labour Service and are polished there for six or seven months. . . . And if, after six or seven months, there are still remnants of class consciousness or pride in status, then the Wehrmacht will take over the further treatment for two years and when they return after two or four years then, to prevent them from slipping back into old habits once again we take them immediately into the SA, SS etc. and they will not be free again for the rest of their lives.<sup>38</sup>

However, the belief that the Hitler Youth had successfully mobilized all young people is clearly an exaggeration. There is considerable evidence to suggest

36 For further details of the Nazis' control of teachers and schools, see R. Eilers, *Die nationalsozialistische Schulpolitik. Eine Studie zur Funktion der Erziehung im totalitären Staat* (Cologne 1963) and W. Feiten, *Der nationalsozialistische Lehrbund. Entwicklung und Organisation* (Weinheim 1981).

37 S. Roberts, *The House that Hitler Built* (London 1937), 208. Cf. also A. Heck, *A Child of Hitler: Germany in the Days when God Wore a Swastika* (Colorado 1985).

38 Noakes and Pridham (eds), *Nazism 1919–1945*, vol. 2, op. cit., 417.

that by the late 1930s the regimental nature of the Hitler Youth was alienating some young people who were forming independent gangs. The two most documented 'non-conformist' groups (referred to by the Gestapo as 'wild cliques') who rejected the Hitler Youth, though for different reasons, were the 'Swing Youth' (*Swing-Jugend*) and the 'Edelweiss Pirates' (*Edelweisspiraten*).

The 'Swing Youth' were certainly not anti-fascist. They tended to be the offspring of the urban middle class with the money and status to reject *völkisch* music and listen instead to jazz and swing music which the authorities labelled American-influenced '*Unkultur*' and later banned. The Hitler Youth reports were concerned less with what was invariably referred to as 'negro music' than with sexual promiscuity, lack of parental discipline and the general cult of 'sleaziness' that surrounded these groups. The 'Swing Youth' cultivated a somewhat élitist culture that rejected the strident nationalism of the Hitler Youth but was nonetheless politically indifferent to National Socialism. It is well documented that Heinrich Himmler in particular found 'Swing Youth' objectionable and demanded that their 'Anglophile tendencies' be 'radically eliminated'.<sup>39</sup> In general, however, the nazis viewed 'Swing Youth' as a minor irritant.

The 'Edelweiss Pirates', on the other hand, represented a more serious challenge to the social conformity that the Hitler Youth attempted to instil. The first 'Edelweiss Pirates' sprang up spontaneously towards the end of the 1930s in western Germany. Consisting mainly of young people between the ages of 14 and 18, individual groups were closely associated with different regions but identifiable by a common style of dress with their own edelweiss badge and a general oppositional attitude towards what they saw as the increasingly paramilitary obligations of the Hitler Youth. However although they rejected the authoritarian and hierarchical lifestyle of the nazis, their nonconformist behaviour tended to be restricted to petty provocation. Fourteen- to eighteen-year-olds could hardly be expected to pose a serious political threat or indeed offer a political alternative. Nevertheless, they represent a very small group of youth who rebelled against regimented leisure and who remained unimpressed by the propaganda eulogizing a *Volksgemeinschaft*. The nazis were concerned that such nonconformist youth groups, which included the 'Leipzig Hound Packs', did not 'run wild'.<sup>40</sup> This became an even greater concern for the authorities during the war and was largely shaped by the experience of the first world war.<sup>41</sup>

39 See Himmler's letter to Heydrich dated 26 January 1942, quoted in Noakes (ed.), *Nazism 1919–45*, vol. 4, op. cit., 460.

40 For a detailed account of the 'Edelweiss Pirates' see D. Peukert, *Die Edelweisspiraten Protestbewegungen jugendlicher Arbeiter im Dritten Reich* (Cologne 1980); for a brief discussion see Peukert's contribution 'Youth in the Third Reich' in R. Bessel (ed.), *Life in the Third Reich* (Oxford 1987), 25–40. See also A. Klönne, *Jugend im Dritten Reich. Die Hitler-Jugend und ihre Gegner* (Düsseldorf 1982). For a discussion of resistance and German youth see D. Welch, *The Hitler Conspiracies* (London 2001), esp. chap. 6, 120–43.

