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VISIONS OF  
COMMUNITY IN **NAZI**  
**GERMANY**

SOCIAL ENGINEERING & PRIVATE LIVES

EDITED BY **MARTINA STEBER & BERNHARD GOTTO**

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VISIONS OF COMMUNITY IN NAZI GERMANY



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# Visions of Community in Nazi Germany

*Social Engineering and Private Lives*

Edited by  
MARTINA STEBER  
and  
BERNHARD GOTTO

**OXFORD**  
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## Foreword

In 1941 a German letter-writing manual advised its readers in the name of the new *Volksgemeinschaft* to stop the old practice of using subaltern and sycophantic addresses when corresponding with state officials and adopt a more self-confident style.<sup>1</sup> Another manual, dating from 1937, gave similar advice, stressing that ‘our new state is a state of the *Volksgemeinschaft*’ and therefore ‘the workman is just as important a member of the whole as the professor or minister’.<sup>2</sup> The term *Volksgemeinschaft* permeated official Nazi state propaganda and all levels and areas of everyday life. It was a key term which covered up the authoritarian and bureaucratic nature of Nazi rule and functioned as a tool to exclude and exterminate all those who were not considered part of or beneficial to it. However, it was also considered by many as an egalitarian and emancipatory concept which defined their relationship to the state by transforming it into ‘our state’.

Over the last few years the ambivalence of the concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* has sparked off a new debate. This partly considers the usefulness of *Volksgemeinschaft* as an analytical term and asks whether it should be used by historians to describe Nazi society. But it also takes up and transforms several older discussions on what was at the centre of Nazi dictatorship and Nazi society. It comes as no surprise, then, that the concept is highly controversial and antagonizes the international community of historians of Nazi Germany considerably. Against this backdrop the German Historical Institute London (GHIL) and the Institut für Zeitgeschichte München-Berlin (IfZ) decided to co-organize a conference on this topic, hosted by the GHIL in March 2010 under the title ‘German Society in the Nazi Era. *Volksgemeinschaft* between Ideological Projection and Social Practice’. It was jointly organized by Bernhard Gotto (IfZ) and Martina Steber (GHIL).

More than once during the conference, comparisons arose with the 1979 conference which the GHIL had organized at Cumberland Lodge on the ‘Structure and Politics of the Third Reich’, and where Tim Mason had coined the famous distinction between an ‘intentionalist’ and ‘functionalist’ camp of historians as regards the explanation of Nazi rule. Some of the protagonists of 1979 were also present at the 2010 conference. However, the new dividing lines did not run along the old trenches. More often old adversaries now found themselves united in either supporting or denying the usefulness of *Volksgemeinschaft* as an analytical tool for the historiography of Nazi Germany. Having published a book on the German working class and the *Volksgemeinschaft*, it would have been interesting to see the position of the late Tim Mason, whose person and work is still so present, especially

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Volkland, *So musst du deine Briefe schreiben* (Mühlhausen 1941), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Curt Elwenspoek, *Der rechte Brief – zur rechten Zeit. Eine Fibel des schriftlichen Verkehrs für jedermann* (Leipzig 1937), 33.

among British historians on Nazi history, and the twentieth anniversary of whose untimely death was also commemorated at this conference.

This volume assembles some of the most important papers given at the conference. They are written by leading British, German, and US historians and not only outline the theoretical issues at stake, but also give insights into the many fields of politics and everyday life where this concept was 'at work' and needs to be analysed. As such, this volume provides far more than just an overview of current research. It makes an important new contribution to the debate on the function of the concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* as the core Nazi vision of community for the structure and politics of the Third Reich.

The 1979 conference not only internationalized a debate which had, up to then, been one of those famous German historical-political controversies with multiple internal agendas, but also initiated new research on an impressive scale. This volume aims to continue this fruitful international exchange on the social and societal history of the Third Reich and, in particular, to promote the lively Anglo-German exchange in this still flourishing field of research.

One of the great challenges of internationalizing academic debates, especially in the field of conceptual history, is to find appropriate translations for frequently untranslatable terms. This volume would not have come about without the invaluable help of Angela Davies (GHIL) and Jonathan Ashby (Winchester), whose admirable linguistic and editorial skills proved essential for turning the conference papers into a coherent book. Our thanks go to them and also to Anna Greithanner and Linus Rapp from the IfZ for their assistance with the editorial work on this volume. Particular thanks go to the contributors, who not only participated in the conference, but were prepared to rework their papers for this volume, to the referees at Oxford University Press who read the manuscript in full and whose valuable reports helped to improve the book, and to OUP's delegates who accepted this volume for publication. Finally, we would like to thank Bernhard Gotto and Martina Steber for their dedication and energy. The main credit for conceiving and organizing this highly stimulating conference as well as for editing the present volume goes to them.

