

# The spectre of National Socialism

Martyn Housden

Germany had one of the most extensive socialist movements in Europe. How were the Nazis able to stifle it so easily?

As Hitler began to seize power across Germany, some strident voices rang out from the left of the political spectrum, arguing that the nation's workers ought to take decisive action. Nevertheless, no popular uprising by the German working classes posed a serious threat to the Nazi regime — not even when the tide of war clearly had turned against the country's armed forces. While it is true that Hitler did appreciate the need to bind the working classes into his national community, as the Third Reich stabilised politically few warning signs emerged suggesting that the working classes demanded significantly more than Hitler was offering them. The overriding impression is that, through the use of 'carrots' and 'sticks', the Nazis managed their country's workers reasonably effectively.

During the 1920s, German trade unions were numerous — **SPD** unions alone had about

**SPD:** German Social Democratic Party, a socialist party, founded May 1875.

**KPD:** German Communist Party, founded December 1918.

**SA:** *Sturmabteilung*; stormtroopers. Nazi paramilitary forces.

Key concept

## Consequences

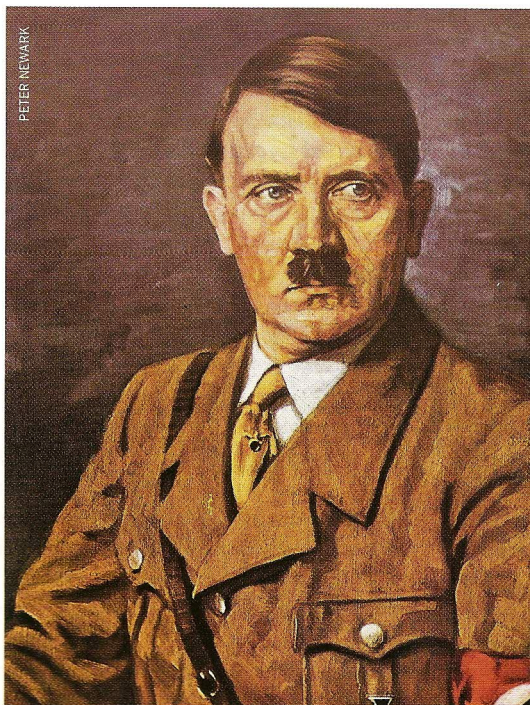
### Before you read this

Check up on socialist activity in Germany before 1933; it often gets overlooked in favour of the rise of the Nazis. You will also need to know something about the early uses of concentration camps.

4 million members. Moreover, the readiness of trade unions to assert themselves had led to disruption during the Weimar years. The potential strength of Germany's working classes was also expressed at the ballot box. Even if the SPD vote fell from 29.8% in 1928 to 20.4% in November 1932, the **KPD** vote rose to 16.9%. Together they still had electoral support comparable to that of Nazism. Furthermore, just as the Nazi Party had its paramilitary wing (the **SA**), so did the leftist parties. The SPD had the *Reichsbanner* and the KPD had *Rote Front*. In other words, they had some capacity for direct action on the streets, as was reflected in street fights with the SA during the latter stages of the Weimar Republic. The potential power of Germany's working classes must have looked all the more ominous, given that the essentially conservative presidential cabinets of Brüning, Papen and Schleicher had not managed to solve the country's mounting problems — including unemployment figures running at over 6 million.

## The left-wing response to the Third Reich

The initial response of Germany's left wing and working classes to the advent of the Third Reich involved clear displays of displeasure. For example, on the night of 30 January 1933 there were anti-Nazi demonstrations across the Ruhr, in Dortmund, Bochum, Düsseldorf, Cologne and Solingen. During the lead-up to the March 1933 elections, Bremen saw demonstrations of up to 30,000 socialist sympathisers. Communist activists there



Adolf Hitler.

had already tried to establish 'Popular Red Self-Protection Organisations' in working class areas of the city. Slogans had been appearing painted on walls with messages such as 'Workers, strike against Hitler!' and 'Workers, arm yourselves. Put Hitler up against a wall!' It was thus a challenge to the new government to keep the lid on places like this without provoking a massive acceleration of civil disorder.

### The Nazi response to left-wing activism

Terror was part of the answer. On the day that 30,000 workers paraded in Bremen, local police arrested 40 of the city's leading KPD functionaries. Across Germany, 10,000 Communists were put in 'protective custody' following the Reichstag Fire on 27 February 1933, and the day after the Reichstag election all KPD activities were banned. Thousands of German Communists were arrested throughout the 1930s, often receiving extremely brutal treatment while in custody. Documents show that some were tortured to death while others were 'shot while trying to escape'.

The reality was systematic state-sponsored intimidation of political opponents. The designation of Nazi paramilitary groups as auxiliary police emphasised the new and strong link which existed between political party and state structure: a political enemy of Hitler became an unambiguous enemy of the state. Hitler's state inherited the various card indexes of suspect characters compiled by the Weimar police, and the technical expertise of the same police became available to the Nazi regime. Moreover, the close-knit nature of working-class residential areas helped with the job of tracking potentially troublesome individuals. Local characters were well known and new faces could be easily recognised. Under the circumstances, intelligence flowed freely to the Nazi authorities as people denounced each other.

