

Lisa Pine

The Impact of the Nazi Regime Upon German Society

homogenise: to make all parts (i.e. of a society) similar.

? How did the Nazis form the 'national community'?

SS: an abbreviation of *Schutzstaffel*. Run by Himmler, it became the force that operated the concentration camp system.

Hitler's accession to power brought about fundamental changes to the nature of German society. The new Nazi regime sought to **homogenise** society into its perception of ideal. It created a *Volkgemeinschaft* ('national community'), whose members or *Volksgenossen* ('national comrades') had to be 'racially pure', 'hereditarily healthy', physically fit, politically reliable and socially responsible. This entailed the use of propaganda, re-education and Nazi Party organisations to 'coordinate' the people and to try to ensure that they met the required norms of the regime. The Nazi government aimed to break down traditional loyalties — to class, region, religion, the family — and to replace them with loyalty to the Führer, the NSDAP and the nation as a whole. Hence the regime attempted to forge a new self-identity and national awareness among its people.

At the same time as creating the ideal type of 'national comrade' who fitted into Nazi society, negative images were attached to those individuals and groups of people who were considered not to belong. Of these, the Jews comprised the largest

group. They were deemed to be 'racially inferior' and were therefore excluded from society on racial grounds. Several other groups also became victims of the regime on account of their inability or unwillingness to meet its norms. These included 'Gypsies' (the Sinti and Roma), 'asocials' and homosexuals. This article considers how the Nazi regime formed the new 'national community' and examines the fate of those categories of people who did not belong.

Creating the 'national community'

The Nazis employed a variety of propaganda and socialisation methods — underpinned by the threat or use of force — to reshape German society into the new 'national community'. Posters, feature films, newsreels, the press and the radio were all used with effectiveness to this end. The regime also introduced significant changes to the educational system and to the school curriculum in order to disseminate its ideology. In addition, a host of Nazi Party organisations were set up to foster feelings of belonging, unity and conformity. These included the élite black-uniformed **SS**, the brown-shirted SA (stormtroopers), the two Nazi women's formations and the Nazi Party youth groups: the Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls.

The regime attempted to undermine sectional loyalties (for example to class, locality, the family) and to replace them with a new national consciousness. It claimed to create a classless society in which class barriers were broken down and workers had new opportunities. In many ways this appeared to be the case, with hitherto middle-class pursuits and opportunities now within the reach of the working class. Mass tourism and leisure were introduced under the *Kraft durch Freude* ('Strength through Joy') organisation (see box on opposite page). It arranged subsidised leisure cruises and holidays, car ownership in the form of saving for a *Volkswagen* ('people's car') and greater accessibility to the theatre, cinema and other cultural activities.

Nazi Party organisations

'Strength through Joy'

- Set up in November 1933, its purpose was to organise leisure time and to subsidise holidays and trips for German workers.
- In 1938, 10.3 million people went on 'Strength through Joy' holidays. Most of the trips were to the countryside, seaside or mountains, but there were also cruises to Norway or Madeira.
- The introduction of mass tourism and leisure symbolised new opportunities for workers.

'Beauty of Labour'

- Set up to improve conditions in German factories, its activities were designed to make workers feel a sense of attachment to their workplace.
- The organisation provided good canteen food and brightened up factory entrances with geraniums.
- It improved sanitation, ventilation and lighting in factories.
- It aimed to raise the status and thereby to increase the productivity of the workers.

Such opportunities, as well as cosmetic improvements to factory conditions, were designed to enhance the self-perception of the workers. In addition the regime succeeded in creating a situation of full employment in Germany by the mid-1930s, as compared to the mass unemployment and despair of the last years of the Weimar era. Hence the lot of the average German worker appeared to have improved. Yet the regime's claims to have created a classless society were not wholly accurate — in reality it succeeded neither in totally removing class barriers nor in alienating workers from their traditional class loyalties.

Another means of rallying people to the 'national community' was foreign policy success. By the late 1930s, with acts including the remilitarisation of the Rhineland and the Anschluss (union) with Austria, Hitler had effectively torn up the Treaty of Versailles and demonstrated Germany's strength as a nation. While Nazi foreign policy continued to succeed, the sense of 'national community' was enhanced; even a nation hesitant to go to war again in September 1939 accepted Hitler's decision and reaped the benefits during the initial blitzkrieg successes of the Second World War.

It was only once the tide of the war turned against Germany, and particularly after the Battle of Stalingrad (1942–43), that both Hitler's infallibility and the nation's strength began to be called into question. Hence during the years 1933–39 the Nazi regime employed a combination of

domestic and foreign policy initiatives in order to create the society, or 'national community', it desired and to manufacture the consensus for that society among those who 'belonged' to it.

Excluding the 'inferior' and 'unfit' from society

Jews

The Jews were excluded from the 'national community' and victimised by the Nazi regime from its very earliest days in power. Policies designed to persecute Germany's Jews and to segregate them from the rest of society included the National Boycott of Jewish Businesses (April 1933) and the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service (May 1933), which called for the 'retirement' of Jewish officials from their positions. The Nuremberg Laws (September 1935) denied Jews their equal civil rights, redefining them as 'subjects' instead of 'citizens', and prohibited marriages and sexual relationships between Jews and 'Aryans'. The Jews were systematically and deliberately pauperised in a process known as the 'Aryanisation of the economy', which excluded them from employment and forced them to sell or close down their businesses.

Throughout the mid-1930s a host of other measures were employed to humiliate the Jews and to separate them physically from the rest of the population. For example, streets named after Jews were renamed, park benches were designated 'for Aryans only' and Jews were prohibited from going to the theatre, cinema, concerts and exhibitions.