Andreas Gestrich  
German Historical Institute  
London

Andreas Wirsching  
Institut für Zeitgeschichte  
München-Berlin

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## *List of Abbreviations*

Abt.	Abteilung
BA	Bundesarchiv
betr.	betreffend
BGH	Bundesgerichtshof
BStU	Behörde für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik
CA	California
CADN	Centre des Archives Diplomatiques, Nantes
cf.	confer
ch.	chapter
Conn.	Connecticut
DAAD	Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst
DAF	Deutsche Arbeitsfront
DAI	Deutsches Auslands-Institut
DDP	Deutsche Demokratische Partei
DDR	Deutsche Demokratische Republik
DFG	Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
DFW	Deutsches Frauen-Werk
Dok.	Dokument
DPs	Displaced Persons
Dr	Doctor
DVP	Deutsche Volkspartei
e.g.	egregia gratia
ed(s)	editor(s)
edn.	edition
etc.	et cetera
esp.	especially
et. al.	et alteri
ff.	and the following pages
fo(s)	folio(s)
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GDR	German Democratic Republic
Gestapo	Geheime Staatspolizei
GfK	Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung
GHI Washington	German Historical Institute Washington
GHIL	German Historical Institute London
GNP	Gross National Product
HJ	Hitlerjugend
HStA	Hauptstaatsarchiv
HTO	Haupttreuhandstelle Ost
Kan.	Kansas
KdF	Kraft durch Freude

Ibid.	ibidem
IfZ	Institut für Zeitgeschichte München-Berlin
IfZ-A	Archives of the Institut für Zeitgeschichte München-Berlin
Ind.	Indiana
LAB	Landesarchiv Berlin
LAV NRW	Landesarchivverwaltung Nordrhein-Westfalen
LG	Landesgericht
lit.	literally
MA	Militärarchiv
Mass.	Massachusetts
Md.	Maryland
MF	Microfiche
M-Film	Microfilm
MPG-Archiv	Archiv der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft
n.	note
n.d.	no date given
NARA	National Archives and Records Administration
NC	North Carolina
Nebr.	Nebraska
NG	Nuremberg Government [documents of the Nuremberg trials relating to government agencies]
nos.	numbers
Nr.	number
NS	Nationalsozialismus, nationalsozialistisch
NSBO	Nationalsozialistische Betriebszellenorganisation
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei
NSF	Nationalsozialistische Frauenschaft
NSFK	Nationalsozialistisches Fliegerkorps
NSV	Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt
NY	New York
OH	Ohio
OKW	Oberkommando der Wehrmacht
OLG	Oberlandesgericht
Ostpr.	Ostpreußen
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
p.m.	post meridiem
PO	Politische Organisation
POWs	prisoners of war
pp.	pages
pt.	part
pub.	publication
RAF	Royal Air Force
rev. edn.	revised edition
RG	Record Group
RGBl	Reichsgesetzblatt
RI	Rhode Island
RKF	Reichskommissar für die Festigung des deutschen Volkstums
RLB	Reichsluftschutzbund
RM	Reichsmark

RMBliV	Reichsministerialblatt der inneren Verwaltung
RMdI	Reichsministerium des Innern
RMJ	Reichsministerium der Justiz
RSHA	Reichssicherheitshauptamt
RdErl	Runderlass
RuPrMdI	Reichs- und Preußischer Minister des Inneren
RuSHA	Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt
SA	Sturmabteilung
SBZ	Sowjetische Besatzungszone
SD	Sicherheitsdienst
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands
SS	Schutzstaffel
St.	Sankt
StA	Staatsarchiv
Stapo	Staatspolizei
ThHStA	Thüringisches Hauptstaatsarchiv
Thür.	Thüringen, thüringisch
USA	United States of America
US	United States
USSBS	United States Strategic Bombing Survey
v.	vom
V-Mann	Vertrauensmann
VO	Verordnung
Vol.	volume
vols	volumes
Wisc.	Wisconsin
WHW	Winterhilfswerk



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## Notes on Contributors

**Frank Bajohr** is Director of the Centre for Holocaust Studies at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte München-Berlin. He is an expert in the history of the Third Reich, in particular the history of the Holocaust, of aryanization, corruption, and resistance. Among his publications are *Norddeutschland im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. (1993), *'Arisierung' in Hamburg: Die Verdrängung der jüdischen Unternehmer 1933–1945* (1997), *Der Holocaust als offenes Geheimnis: Die Deutschen, das NS-Regime und die Alliierten*, ed. with Dieter Pohl (2006), *Massenmord und schlechtes Gewissen: Die deutsche Bevölkerung, die NS-Führung und der Holocaust*, ed. with Dieter Pohl (2008), *Volksgemeinschaft: Neue Forschungen zur Gesellschaft des Nationalsozialismus*, ed. with Michael Wildt (2009), *Hanseat und Grenzgänger: Erik Blumenfeld—eine politische Biographie* (2010).