41 See Welch, *Germany, Propaganda and Total War 1914–18*, op. cit., 47–8, 297.

For the vast mass of German youth, however, the nazi regime offered comradeship and a pioneering role: the ideology of National Socialism represented the triumph of a rejuvenated Germany, liberated from outdated fallacies of bourgeois liberalism or Marxist class war. It was to be this generation, after all, that would instil the nazi *Weltanschauung* in their 'national comrades', and lay the foundations for the New Order in Europe. As Hans Schemm, the leader of the Nazi Teachers' League put it: 'Those who have youth on their side control the future.' In a celebrated speech on 6 November 1933 Hitler declared:

When an opponent says, 'I will not come over to your side', I calmly say, 'Your child belongs to us already . . . you will pass on. Your descendants, however, now stand in the new camp. In a short time they will know nothing else but this new community.'

The diminution of parental control was viewed by many with concern, especially as children were officially encouraged by teachers and Hitler Youth leaders to denounce recalcitrant parents.<sup>42</sup> The degree to which German youth was expected to transfer allegiance from family to the national community and to subordinate individualism to the service of the Third Reich can be gauged from the propaganda posters that proclaimed proudly: 'Youth Serves the Führer. All ten-year-olds to join the HJ', 'This hand (Hitler's) guides the Reich: German youth, follow it in the ranks of the Hitler Youth', and 'German students — fight for Führer and Volk'. A BDM poster boldly stated: 'You too, belong to the Führer'. Analysing the images projected in these posters — and propaganda in general aimed at youth — one is struck by the predominance of fundamental nazi themes such as national rebirth and supremacy and the extent to which these themes were built on racial purification and regeneration. It should not be forgotten that the *Volksgemeinschaft* was an exclusive community based on racial purity and the concept of struggle.

Although, as we have seen, the growing regimentation and militarism of the youth organizations isolated some young Germans, the Sopade reports of the 1930s tend to concede that the opportunities for participation, the comradeship and enthusiasm, together with the anti-intellectualism, generally attracted the support of young people.<sup>43</sup> While some parents, teachers and employers complained about the brutalizing effects of the *Hitler Jugend*, Sopade acknowledged that the contempt for the intellect cultivated by the HJ (and Hitler!), was potently attractive to youth itself: 'The new generation has never had much use for education and reading. Now nothing is demanded of them; on the contrary, knowledge is publicly condemned.' The time devoted to physical training had been increased by order of the Ministry of Education as early as 1933 and thereafter book learning remained secondary in the educational system of the Third Reich. Fired by nationalist rhetoric, nazi education

<sup>42</sup> Cf. *Sopade-Berichte*, vol. 2 (1935), 215; vol. 3 (1936), 769; vol. 4 (1937), 840, 852; vol. 5 (1938), 1402.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *Sopade-Berichte*, vol. 1 (1934), 117–18; vol. 2 (1935), 1374–6; vol. 5 (1938), 27.

stressed the importance of clean living, ‘character building’, and the value of ‘experience’ (*Erlebnis*) to the development of the individual rather than the acquisition of ‘knowledge’.<sup>44</sup> The exultation of the common experience and the enthusiasm for a common cause underpinned much of the character building that took place in the Hitler Youth movement. Slogans like ‘youth must be led by youth’ appealed to the desire of youth to be independent and to challenge traditional authority figures in the name of the nazi social ‘revolution’.

To this end, concepts like *Volksgemeinschaft* provided a vehicle for the ambitions of a younger generation which had grown frustrated with a discredited establishment that had failed to solve Germany’s national problems. The ‘battle for work’ and the nazi welfare schemes appeared to extend opportunities for social advancement which had previously been denied to large sections of the youth population. Although the six months that students were obliged to serve in the Labour Service (*Arbeitsdienst*) was in reality a means of reducing overcrowding in the universities (and providing cheap labour), they helped, nonetheless, to heighten an awareness of the needs of the national community. Students were not only forced to work side by side with working-class and peasant youth, but by undertaking manual work on public-work projects, the university student was inculcated with a wider notion that there existed more important pursuits than simply academic work. Furthermore (and perhaps paradoxically), the constant stress on achievement and competition within the youth movement (behind which lay the glorification of the heroic fighter) served to harness and channel young people’s enthusiasm and to project participation as a dynamic involvement.