Discrimination against the Jews escalated in 1938. In November, *Kristallnacht* (the 'Night of the Broken Glass'), a pogrom unleashed by Josef Goebbels, saw unprecedented violence and the destruction of almost every synagogue in the land. Once the war broke out, the conditions of the German Jews deteriorated even more rapidly, as they were deprived of whatever rights and dignity they had left. In September 1941 they were forced to wear the Yellow Star and were subsequently deported to death camps in Poland, where they shared the fate of the rest of European Jewry in the

pogrom: a state-sponsored attack on an ethnic group, in this case Jews.

❓ Which groups of people were excluded from society under the Nazi regime?

Key dates

- 1935** Nuremberg Laws.
Paragraph 175a added to Criminal Code to tighten up laws relating to homosexuals.
- 1938** 'National Campaign against the Workshy.'
Night of the Broken Glass.
- 1941** German Jews forced to wear the 'Yellow Star' and subsequently deported.
- 1942** Himmler's order to send Germany's 'Gypsies' to Auschwitz.

Key points

- ★ The Nazi regime tried to break down traditional loyalties and to replace them with loyalty to Hitler, the Nazi Party and the German nation.
- ★ The Nazis encouraged nationalist feelings among Germans and promoted a sense of the greatness of the German nation.
- ★ The German nation was to be made up of ideal 'national comrades'.
- ★ The Jews were excluded from German society for being 'racially inferior'.
- ★ The 'Gypsies' were persecuted by the Nazi regime and excluded from society.
- ★ 'Asocials' and homosexuals were also persecuted by the Nazis, who considered their attitudes and behaviour to be 'deviant'.

Nazis' systematic extermination process, termed the 'Final Solution'.

'Gypsies'

The 'Gypsies' were excluded from the 'national community' because of their 'racial inferiority' and their itinerant lifestyle. Like the Jews, they had been the subjects of discrimination over many centuries, but once the Nazis came to power, persecution of the 'Gypsies' was centralised and policies against them became increasingly radicalised. In 1936 the Reich Central Office for Combating the Gypsy Nuisance was set up and the regime began to classify and register 'Gypsies', to make it easier for the police to persecute them systematically. By the end of 1938 Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, was calling for a 'solution' to the 'Gypsy question' and in September 1939 the removal of Germany's 30,000 'Gypsies' to Poland was proposed. In December 1942 Himmler signed the order to send them to Auschwitz.

'Asocials'

The term 'asocial' was used to categorise tramps, vagrants and the 'workshy' on grounds of their lack of productivity or use to society. It was an elastic term that included anyone who did not, would not or could not conform to Nazi norms. The regime imposed a number of measures upon 'asocials', including compulsory sterilisation under the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring (July 1933), to prevent them from reproducing.

The Nazis attempted to exclude or remove 'asocials' from society. In an organised raid in September 1933, known as 'Beggars' Week', some 100,000 vagrants and tramps were taken into custody, although most were subsequently released. However, vagrants became subject to more and more restrictions. They were registered by the authorities and their movements were recorded.

In December 1937 Himmler stepped up the persecution of 'asocials'. A wave of arrests in June 1938, the 'National Campaign against the Workshy', resulted in the internment of some 11,000 'asocials' in concentration camps such as Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, where they undertook compulsory labour. Although attempts to pass a law against 'asocials' were not realised, the regime continued to round them up throughout the wartime period and continued to persecute them without any formal legislation.

Homosexuals

Homosexuals were persecuted by the Nazi regime on grounds of their 'deviant' sexual behaviour. Although homosexuality had been illegal in Germany since 1871, under Paragraph 175 of the Criminal Code, which made 'indecent activity' between males a crime punishable by imprisonment, there were relatively few convictions before the Nazis came to power. There had even been calls for a repeal of Paragraph 175 during the Weimar years.

In 1935 the Nazis added Paragraph 175a to the Criminal Code, which made penalties for homosexual acts harsher. Prosecution led to imprisonment of between 3 and 10 years. Raids on homosexual bars and meeting places took place and the Gestapo (secret state police) made lists of homosexuals in order to facilitate their arrest. It is estimated that some 10,000–15,000 homosexual men ended up in concentration camps. There, marked out by their 'pink triangles', they were subjected to much abuse, from both guards and other inmates.

Conclusion

The Nazi regime aimed to break down traditional and sectional loyalties and to replace them with a homogenous 'national community'. The classless society it claimed to have achieved was superficial, yet it imposed upon society a different type of hierarchy, in which some sectors were valuable and others were expendable. The Nazis reordered German society to fit in with their concept of perfection. This entailed the creation of types — the ideal 'national comrade' who belonged to society and the 'inferior' and the 'unfit' who did not. In the Third Reich a variety of measures were undertaken to turn the majority of Germans into reliable, fit and productive members of society and simultaneously to exclude, terrorise and even annihilate those groups that did not conform to the Nazi ideal.

Dr Lisa Pine is Senior Lecturer in Modern European History at South Bank University and author of *Nazi Family Policy, 1933–1945* (Berg, 1997).

Further study

Burleigh, M. (ed.) (1996) *Confronting the Nazi Past: New Debates on Modern German History*, Collins and Brown.

Kershaw, I. (2000) *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, Arnold.

Peukert, D. (1987) *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity and Opposition in Everyday Life*, Penguin.

Pine, L. (1997) *Nazi Family Policy, 1933–1945*,