**Richard Bessel** is Professor of Twentieth Century History at the University of York. His research covers modern German history, especially social history and the history of violence. Among others he has published *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism: The Storm Troopers in Eastern Germany 1925–1934* (1984), *Die Grenzen der Diktatur: Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR*, ed. with Ralph Jessen (1996), *Life in the Third Reich* (2001), *Life after Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s*, ed. with Dirk Schumann (2003), *Nazism and War* (2004), *Germany 1945: From War to Peace* (2009), *Removing Peoples: Forced Removal in the Modern World*, ed. with Claudia Haake (2009).

**Christopher R. Browning** is Frank Porter Graham Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His is an expert in the history of the Holocaust, and is interested in comparative genocide studies and modern German history in general. His books are *The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office* (1978), *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992), *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers* (2000), *Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939–March 1942* (2004), *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (2010).

**Jane Caplan** is Professor Emeritus of Modern European History at the University of Oxford. She specializes in the history of Nazi Germany and the history of identity in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. Her main publications are *Government without Administration: State and Civil Service in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (1988), *Reevaluating the Third Reich*, ed. with Thomas Childers (1993), *Documenting Individual Identity: The Development of State Practices in the Modern World*, ed. with John Torpey (2001), *Nazi Germany*, ed. (2008), *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories*, ed. with Nikolaus Wachsmann (2010).

**Bernhard Gotto** is Research Fellow at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte München-Berlin. He has worked on local administration in the Nazi regime, on businesses under National Socialism, and is currently engaged in research on the history of disappointment. He is author of *Nationalsozialistische Kommunalpolitik: Administrative Normalität und Systemstabilisierung durch die Augsburger Stadtverwaltung 1933–1945* (2006), *Der Flick-Konzern im Dritten Reich*, with Johannes Bähr, Axel Dreccoll, Kim C. Priemel, and

Harald Wixforth (2008), *'Machtergreifung' in Augsburg: Anfänge der NS-Diktatur 1933–1937*, ed. with Michael Cramer-Fürtig (2008).

**Rüdiger Hachtmann** is Research Fellow at the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung in Potsdam. His research interests are in the history of the 1848 revolution, the history of National Socialism, and the history of science. Among others he has published *Industriearbeit im Dritten Reich: Untersuchungen zu den Lohn- und Arbeitsbedingungen 1933 bis 1945* (1989), *Berlin 1848: Eine Politik- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte der Revolution* (1997), *Hitlers Kommissare: Sondergewalten in der nationalsozialistischen Diktatur*, ed. with Winfried Süß (2006), *Wissenschaftsmanagement im Dritten Reich: Geschichte der Generalverwaltung der Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft* (2007), *Das Wirtschaftsimperium der Deutschen Arbeitsfront 1933–1945* (2012).

**Ulrich Herbert** is Professor of Modern History at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg im Breisgau. He has written extensively on the history of Germany in the twentieth century, on the history of migration, the Holocaust, and the Nazi regime. Among his publications are *Fremdarbeiter: Politik und Praxis des 'Ausländer-Einsatzes' in der Kriegswirtschaft des Dritten Reiches* (1985), *Best: Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft, 1903–1989* (1996), *Die Nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager 1933 bis 1945: Entwicklung und Struktur*, ed. with Karin Orth and Christoph Dieckmann (1998), *Wandlungsprozesse in Westdeutschland: Belastung, Integration, Liberalisierung, 1945–1980*, ed. (2002).

**Johannes Hürter** is Research Fellow at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte München-Berlin. Being an expert in military history and the history of terrorism of Germany in the twentieth century, his publications include *Wilhelm Groener: Reichswehrminister am Ende der Weimarer Republik (1928–1932)* (1993), *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Bilanz einer Debatte* (2005), *Hitlers Heerführer: Die deutschen Oberbefehlshaber im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion 1941/42* (2006), *Die bleiernen Jahre: Staat und Terrorismus in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und Italien 1969–1982*, ed. with Gian Enrico Rusconi (2010).