Although initially the trade union organisations had hoped to retain some degree of independent life in the Third Reich, the Nazi system went out of its way to marginalise and demoralise would-be opponents, showing its command of the streets. On 30 January 1933, the police helped the SA march through the working-class districts of Wuppertal, a town of 400,000 people and a leftist stronghold. In due course, Wuppertal's police were checked for political reliability: the 'unreliable' went to the local concentration camp, Kemna. Bremen's labour leaders were interned at concentration camp Missler. On 2 May 1933, trade union headquarters throughout Germany were occupied by auxiliary police.

### Left-wing activism driven underground

Working-class dissatisfaction with the Third Reich continued to exist throughout the 1930s, even after the unions and left-wing political parties had



Burning of the Reichstag, Berlin, 27 February 1933.

been wound up. Hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of left-wing newspapers, pamphlets and leaflets were smuggled into Germany from Scandinavia, Holland, Belgium, Czechoslovakia and Switzerland. Sometimes socialist tracts were cleverly concealed inside book covers with misleading titles. It is also true that the conditions of labour enjoyed by some people allowed them to keep living in a broadly 'socialist' environment.

Surviving contemporary police reports suggest that in many German towns during the Third Reich, sympathisers of socialism and communism continued meeting to support each other's morale. They met for birthday celebrations, hiking events

### Notable quotations, early 1933

Wilhelm Beyes, a Bremen labour leader: 'The fascists are powerless if the entire work force rebels against the present system. The German Socialist Party [SPD] workers and trade union members must be made aware of the danger which is threatening.'

Oskar Eichertopf, a Bremen Communist Party member: 'The German Communist Party [KPD] must show the bourgeoisie that it is willing to fight. ... If a comrade were shot, another 100 comrades would take his place. If the fight were to be led with courage, it would cause the police and SA to be overrun.'

or (perhaps more appropriate in symbolic terms) at funerals. There are numerous and lengthy police reports which detail the way ‘malcontents’ were (or were suspected of) causing unrest in the workplace. These specify the names and backgrounds of people who had caught the eye of the Gestapo. The large number of police reports not only testifies to the fact that dissatisfaction was never eradicated — an impossible goal for any government — but also that the police authorities were pretty well able to pinpoint the most important focuses of potential unrest. By 1935, of the 422 leading Communist groups still inside Germany, only 13 remained undiscovered by the Nazis.

The regime could survive with some threats from the left: any attempt by an individual to resist Hitler’s regime in a way likely to lead to real disruption exposed him or her to massive risks. This is evident in a set of instructions about covert activity which was circulated among Communists (see case study 3). Thus, underground activity made massive demands on a person. It is doubtful whether anyone with family responsibilities could consider such a path. Thus, remaining signs of antipathy towards the Third Reich by Germany’s workers were limited by unscrupulous policing and the sheer demands of underground activity against such a system.

### Nazi ‘sweeteners’ to the left

The Nazi regime sought to sweeten the bitterness felt by socialist sympathisers and to bind them into conformity. Working in a model factory was not an

**Strength through Joy:** a state bureau which organised free or subsidised holidays for workers, occasionally abroad, such as a cruise to Spitzbergen in Norway for Bavarian workers in 1934, but usually in picturesque country areas within Germany, such as the Mosel Valley or the Alps.

### Key points

- Germany's left-wing and working classes responded to the advent of the Third Reich with displays of displeasure, which challenged the new government to keep the lid on discontent without provoking a massive acceleration of civil disorder.
- Thus, no popular uprising by the German working classes posed a serious threat to the Nazi regime.
- The Nazi system went out of its way to marginalise and demoralise would-be opponents, showing its command of the streets. Terror was part of the answer, with wholesale arrests of workers demonstrating against Nazism and the banning of communist activism.
- Socialist and Communist sympathisers continued to get together in the 1930s to support each other's morale. The large number of police reports testifies to the fact that widespread left-wing worker dissatisfaction with the Nazi regime remained.
- After the unions and left-wing political parties had been wound up, they went underground and adopted covert activities.
- The Nazi regime sought to sweeten the bitterness felt by socialist sympathisers in an attempt to bind them into conformity with the new political mission. As a result, about a third of Germany's workers had begun to develop a positive attitude towards National Socialism by 1934.
- By 1939, even if the working classes were not enthusiastic about the onset of war, neither were they so deeply at odds with the regime that they would resist the state.

