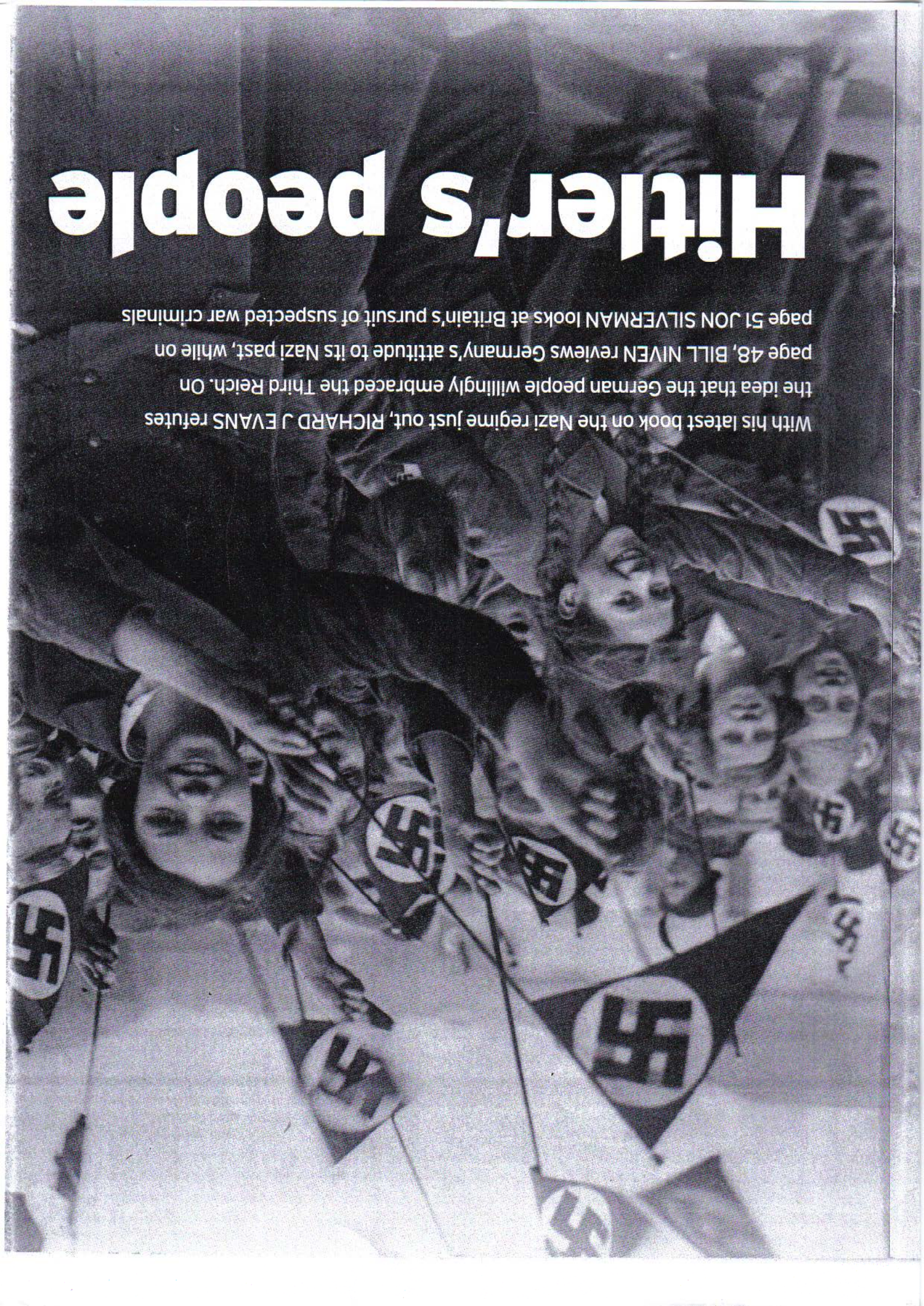


# Hitler's people

With his latest book on the Nazi regime just out, RICHARD J EVANS refutes the idea that the German people willingly embraced the Third Reich. On page 48, BILL NIVEN reviews Germany's attitude to its Nazi past, while on page 51 JON SILVERMAN looks at Britain's pursuit of suspected war criminals



Richard J Evans is professor of modern history at Cambridge University. His book *The Third Reich in Power 1933-1939* (Penguin, October 2005) is the second in his trilogy on the Third Reich