**Sven Keller** is Research Fellow at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte München-Berlin. His research focuses on the history of National Socialism. He has published *Günzburg und der Fall Josef Mengele: Die Heimatstadt und die Jagd nach dem NS-Verbrecher* (2003), *Vom Recht zur Geschichte: Akten aus NS-Prozessen als Quellen der Zeitgeschichte*, ed. with Jürgen Finger (2009), *'Volksgemeinschaft' am Ende: Gesellschaft und Gewalt 1944/45* (2013), *Dr. Oetker und der Nationalsozialismus: Geschichte eines Familienunternehmens 1933–1945*, with Jürgen Finger and Andreas Wirsching (2013).

**Ian Kershaw** is Professor Emeritus of Modern History at the University of Sheffield. He is an expert in the social and political history of the Third Reich. Among his numerous publications are *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria, 1933–45* (1983), *The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (1987), *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* (1998), *Hitler 1936–2000: Nemesis* (2000), *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* (2008), *The End: The Defiance and Destruction of Hitler's Germany, 1944–45* (2011).

**Nicole Kramer** is Lecturer at the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main. Her research deals with gender history, the history of National Socialism, and the twentieth-century welfare state. Among her publications are *Die vielen Gesichter der Zwangsarbeit: 'Ausländereinsatz' im Landkreis München 1939–1945*, ed. with Elsbeth Bösl and Stephanie Linsinger (2005), *Lieschen Müller wird politisch: Geschlecht, Staat und Partizipation im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. with Christine Hikel and Elisabeth Zellmer (2009), *Volksgenossinnen an der Heimatfront*.

*Mobilisierung, Verhalten, Erinnerung* (2011), *Ungleichheiten im 'Dritten Reich': Semantiken, Praktiken, Erfahrungen*, ed. with Armin Nolzen (2012).

**Birthe Kundrus** is Professor of Modern Social and Economic History at the University of Hamburg. She has worked on the social and cultural history of Germany, on the history of violence, and on colonial history and postcolonial theory. She has published *Kriegerfrauen: Familienpolitik und Geschlechterverhältnisse im Ersten und Zweiten Weltkrieg* (1995), *Moderne Imperialisten: Das Kaiserreich im Spiegel seiner Kolonien* (2003), *Die Deportation der Juden aus Deutschland: Pläne. Praxis. Reaktionen 1938–1945*, ed. with Beate Meyer (2004), *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures: Continental Europe and its Empires*, ed. (2008), *Waffen Wissen Wandel: Anpassung und Lernen in transkulturellen Erstkonflikten*, ed. with Dierk Walter (2012).

**Armin Nolzen** is editor of *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus*. He is an expert on the history of National Socialism and particularly the NSDAP. His publications include *Bürokratien: Initiative und Effizienz*, ed. with Wolf Gruner (2001), *Faschismus in Italien und Deutschland: Studien zu Transfer und Vergleich*, ed. with Sven Reichardt (2005), *Zerstrittene 'Volksgemeinschaft': Glaube, Konfession und Religion im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. with Manfred Gailus (2011), *Ungleichheiten im 'Dritten Reich': Semantiken, Praktiken, Erfahrungen*, ed. with Nicole Kramer (2012).

**Willi Oberkrome** is Professor of Modern History at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg im Breisgau. He has written widely on the social and political history of Germany, in particular the history of science and of historiography. Among his publications are *Volksgeschichte: Methodische Innovation und völkische Ideologisierung in der deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft 1918–1945* (1993), *'Deutsche Heimat': Nationale Konzeption und regionale Praxis von Naturschutz, Landschaftsgestaltung und Kulturpolitik in Westfalen-Lippe und Thüringen (1900–1960)* (2004), *Ordnung und Autarkie: Die Geschichte der deutschen Landbauforschung, Agrarökonomie und ländlichen Sozialwissenschaft im Spiegel von Forschungsdienst und DFG (1920–1970)* (2009).

**Lutz Raphael** is Professor of Modern History at the University of Trier. His main focus lies on the social history of Germany and France in the twentieth century, especially on expert cultures, ideas in their social context and historiography. His publications include *Die Erben von Bloch und Febvre: Annales-Historiographie und nouvelle histoire in Frankreich 1945–1980* (1994), *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeitalter der Extreme: Hauptwerke und Hauptströmungen von 1900 bis zur Gegenwart* (2003), *Being Poor in Modern Europe: Historical Perspectives 1800–1940*, ed. with Andreas Gestrich and Steven King (2006), *Ideen als gesellschaftliche Gestaltungskraft im Europa der Neuzeit: Beiträge für eine erneuerte Geistesgeschichte*, ed. with Heinz-Elmar Tenorth (2006), *Nach dem Boom: Perspektiven der Zeitgeschichte nach 1970*, with Anselm Doering-Manteuffel (2008), *Imperiale Gewalt und mobilisierte Nation: Europa 1914–1945* (2011).