In this context, film propaganda in particular had an important role in mobilizing German youth to the National Socialist world-view — and in preparing this generation for war. A revealing example of this is the 1941 documentary *Soldaten von Morgen* (Soldiers of Tomorrow) produced by the *Reichsjugendführung* (Reich Youth leadership) for the Hitler Youth. The film takes the form of a Hitler Youth theatrical skit on the English public school system and the degeneracy of British youth resulting from this type of educa-

---

44 Employers discerned a decline in academic excellence and blamed the over-emphasis on physical education. See L. Peiffer, *Turnunterricht im Dritten Reich* (Cologne 1978). Sopade also recorded an alarming brutalization in manners and a general rejection of traditional authority figures. Cf. *Sopade-Berichte*, vol. 3 (1936), 769; vol. 4, (1937), 494. Michael Burleigh has memorably referred to membership of the Hitler Youth as ‘a bullies’ charter’, Burleigh, *The Third Reich. A New History* (London 2000), 237. After 1945, British educationalists undertook a critical assessment of the Weimar education system and came to the conclusion that due to the lack of reconstruction along democratic lines, a strong class structure remained along nineteenth-century lines. The report recognized that the notion of *Volksgemeinschaft* had tried to pull down class barriers and that efforts had been made to curb extreme academic bias in favour of ‘character-building’. Had it not been for the indoctrination of a perverse and unacceptable ideology (and for the establishment of a new arrogant élite), the *principles* of the nazi social revolution would have found some favour with British educational reformers. See my contribution, ‘Priming the Pump of German Democracy: “Re-education” Policy in Germany after the Second World War’ in I. Turner (ed.), *Reconstruction in Post-War Germany* (Oxford 1989), 215–39.

tion. The film cites Winston Churchill, Lord Halifax and Anthony Eden as decadent political symbols of such a system. British youth is ridiculed quite savagely. The first half of the film ends with dishevelled British troops being captured at Dunkirk. The propaganda message is clear; effete young English schoolboys turn into British soldiers who are easily captured. The second part of the film, by comparison, shows the 'healthy' and virile activities of the Hitler Youth — a sequence of outdoor events, all with a military flavour — culminates in German youth's joining the ranks of the armed forces. (It was no coincidence that one of the most popular Hitler Youth songs pledged: 'We follow the flag; it means more than death'.)<sup>45</sup> Speaking to an audience of Hitler Youth at the 1937 Party rally, which took place in torrential rain, Hitler alluded to the role that German youth should expect in a 'stormy' future and managed, in the process, to turn the absence of 'Hitler weather' into a political allegory:

This morning I learned from our weather forecasters that we have a meteorological condition 'V.b.' That is supposed to be a mixture of very bad and bad. Now, my boys and girls, Germany has had this meteorological condition for fifteen years! . . . For the space of a decade, the sun did not shine upon this Movement. It was a battle in which only hope could be victorious, the hope that in the end the sun would rise over Germany after all. And risen it has! And as you are standing here today, it is also good that the sun is not smiling down on you. For we want to raise a race not only for sunny, but also for stormy days!<sup>46</sup>

Nazi documentary and feature films also depicted a German society in which class barriers were rapidly being broken down. Typical of the way in which this message was disseminated under the guise of film 'entertainment' was the apparently innocuous comedy film '*Der Stammbaum des Drs Pistorius*' (Dr Pistorius's Family Tree, 1939). The film centres on the activities of the new German youth and the outmoded reactions of parents. A public official and his wife have to learn to accept a daughter-in-law from the family of a craftsman (cobbler). The father is heard to exclaim: 'Youth today does not know what class-consciousness is!' The nazis had no qualms about criticizing social rank, provided such criticism was not too divisive. '*Der Stammbaum des Drs Pistorius*' ends with the same parents looking out at the Hitler Youth marching in the streets to the song 'Hearts are ready, fists are clenched, ready for the battles ahead', and their recognition coupled with a new respect that: 'A new generation is coming — it is different from ours. . . . Youth today is marching, it is stronger than we are.' In this sense, youth gave a lead to the rest of the nation. Sopade reported:

45 Other documentary films in this genre include *Einsatz der Jugend* (Youth's Mission, 1939); *Der Marsch zum Führer* (The March to the Führer, 1940); *Glaube und Schönheit* (Faith and Beauty, 1940); *Unsere Kinder — unsere Zukunft* (Our Children — Our Future, 1940); and *Der Wille zum Fliegen* (The Desire to Fly, 1942). For an analysis of some of these films see Welch, 'Education Film Propaganda and the Nazi Youth' in Welch (ed.), *Nazi Propaganda*, op. cit., 65–87.

46 M. Domarus (ed.), *Hitler. Speeches and Proclamations*, vol. 2, 931, quoted in M. Burleigh, *The Third Reich*, op. cit., 213.



The young people follow the instructions of the HJ and demand from their parents that they become good nazis, that they give up Marxism, reactionism, and contact with Jews. It is the young men who bring home enthusiasm for the nazis. Old men no longer make any impression . . . the secret of National Socialism is the secret of its youth.<sup>47</sup>

Whether or not the nazi social 'revolution' provided wide-scale opportunities for advancement based on merit and affiliation to the new community, is open to doubt. It is clear, however, from the Sopade and SD reports (at least until late 1943 when increasingly negative attitudes are recorded) that the perception of German youth was that the regime *had* brought about real change, which marked a break with a more rigidly hierarchical and class-based past.<sup>48</sup>

To the question 'Did nazi social propaganda successfully displace traditional political and religious loyalties by means of a "national" or "people's" community', the answer must be that it 'failed' ultimately to achieve this objective. But the 'success' or 'failure' of *Volksgemeinschaft* should not necessarily be seen in terms of its ability, or otherwise, to destroy old loyalties. On a more limited basis, it was enough to suspend such allegiances with the ethos of a nazi *Weltanschauung* that urged the population to put the 'community before the individual'. That is not to say that 'national community' propaganda sustained a heightened commitment to such a radical concept. The outbreak of war did eventually produce a decline in the standing of the Party (although not Hitler), but German society did not fragment or disintegrate. Schemes like 'Strength through Joy', 'Winter Help' and the 'One Pot' meal, could not be maintained indefinitely without resentment setting in. Equally, *Volksgemeinschaft* did not bring an end to people's grievances; they continued throughout the 12 years of the Third Reich, many of them the result of cleavages that existed *before* 1933. Complaints about low wages, long working hours and the unavailability of consumer goods remained, but did not constitute a crisis beyond the control of the regime. When the economy momentarily faltered in 1935 and discontent emerged, the fact that the NSDAP was the only legal party and controlled the media ensured that this discontent could not be mobilized. Instead, nazi propaganda skilfully diverted public frustrations into

47 *Sopade-Berichte*, vol. 1 (1934), 117. In his autobiography, Henry Metelmann referred to his time in the Hitler Youth: 'My father hated the nazis and couldn't understand why I wanted to join. I must admit I thought the uniform was smashing. We were very poor and most of my clothes were made by my mother; so for the first time in my life, it made me feel important. We had meetings twice a week where we were taught Germany was the greatest nation on earth. . . . In the summer we marched through the town with swastikas, singing bawdy songs which roughly translated as "and when the Jewish blood drops off our knives then things go doubly well". . . . I was 18 when I was called up to join the army. I was really proud because I was full of nazi doctrine. I thought, now I can show the Führer what I'm made of. I believed earnestly and fully in the nazi principles.' Metelmann, interview in *The Independent*, 12 November 2001. See H. Metelmann, *Through Hell for Hitler* (London 2001).