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**Deviance and dissent**

Particularly as a result of the Canadian historian Robert Gellately's powerful and original work on the Gestapo, it became clear not just that the secret police was a small institution with relatively few officers, most of whom seldom ventured outside their offices, but also that it relied heavily for information about deviance and dissent on denunciations by ordinary citizens. Germany, in Gellately's words, became a society where conformity was built on a system of "self-surveillance". Other historians, notably Gerhard Paul and Klaus-Michael Mallmann, two Germans who specialised in the history of the Saarland, pointed out that the Gestapo consisted overwhelmingly not of

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Propaganda machine: but Nazi attempts to seduce public opinion were backed up by coercion

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**The Reich began to appear not as a perfectly functioning totalitarian machine but as a chaotic mass of competing institutions**

Then in the late 1960s, as the concept of totalitarianism went out of fashion, and younger German historians began to see its application to the Third Reich as an easy excuse for their parents' failure to resist the Nazis, a more nuanced picture emerged, aided by the turn of the historical profession to social history and what was known in Germany as the history of everyday life. New sources, particularly at a local level, began to show how Germans had stood up to the Nazis where their own most cherished beliefs and way of life were challenged. The Reich began to appear not as a perfectly functioning totalitarian machine but as a chaotic mass of competing institutions in which a good deal of initiative was left to the individual.

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BETTMANN-CORBIS/ART ARCHIVE

HITLER'S CHILDREN  
BERLIN 1938  
Germans born  
between 1910 and  
1928, and therefore  
young at the time of  
the Third Reich,  
became the most  
heavily indoctrinated  
by the Nazis



# There exists in today's Germany a tendency to equate the suffering of Germans during the war with that of Jews

The reasons for this rash of self-pity are hard to fathom. It could be a reaction against the strong focus in Germany between 1990 and 1998 on Nazi crime and Jewish victimhood—a focus which helped promote the cause of those who wished to see the Holocaust memorial built in Berlin (it was dedicated in May 2005). It could be a reaction against the Red-Green government, which was in power between 1998 and 2005. Some of this government's members belonged to the critical 1968 generation, a generation which has been coming under fire recently for "preventing" memory of German pain. Equally, it could be a result of that government's rather relaxed attitude to responsibility for remembrance. Nazi crime scholar, during his tenure as Chancellor, sent out messages along the lines of "we've come to terms with our past and can now look to the future". In 1984, the then Chancellor Helmut Kohl sent out a similar message when he referred to "the grace of late birth".

## Pain and self-pity

Yet this international commemorative embrace has not eliminated the proclivity of some Germans to regard Germany as a "victim" of the war. In fact, in recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in Germany's public realm in German suffering. In 1999, the writer WG Sebald claimed, quite wrongly, that German literature had never depicted such suffering, triggering a wave of self-indulgent media articles about the supposed taboo on such a depiction. In 2002, Günter Grass published his novella *Crabwalk*, in which he took issue with the 1968 generation for having "ignored" the theme of the plight of German refugees and expellees in 1945. In the same year, historian Jörg Friedrich pilloried the Allies for their bombing of German cities in his book *The Fire*. Finally, in Oliver Hirschbiegel's recent blockbuster film *Downfall* (2004), Germans are portrayed as victims of Hitler's contempt for the German people when it became clear that the war was lost.

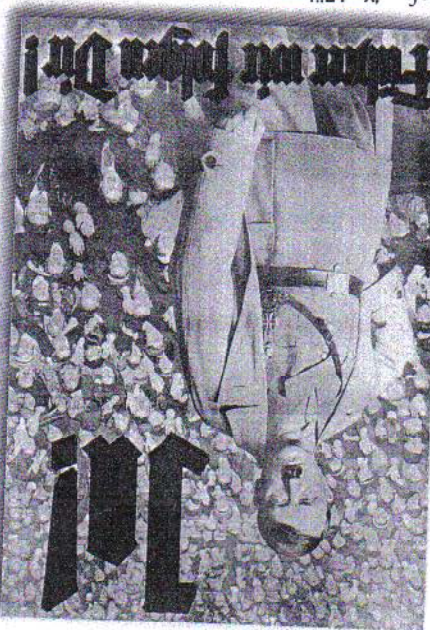
German historian has implausibly claimed that there was no "system of manipulation" in any of the elections or plebiscites of the era. Of course, this does not mean that in votes such as the plebiscite on the annexation of Austria in 1938 there would have been no majority for the regime, even if free opposition had been allowed and campaigning against had been legal. If there was one issue on which the majority of Germans probably supported Hitler during the 1930s it was the resurgence of German national pride and power, though contemporary reports suggest strongly that they only did so if it was clear this could be achieved without a major European war. Yet here too, another of the limitations of Johnson and Rebund's fascinating study becomes apparent. For while the people they interviewed said that they had liked the Nazis above all because they believed their claims to have abolished unemployment and reduced crime,