**Thomas Schaarschmidt** is Research Fellow at the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung in Potsdam. His research interests cover the history of international relations, modern regional history, and the history of the Third Reich and the GDR. Among his works are *Regionalkultur und Diktatur: Sächsische Heimatbewegung und Heimat-Propaganda im Dritten Reich und in der SBZ/DDR* (2004), *Die NS-Gaue: Regionale Mittelinstanzen im zentralistischen 'Führerstaat'*, ed. with Jürgen John and Horst Möller (2007), *Strafjustiz im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. with Hans-Hermann Hertle (2008), *Berlin im Nationalsozialismus: Politik und Gesellschaft 1933–1945*, ed. with Rüdiger Hachtmann and Winfried Süß (2011).



**Detlef Schmiechen-Ackermann** is Professor at the Leibniz Universität Hannover. Focusing on the social and political history of National Socialism and the GDR, his publications include *Anpassung, Verweigerung und Widerstand: Soziale Milieus, Politische Kultur und der Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus in Deutschland im regionalen Vergleich*, ed. (1997), *Nationalsozialismus und Arbeitermilieus: Der nationalsozialistische Angriff auf die proletarischen Wohnquartiere und die Reaktionen in den sozialistischen Vereinen* (1998), *Diktaturen im Vergleich* (2002), *Stadtgeschichte in der NS-Zeit: Fallstudien aus Sachsen-Anhalt und vergleichende Perspektiven*, ed. with Steffi Kaltenborn (2005), *'Volksgemeinschaft': Mythos, wirkungsmächtige soziale Verheißung oder soziale Realität im 'Dritten Reich?': Zwischenbilanz einer kontroversen Debatte*, ed. (2012).

**Martina Steber** is Research Fellow at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte München-Berlin. From 2007 to 2012 she was Research Fellow at the German Historical Institute London. Her main research interests are German and British political history, the history of regionality, and the history of conservatism. Her publications include *Ethnische Gewissheiten: Die Ordnung des Regionalen im bayerischen Schwaben vom Kaiserreich bis zum NS-Regime* (2010) and *Germany and the 'West': The History of a Modern Concept*, ed. with Riccardo Bavaj (forthcoming 2014).

**Michael Wildt** is Professor of Contemporary History at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. His research focuses on the history of National Socialism and of consumer society. Among others he has published *Am Beginn der 'Konsumgesellschaft': Mangelerfahrung, Lebenshaltung, Wohlstandshoffnung in Westdeutschland in den fünfziger Jahren* (1994), *Generation des Unbedingten: Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (2002), *Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung: Gewalt gegen Juden in der deutschen Provinz 1919 bis 1939* (2007), in English: *Hitler's Volksgemeinschaft and the Dynamics of Racial Exclusion: Violence Against Jews in Provincial Germany, 1919–1939* (2012), *Volksgemeinschaft: Neue Forschungen zur Gesellschaft des Nationalsozialismus*, ed. with Frank Bajohr (2009).

**Andreas Wirsching** is Director of the Institut für Zeitgeschichte München-Berlin. His research covers German, French, and British political history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the history of the European Union. Among his numerous publications are *Vom Weltkrieg zum Bürgerkrieg?: Politischer Extremismus in Deutschland und Frankreich 1918–1933/39. Berlin und Paris im Vergleich* (1999), *Die Weimarer Republik: Politik und Gesellschaft* (2000), *Stadtverwaltung und Nationalsozialismus: Systemstabilisierende Dimensionen kommunaler Herrschaft*, ed. with Sabine Mecking (2005), *Abschied vom Provisorium: Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1982–1990* (2006), *Das Jahr 1933: Die nationalsozialistische Machteroberung und die deutsche Gesellschaft*, ed. (2009), *Der Preis der Freiheit: Geschichte Europas in unserer Zeit* (2012).

**Gerhard Wolf** is DAAD Lecturer at the University of Sussex. He focuses on modern German history, in particular the history of National Socialism, the Holocaust, and German-Jewish history. His book *Ideologie und Herrschaftsrationalität: Nationalsozialistische Germanisierungspolitik in Polen* was published in 2012; previously he co-edited *Deutschland, die Linke und der Holocaust: Politische Interventionen von Moishe Postone*, ed. with Barbara Fried and Steffen Küssner (2004).