48 Cf. G. Rempel, *Hitler's Children* (London 1989).

attacks on the Jews.<sup>49</sup> Discriminatory and racist feelings had, from the outset, been built into the idealism of the 'national community'. It is too simplistic, however, to think of nazi Germany as a uniformly obedient society, ideologically indoctrinated by a combination of propaganda slogans and coercion and terror by the secret police. Consent and coercion often went hand in hand.<sup>50</sup> Far from being powerless victims, citizens were able to utilize the system to their own advantage — whether to denounce a parent or neighbour, or to gain advancement at work or within the Hitler Youth. Moreover, it was not uncommon for individual citizens to support some policies of the regime while rejecting others. However, the implementation of a 'people's community' was widely seen in positive terms that would continue to guarantee at least passive support for the regime. It may not have been recognized as a true 'national community' in the way in which it was eulogized in the mass media, but it was apparently tolerable to wide sections of the population. In the sense that propaganda promoting the *Volksgemeinschaft* was attempting to disseminate the idea of social and national harmony as the ideological obverse of class conflict, it can be said to have succeeded by default.<sup>51</sup> By turning large sections of the population into passive consumers, the nazi technique of organization and atomization led to a gradual process of depoliticization which effectively achieved the desired consent. The monopoly of organizations, whether the Labour Front or 'Strength through Joy' or the *Hitler Jugend*, served the same purpose: to compulsorily 'involve' the 'national comrades' so completely that individuals were no longer left to themselves or ultimately left to think for themselves. Subordinating the rights of the individual to those of the 'community' entailed not only unconditional sacrifice but also the suspension of critical judgment. Even anti-nazi sources such as the pre-war Sopade reports testify gloomily to the widespread political indifference of the population 'who have been persuaded to leave politics to the men at the top'.<sup>52</sup> Such indifference proved fatal. The idea of an organic Volk, resting on the purity of race and sustained by permanent struggle became progressively exclusionary. Those individuals and groups who did not fit into such a 'community' were ruthlessly

49 See Welch, *The Third Reich*, op. cit., 72–82. See also Jeremy Noakes, *TLS*, 5 October 2001, 32.

50 Cf. Gellately, *Backing Hitler*, op. cit. See also Welch, 'Propaganda and Indoctrination in the Third Reich: Success or Failure?', *European History Quarterly*, 17 (1987), 403–22.

51 One of the striking features to emerge from the oral history project, directed by Lutz Niethammer on the experiences of the Ruhr workers, was the stress on 'normality' and the manner in which even opponents of nazism looked favourably on 'Strength through Joy' and the planned leisure activities as positive, compensatory, features of the nazi regime. L. Niethammer (ed.), *Die Jahre weiss man nicht, wo man die heute hinsetzen soll. Faschismuserfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet* (Berlin 1986). Cf. the documentation on the Saar area in K.M. Mallmann and G. Paul (eds), *Herrschaft und Alltag. Ein Industrieviertel im Dritten Reich* (Bonn 1991); for Bremen see I. Marssolek and R. Ott, *Bremen im Dritten Reich* (Bonn 1991); see also E. Wolff, *Nationalsozialismus in Leverkusen* (Leverkusen 1988). All these studies reveal the complex relationship between workers and the nazi regime.

52 *Sopade-Berichte*, vol. 3 (1936), 683–4. Cf. vol. 4 (1937), 1238; vol. 5 (1938), 697–8.

suppressed and/or murdered. The concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* represents an abhorrent, utopian vision, yet the reality is that during the Third Reich, 'belonging' to such a community remained a powerful integratory force for many Germans.

David Welch

is Professor of Modern History and Director of the Centre for the Study of Propaganda at the University of Kent at Canterbury. His recent publications include: *Hitler. Profile of a Dictator* (London and New York 2001); *The Third Reich Politics and Propaganda* (London and New York, 2nd edn 2002) and, with N.J. Cull and D. Culbert, *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion. A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present* (Oxford and Santa Barbara, CA 2003). He is currently working on a history of propaganda in the twentieth century.