for the greater good of Germany? And does it invite make a heroine of her? Is she shown to sacrifice herself Germany's anti-Nazi resistance icons. Does the film based largely on minutes of the interrogation of one of *Days* released in the UK in October 2005, which is by Marc Rothemund's film *Sophie Scholl, The Final Days*. Arguably, this impression is being strengthened shame, may be shifting towards a basis on self-pity. identity, long built at least in post-1970 West Germany on (1995) about an illiterate concentration camp guard. German Actor Bruno Ganz plays Hitler in the 2004 film *Downfall*.

Bernhard Schlink's novel *The Reader* trend already noticeable, perhaps, in with reference to German victimhood, a towards "cancelling out" German crime an at the very least problematic trend to the Holocaust memorial and reinforce in Berlin, it will serve as a counterweight on the pain of German expellees is built Centre Against Expulsions with its focus the war with that of Jews. If the planned suffering of Germans during and after Germany a tendency to equate the doubt that there exists in today's in the German press, there can be little

What ever the reasons, and despite the presence of a more differentiated and self-critical discourse on German victimhood last acquired the right to confront their national pain. pronouncing absolutism, some Germans may feel that they have at with Nazism. Given that it is this generation that now appears to be a generation with much better moral credentials in coming to terms severely criticised in left-liberal circles. Schröder represents a But Kohl was a Christian Democrat whose memory politics were

And what of the Gestapo? To portray them as mere pen-pushers processing denunciations from the general public is, in the words of one German historian, to trivialise them, for there is plenty of evidence of the brutal and sometimes murderous methods they used to interrogate their suspects. Others have argued that denunciation, while shocking and significant, should not be ascribed too much importance. It was the exception, not the rule, as far as the behaviour of the vast majority was concerned. In the district of Lippe, for instance, with 176,000 inhabitants, there were more than 292 denunciations sent to the authorities between 1933 and 1945, sometimes no more than a handful a year. There were many other means of rooting out opposition and



'Yes! Führer, we'll follow you!' A Nazi poster portrays Hitler with unanimous support



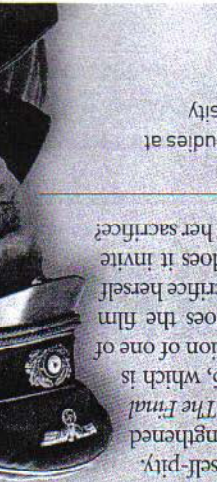
of their enthusiasms for them. important, or perhaps had become ashamed clearly no longer thought such triumph policy successes at all; by the 1990s German they did not mention the regime's foreign

In the film *Sophie Scholl*, actress Julia Jentsch re-enacts the final days of a German resistance icon



Actor Bruno Ganz plays Hitler in the 2004 film *Downfall*

Bill Niven is professor of contemporary German studies at Nottingham Trent University



**BOOKS**

**The Third Reich in Power 1933-1939** by Richard J Evans (Penguin, 2005) **BOOK CLUB** Available from History Books Direct for £27, with free p&hp. Tel. 01763 263074; **Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany** by Robert Gellately (Oxford University Press, 2001); **What We Knew, Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany** by Eric Johnson and Karl-Heinz Reuband (John Murray, 2005); "Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent? Gestapo, Society and Resistance" by Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Gerhard Paul in **Nazism and German Society 1933-1945** edited by David Crew (Routledge, 1994)

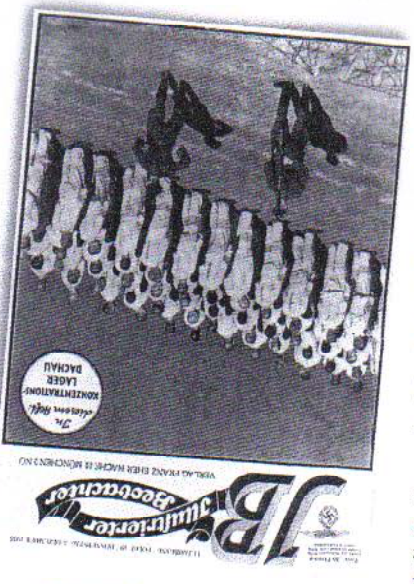
**JOURNEYS**

engage in dissent. There were already 200,000 of these officials by 1935. By the eve of war, virtually all Germans of all ages belonged to one or more vast Party organisations, from the women's movement to the Labour Front, in which they were also subjected to constant observation.