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## Glossary

- Abitur** grammar school matriculation certificate
- Altreich** Germany as defined by the borders of 1937
- Amt Rosenberg** Rosenberg Office
- Amtsgericht** district court
- Arierparagraph** Aryan Paragraph
- arische Abstammung** Aryan descent
- Arisierung** Aryanization
- Armee- und Heeresgruppen-Oberbefehlshaber** Army Group Commander-in-Chief
- Blockwart** Party Warden
- Bund deutscher Mädel** League of German Girls
- Bündische Jugend** *bündisch* youth movement
- Deutsche Arbeitsfront, DAF** German Labour Front
- Deutscher Volkssturm** German national militia at the end of the Second World War into which all men between the ages of sixteen and sixty not yet serving in a military unit were conscripted
- Deutschnational** lit. 'German National'; nationalistic-conservative attitude to politics
- Eintopfsonntage** Hot Pot Sundays
- Flakhelfer** anti-aircraft assistant
- Frontkämpfergemeinschaft** community of front-line fighters
- Gau** Nazi regional party district
- Gauleiter** Nazi regional party leader
- Gauwirtschaftskammer** Gau Chamber of Economic Affairs
- Geheime Staatspolizei (Gestapo)** Secret State Police
- Gemeinschaftsfremde** community aliens
- Generalgouvernement** administrative regional unit encompassing those territories of German-occupied Poland not incorporated into the German Reich
- Germanisierung** Germanization
- Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums** law for the restoration of the civil service
- Gleichschaltung** lit. 'bringing into line'; enforced conformity; coordination with Nazi norms
- Großdeutsches Reich** Greater German Reich
- Haupttreuhandstelle Ost (HTO)** Main Trusteeship Office East; office overseeing the confiscation of property from Polish citizens
- Herrenmenschentum** specific mentality of racial superiority and arrogance

- Hitlerjugend (HJ)** Hitler Youth
- Industrie- und Handelskammer** Chamber of Industry and Commerce
- Kampferlebnis** collective experience of struggle
- Kreisleiter** Nazi district leader
- Kulturkampf** lit. 'culture struggle', 'culture war'; conflict between the governments of the federal states and the Catholic Church, conducted especially fiercely in Prussia by Otto von Bismarck between 1871 and 1878
- Land, Länder** German federal states
- Lebensraum** lit. 'living space'; Nazi key concept
- Luftschutzgemeinschaft im Selbstschutz** Air Raid Protection Squads
- Nationalsozialistische Betriebszellenorganisation (NSBO)** National Socialist Factory Cell Organization
- Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP)** National Socialist German Workers' Party
- Nationalsozialistische Frauenschaft (NSF)** National Socialist Women's League
- Nationalsozialistische Gemeinschaft 'Kraft durch Freude' (NSG KdF)** National Socialist Association 'Strength through Joy'
- Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt (NSV)** National Socialist People's Welfare Organization
- Nationalsozialistischer Reichsbund für Leibesübungen** National Socialist Reich League for Physical Exercise
- Nationalsozialistisches Fliegerkorps (NSFK)** National Socialist Flying Corps
- Nationalsozialistisches Frauen-Werk (DFW)** National Socialist Women's Welfare Organization
- NSDAP Ortsgruppe** local Nazi Party branch
- NSDAP Ortsgruppenleiter** local Nazi Party branch leader
- NS-Rechtswahrerbund** National Socialist Lawyers' Association
- Oberkommando der Wehrmacht** Wehrmacht High Command
- Ortsfrauenschaftsleiterin** Women's League local leader
- Ortsgruppe** local Party branch
- Ortsgruppenleiter** local Party branch leader
- Parteigenosse** lit. 'party comrade'; self-designation of NSDAP members
- Politische Organisation der NSDAP (PO)** Political Organization of the NSDAP
- Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt (RuSHA)** Head Office for Race and Settlement
- Rassenhygiene** racial hygiene
- Rassenschande** race defilement
- (Reichs)arbeitsdienst** (Reich) Labour Service
- Reichsarbeitsgemeinschaft für Raumforschung** Reich Study Group for Regional Studies and Planning
- Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold** lit. 'black-red-gold banner of the Reich'; Social Democrat paramilitary organization during the Weimar Republic