### Questions

- If they were as strong as Housden is suggesting, why did the Socialists and Communists not rebel in Germany in 1933?
- What options did German Socialists and trade unionists have when the Nazis started arresting their comrades and putting them in concentration camps?
- What were the special dangers of participating in organised resistance to Nazism?
- If you had been advising a German socialist worker who got an invitation to go on a expenses-paid Strength through Joy holiday, what would you have told him to do?

option available to everyone, but the lucky few who did enabled the Nazis to present a propaganda image of ideally Nazified work. The government expanded high-tech firms such as the plane manufacturer Focke-Wulf, in the process retraining formerly unskilled staff for quite challenging jobs. Antipathy towards helping Nazism rearm Germany was off-set by the offer of high wages, cultural events, housing projects and social support networks, not to mention free lunches and the funding of ‘Strength through Joy’ outings. Workers could take pride in their association with cutting-edge scientific achievement. Factory newspapers carried tales of test flights and of the most recent celebrity to have ridden in one of the workforce’s products. People wrote to the paper offering genuine thanks for charitable donations which the firm had made at times of particular need. Even those who were not one of the lucky employees in such a factory — and few expected to be — still had fresh memories of the misery of unemployment in the Depression. As one put it, he simply ‘wanted to earn money’ and get on with ‘enjoying life’. With foremen standing right behind them, checking their work, more average German workers settled down to getting through the ‘9 to 5’ working day.

In an age where tourism was still a relatively new phenomenon, Nazism added another incentive: Strength through Joy holidays. 2.3 million people took them in 1934; 10.3 million in 1938. Although there were complaints from hoteliers that payment by the government was slow and that visitors were badly behaved, and gripes from workers that some trips were too expensive or else they were just propaganda ploys, enough people were impressed for the initiative to be worthwhile. Even underground reports compiled by the German Socialist Party in exile show that German workers often did appreciate these outings.



PETER NEWARK

Nazi rally, Nuremberg, 1935. 'Strength through Joy' girls dancing in the Zeppelinfeld.

### Case study 1

Following a raid on their local headquarters, trade union leaders in Bremen put out a number of public statements — for instance asking members to behave with 'discipline and prudence' — but also asking them to participate in the official government celebrations planned for 1 May. The Nazis countered by taking ten left-wing leaders from the Missler camp, and driving them in the back of a lorry around Bremen to see workers participating in the official events staged to celebrate Labour Day. Upon their return to the camp, the men were instructed to report to the other camp inmates on what they had seen; the purpose was to emphasise that the left-wing cause had been lost already.

### Case study 3

A Communist active in the underground was to have no close friend with whom he or she could discuss their work. It was advised that nothing should be done to draw attention to oneself in the street, such as walking with a slouch or talking with extravagant gestures. The quickest route home was not always the best one to take: one needed time to check one was not being followed. Communist activities were not to be discussed in public places at all. All private meeting places had to be checked thoroughly. Friendship with any Communist who was also a contact was to be terminated: meetings were to be for business only. Meetings, in fact, were to be rigorously organised and plans made in case of Gestapo arrest. No single place should become a habitual haunt and people were even warned against occasional feelings of panic.

### Case study 2

A specific lathe operator born on 8 January 1907 had been a member of the Red Sport Unit before being arrested along with a colleague (a machine fitter) at a Groeditz steel mill in June 1939. They were deemed guilty of registering sick too often, not paying attention to their equipment, causing a loss of productivity and inciting other colleagues.

### Case study 4

In a case from the working-class area of Düsseldorf, information passed to the police by a neighbour led to the arrest of a courier from the Netherlands carrying political literature. Under interrogation he yielded further information, which allowed the authorities to wind up a number of left-wing cells around the Ruhr.

Spartacus has useful material on the Strength through Joy movement at [www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk) under 'Nazi Germany'. An unexpected but useful site at [www.colley.co.uk/garethjones](http://www.colley.co.uk/garethjones) carries some very perceptive articles written at the time by a Welsh journalist, Gareth Jones, about the impact Nazi rule was having on ordinary Germans.

One of the first concentration camps built to house workers and socialist opponents of the Nazis was at Oranienburg near Berlin, later renamed Sachsenhausen. Its memorial site, at [www.scrapbookpages.com/sachsenhausen](http://www.scrapbookpages.com/sachsenhausen), gives a detailed idea of the background to the establishment of the camp and the regime the inmates found inside it.

### Conclusion

The experience offered to German workers as a whole by the Third Reich was distinctly grey. Traditional avenues of worker political expression were closed down and political dissent was policed stringently. However, there was at least a piecemeal image of good intent on the part of Hitler and his gang, and just occasionally there was the possibility of achieving elements of a 'better' life. It should not be a complete surprise, therefore, that reports of the German Socialist Party in exile from even as early as 1934 suggest that about a third of Germany's workers had begun to develop a positive attitude towards National Socialism. All of this helps us understand why the massive majority of German workers did not challenge the framework of Hitler's state. So even if, as a mass, the working classes were not enthusiastic about the onset of war in 1939, neither were they so deeply at odds with

the regime that they would resist the state even over this step.

In fact, Germany's workers played their part in the war effort, even making the most of the opportunities it opened up to them for better living conditions and cheaper luxury goods to send home. Conformity even stretched to participation in the Holocaust. As historian Christopher Browning observed, most of the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 were of working-class origin drawn from Hamburg. For all of the very mixed motives and feelings that must have stood behind these actions, sad to say, the large majority of Germany's workers did what was expected of them right up to the bitter end.

**Dr Martyn Housden** lectures in German history at the University of Bradford. His most recent book is *Hans Frank. Lebensraum and the Holocaust* (Palgrave, 2003).

### Further study

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