Johnson and Reuband show convincingly that few of the respondents came into direct or indirect contact with the Gestapo or feared incarceration in a concentration camp. But this is a question that produces a pre-programmed answer, of course, because they did not ask anybody about other agencies of control or other means of punishment. To extrapolate from this and assume people lived freely and without fear is to go beyond the evidence. As for the camps, they were widely publicised, but of course as a threat to people, not as a comforting reminder of their invulnerability. And they were by no means the most important sanction against political deviance: in the mid-1930s they only held 7,500 inmates, many of them put there for non-political offences, whereas 122,000 languished in the prisons of the state penitential system, 14,000 of whom had been put there for political offences. Apart from imprisonment, there were many other sanctions that could be, and were employed against those who refused to toe the line, from withdrawal of unemployment and other social benefits to drafting in to compulsory labour schemes, most notably on the defensive earthworks of the West Wall along Germany's western border.

Such sanctions could work because of the destruction of civil rights and freedoms under the Third Reich, where it was a criminal offence to criticise the government. In the first 18 months of Hitler's rule, mass, murderous violence against the regime's real or potential opponents, including not only leftists but also leading figures in Catholic, liberal and conservative politics, had had the desired effect. From mid-1934 on, terror was used more as a threat than a reality. But the threat was always there. Terror and control formed the essential backdrop to the regime's massive propaganda campaigns to win over people's hearts and minds throughout the 12 years of the Third Reich, and unless we remember this crucial fact, it is impossible to understand the extent to which these campaigns achieved their objectives. **H**

At every point, ordinary citizens came into contact with officials primed to report the slightest deviation from the norm



And yet, crucially, the Gestapo was only one small, if central, other: it was the Gestapo that was exercising control. Party officials of defiance and opposition. People were not controlling each other; it was the Gestapo that was exercising control. Party officials of defiance and opposition. People were not controlling each other; it was the Gestapo that was exercising control. Party officials of defiance and opposition. People were not controlling each other; it was the Gestapo that was exercising control.

dissect, from interrogation and torture of suspects by the Gestapo with the aim of revealing names, to the observation by Party officials of gestures of defiance like failing to give the Hitler salute. Above all, of course, denunciations would have been meaningless if the Gestapo had not actively pursued defiance and opposition. People were not controlling each other; it was the Gestapo that was exercising control.

Deutschland-Berichte der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (Sopade) edited by Klaus Behken (Verlag Petra Nettelbeck, 1980)

The following happened in X, a rural community with 700 inhabitants: An elderly woman went to vote. As she was handed a ballot paper and a pencil, she dropped the pencil and the point broke off. So the returning officer gave her his green pencil and the woman used it to put her cross on the paper. In the evening, three 'no' votes were counted in the little community, and in one of them the cross was green, in other words it had been made with the returning officer's pencil. So the woman was identified as a 'no' voter. She was hauled out of her house the same evening, a placard was put on her back with the words 'I am a traitor to the people' and she was dragged from one inn to another the whole evening long, spat upon, and cursed in the wildest manner. The woman is now in hospital suffering from severe nervous shock.

On election Sunday, after I had voted, I made an attempt to find out what was happening at the other polling stations. I had already been obliged to note in my own polling station that there was no possibility of voting without being checked out. People were voting at long tables. There were no polling booths, but the whole place was filled with uniformed men who were observing every voter to see where he put his cross. In another polling station there were indeed two booths, but they were located so far away from the tables that were generally used to vote that no elector would have dared to make use of them.

THOUGH RECENT commentators have cited the results of elections and plebiscites in the 1930s as evidence of popular backing for Hitler among the German people, the following extract from the confidential reports of Social Democratic agents in Württemberg, on the April 1938 plebiscite on the union of Austria with Germany:



**FREEDOM OF SPEECH?**