- Reichsschulungsamt der NSDAP** Reich Office of Ideological Training of the NSDAP
- Reichserbhofgesetz** Nazi law governing hereditary land holding
- Reichsfrauenführerin** Reich women's leader
- Reichsfrauenführung** Reich women's leadership
- Reichsführung der NSDAP** Reich leadership of the NSDAP
- Reichskommissar für die Festigung des deutschen Volkstums (RKF)** Reich Commissioner for the Strengthening of Germandom
- Reichskulturkammer (RKK)** Reich Chamber of Culture
- Reichsluftschutzbund (RLB)** Reich Air Raid Defence League
- Reichsnährstand** Reich Food Department
- Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt (RSHA)** Reich Security Main Office
- Reichswehr** armed forces of the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich up to 1935
- Reichswehrminister** Minister for the Reichswehr
- Schicksalsgemeinschaft** community of fate
- Schützengrabengemeinschaft** trench community
- Schutzstaffel (SS)** police and security organization run by Heinrich Himmler
- Sicherheitsdienst der SS (SD)** SS 'Security' and Intelligence Service
- Sippenamt** Kinship Office
- Sozialismus der Tat** socialism of practical action
- SS Oberführer** SS Colonel
- SS Obergruppenführer** SS General
- Stahlhelm, Bund der Frontsoldaten** lit. 'Steel Helmets, Association of Front Line Soldiers'; right-wing paramilitary group in the Weimar Republic
- Standesamt** Civil Registry Office
- Standesbeamter** Civil Registrar
- Sturmabteilung (SA)** Storm troopers
- Volk** organic unity of a people, bound by blood, soil, history, and culture
- völkisch** adjective of *Volk*
- völkische Konsumgesellschaft** völkisch consumer society
- Volksaufgebot** mobilization and conscription of German men, women, and young people in 1944–5 for various services on the home front, especially the building of defensive 'walls' along the borders of the Reich; based on the terminology of *levée en masse*, alluding to the French Revolutionary Wars and the Prussian War of Liberation in 1813–15
- Volksgeist** unique spirit of the *Volk*
- Volksgenosse** lit. 'Volk comrade'; National Socialist designation for the members of the *Volksgemeinschaft*
- Volkskörper** collective body of the *Volk*
- Volkschädling** parasite
- Volkstum** character and abstract expression of the *Volk*
- Volkstumskampf** battle to maintain the culture and defend the existence of the *Volk*

**Volkszugehörigkeit** lit. 'belonging to the *Volk*'

**Wehrgesetz** Military Service Act

**Wehrmacht** armed forces of the Third Reich from 1935

**Winterhilfswerk (WHW)** Winter Relief Organization

**Zellenleiter of the NSDAP** cell leader of the NSDAP

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# 1

## *Volksgemeinschaft*

### Writing the Social History of the Nazi Regime

*Martina Steber and Bernhard Gotto*

In 1938, Bertolt Brecht's play *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* was premiered in Paris. It presented a dramatized collage of incidents and situations drawn from everyday life in National Socialist Germany. Brecht had been collecting material for the play since 1934. The opening scene is entitled *Volksgemeinschaft*, a term that can be roughly translated as 'community of the people'—though, as we shall see, 'Volk' has a significantly more loaded meaning than the word 'people' might suggest. In this opening scene, two intoxicated SS officers lurch down the streets of Berlin on the night of 30 January 1933. Brecht introduces them in a short poem which closes with the verse:

Their aim is a People imperious  
Respected and powerful and serious  
Above all, one that obeys.

Urinating against a house wall and speaking in broad Berlin dialect, the SS officers discuss their hopes for the future:

THE SECOND: And now it'll be a *Volksjemeinschaft*. I'm expecting the German people to have an unprecedented moral revival.

THE FIRST: Wait till we've coaxed German Man out from among all those filthy subhumans...

THE SECOND: Think he [the *Führer*] will really make us a *Volksjemeinschaft*?

THE FIRST: He'll make anything.

The two SS officers believe themselves to be in a 'Marxist quarter'. When an old man in a nightshirt leans out of the window and calls softly for his wife, one of them pulls out his revolver and shoots wildly in all directions. The scene closes with the terrible cry of someone who has been hit.<sup>1</sup>

This scene brings out Brecht's angry exasperation at what was going on inside the 'Third Reich'. It is far from coincidence that, to describe German society under

<sup>1</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, trans. John Willett (London, 2002), 5–6. In quoting this passage, we have used the original term *Volksjemeinschaft* (Berlin dialect for *Volksgemeinschaft*) instead of Willett's attempt to render it in English. The original German version is to be found in Bertolt Brecht, *Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reiches: 24 Szenen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1970), 8–9. The authors would like to thank Jörg Arnold, Elizabeth Harvey, Andreas Gestrich, Nick Stargardt, and Andreas Wirsching, as well as the anonymous referees for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this introduction. We are grateful to Angela Davies for the translation of the first draft.

National Socialism, he focused on *Volksgemeinschaft*. *Volksgemeinschaft* was the Nazis' central social concept: it was within it, and via it, that visions of community in Nazi Germany were expressed, negotiated, and put into practice. This volume sets out to scrutinize the complex process of multilayered adaptation this involved and the social dynamic it instituted.

*Volksgemeinschaft* was the National Socialist social promise. Brecht's scene touches on many of the criteria upon which it was based: ethnic origin as the ultimate point of reference; an appeal to inner experience; tension between utopian expectations and the radical willingness to fulfil them; racist separation; unconditional trust in the *Führer*; and a deadly violence which was directed internally as well as externally. In recent years, historians have explored all of these aspects, and there has been a rapid growth in our understanding of all that the *Volksgemeinschaft* concept evoked. It is not easy to reduce this multifaceted concept to a common denominator: *Volksgemeinschaft* encompassed both a social utopia and precise instructions for realizing it. Its core component was not the individual but a collective subject, the *Volk*, being imagined as a timeless racial unit over which the *Führer* had been chosen to rule by destiny and could exercise unlimited authority. Membership of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, it was believed, overrode all differences of social stratification arising out of religious or class affiliation. It centred on notions of belonging that had to be biologically legitimized and performatively underpinned by acts and declarations of loyalty. Belonging determined people's opportunities of succeeding in the new Germany, and the new social inequalities were based on how these opportunities were distributed. And, for many, belonging determined much more: whether they could be assigned the right to live. The means by which the Nazis created the *Volksgemeinschaft* they projected were means of violence, and these turned inwards in the form of victimization and extermination as well as being directed outwards in aggressive territorial expansion.

The concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* cannot be understood in isolation from the multilayered historical semantics of the German idea of the *Volk*.<sup>2</sup> *Volk* clearly differs in meaning from the English word 'people', and therefore the word remains untranslated in this volume. In the National Socialist view, *Volk* included all the members of a race, both living and dead, as well as future generations. The *Volk* itself was seen as a timeless entity whose qualities were revealed in its individual members. Their physical appearance, character, and behaviour were all, in this way of thinking, determined by racial predisposition.

While the *Volk* was (supposedly) a pre-existent entity, it had, in the Nazis' view, become debased and deprived of its vigour. National Socialists were determined to rectify this: they wanted to change society to create a true 'community', the *Volksgemeinschaft*. This was their big project, and they intended to realize their vision of society by means of social engineering. Any belief that private lives would

<sup>2</sup> See Reinhart Koselleck, 'Volk, Nation, Nationalismus, Masse', in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (eds), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, 8 vols. (Stuttgart, 1972–92), vii. (1992), 141–431.

not be affected, that individuals could keep at a distance from ‘politics’ as many hoped in 1933, would soon prove to be illusory.

#### WHY THE FOCUS ON *VOLKSGEMEINSCHAFT*?

Increasingly, the regime’s social engineering became entwined with the private lives of ordinary German citizens during the twelve years of Nazi rule. The propaganda picture of a young couple’s private moment depicted on the cover of this book—the couple sunbathing on the beach with swastika bunting above them waving cheerfully in the wind—told Germans more about the envisioned *Volksgemeinschaft* than any picture of ecstatic masses at the Hitler rallies did. Nazi society demanded a lot from the individual, but it also had a lot to offer: a place for individual happiness and success was promised to all who belonged to the chosen community. This was the promise the concept contained. However, the picture also carried another message: this promise of happiness and success was to be denied to all those classified unfit to belong to the *Volksgemeinschaft*. The sunny face hid a dark and deathly background countenance.

*Volksgemeinschaft* was the Nazis’ central social concept. This volume takes this observation as its starting point. Its objective is to clarify the heuristic and explanatory potential of the *Volksgemeinschaft* concept. By drawing on specific examples, the essays explore the extent to which the concept helps us understand social change during the period of National Socialism. The authors investigate the specific forms the concept assumed and how it was used as a guideline for the actions both of private individuals and of political leaders; they examine interpretations and perceptions of policies dictated by the notion of *Volksgemeinschaft*; and they illuminate how its utopian aims could motivate people and engage their emotions. The volume also attempts to sum up the lively international debate about *Volksgemeinschaft* as an approach to research.

Current research on the National Socialist concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* is especially interested in the interplay between the various National Socialist means of exerting power and how life went on in society. The contributions in this volume therefore focus first on the interaction between the institutions of the National Socialist state, with their Party organizations and functionaries, and people living their everyday lives. The people in Nazi Germany were divided into two categories: *Volksgenossen* (members of the imagined *Volksgemeinschaft*) and ‘the others’. *Volksgenossen* were granted full citizenship and had access to the provisions of the welfare state; but the social and legal status of those who deviated from the norms established through the *Volksgemeinschaft* concept was significantly less secure, and such people suffered discrimination of many kinds. In a continual series of challenges when dealing with Party functionaries, civil servants, or even just officious supporters of the regime, every individual was repeatedly obliged to choose, and to show, on which side of the divide he or she stood. Research on the National Socialist *Volksgemeinschaft* project therefore is inspired by Alf Lüdtke’s concept of *Herrschaft als soziale Praxis*—the exercise of political control through social



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