



AQA AS Life in Nazi Germany 1933–45

Edexcel AS From Second Reich to Third Reich: Germany 1918–45

Edexcel A2 From Kaiser to Führer: Germany 1900–1945

OCR (A) AS Democracy and dictatorship in Germany 1919–63, Study topic 8

OCR (A) A2 Nazi Germany 1933–45

The German Home Front

Caroline Sharples explores the contradictory nature of the experience of the German Home Front during the Second World War

Argument

Nasty, brutish and fraught

Although Germans on the Home Front claimed that they too had been war's victims in suffering losses of home and family, records suggest that there was generally little resistance to Nazi pressure to engage in the battle for survival.

extermination programme directed against European Jewry. In the aftermath of defeat and the collapse of the Nazi regime in 1945, many ordinary Germans were quick to claim that they too had suffered. For many years scholars were reluctant to give too much credence to this rhetoric of German victimhood, wary of displacing attention from the victims of the Holocaust.

Historians are now, however, more willing to engage with these themes, recognising that the German population did indeed experience genuine losses as a result of the Second World War. Whether facing the destruction of their homes and property

The Third Reich spent half its existence at war. The repercussions of this conflict were devastating and notoriously included the

through Allied air raids, the loss of loved ones in the fighting, or simply struggling to sustain daily life amid food and clothing shortages, the experience of the Home Front was one of adversity, terror and trauma. At the same time, though, it was notable that the population continued to fight until the bitter end. By exploring events within Germany between 1939 and 1945, we can not only gain an insight into everyday life under National Socialism, but we can also examine the contradictory workings of the regime itself.

'Doing their bit'

Since the early days of the NSDAP, Nazi propaganda had been characterised by a distinct military motif with almost everything being routinely presented as a battle for survival. The emphasis was on strength and unity and the idea that these qualities would inevitably lead to German victory. There were frequent pleas for the population to put the greater needs of the nation ahead of the pursuit of their own individual interests.

This notion of self-sacrifice was a key component of the Nazis' concept of *Volksgemeinschaft*. Given that these ideas had always been there, the challenge from 1939 was how the state could convey the urgency of a real war situation and get the people to mobilise accordingly. Josef Goebbels' propaganda ministry had to up the ante. The result was a new series of posters, publications and broadcasts that tried to persuade people that their role at home was equally important as that of the soldiers doing the actual fighting, whether they were collecting supplies for the troops, tending the land, working in munitions factories or maintaining the nation's infrastructure. The Second World War thus provided an opportunity to put all the talk of a *Volksgemeinschaft* into action.

Much of this may not seem all that different from any other country at war. We need only to look at the British Home Front during this period to come across the 'spirit of the Blitz' and the idea of everyone carrying on and pulling together in the fight against a common enemy. It is important, however, to remember that the Third Reich was infused with a particular racial ideology that was becoming more and more radical under the cover of the war. This affected various aspects of the civilian experience and dictated just who could and who could not be part of the war effort.

Terror and racial policy

One particular example of this is the German war economy. With German men going off to fight, there was a clear need to find an alternative source of labour to keep industries going, particularly the armaments factories. The regime was divided over the best way to do this. Should women be conscripted into the war industries? This would, perhaps, be a logical

solution, yet it was one that contradicted the Nazi ideology of a woman's primary duty being that of a wife and mother, producing the next generation of National Socialists. Much propaganda and financial incentive had already been devoted to encouraging women to stay at home. Many people struggled to reconcile this with the notion that they should now enter the workplace instead.

An alternative option was to use forced foreign workers: with the Nazis now occupying a vast area of Europe, they had a ready supply of expendable labour at their disposal. This, however, also prompted much discussion among the Nazi elite with regard to the wisdom of having these 'racially inferior' persons brought into contact with German workers. A string of directives was introduced warning Germans of the 'dangers' of fraternising with these foreigners — and the harsh punishments they would face if they did.

The threat of violence was a key feature of life on the Home Front, particularly after the failure of the **July Bomb Plot** when the regime swooped upon any suspected conspirators and troublemakers. People were encouraged to report any defeatist attitudes or non-compliance with the racial laws to the Gestapo. Those that found themselves the subject of such a denunciation would be arrested and could face imprisonment or even execution.

The powers of the **People's Courts** expanded enormously during the war years. By 1945 they had passed down thousands of death sentences for allegations of treason. Similarly, those who sabotaged factory equipment or who did not seem to be pulling their weight in the war economy were also threatened with reprisals. A memorandum by **Albert Speer** from 30 October 1942 made it clear that any 'slackers' should be sent to concentration camps.

The damage caused by the July Bomb Plot; the conspirators, including Claus von Stauffenberg (inset), were executed



Volksgemeinschaft: 'People's community' — a central feature of Nazi ideology, which stressed national solidarity and was based upon racial ties.

July Bomb Plot: the attempt, on 20 July 1944, to assassinate Adolf Hitler by placing a bomb in his Wolf's Lair. The conspirators, including Claus von Stauffenberg, were captured and executed.

People's Courts: initially established in 1934 to try political opponents, the People's Courts were beyond the bounds of constitutional law. The punishments handed down by these courts were severe and defendants did not have a fair hearing.

Albert Speer: famous for being Hitler's architect, Speer assumed the role of minister of armaments and war production in 1942. He oversaw the rationalisation programme, which saw Germany become fully mobilised for total war.

Maintaining morale

Even as late as 1944, when the Nazis were resorting to increasingly severe measures to keep people in line, the party continued to orchestrate public rallies and big displays of unswerving loyalty to the Führer. Civilian morale was a major concern for the Nazi leadership, particularly given the legacy of the First World War. Defeat in 1918 had long been attributed, by those on the political right, to a 'stab in the back' and the collapse of the Home Front (see 20TH CENTURY HISTORY REVIEW, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 16).

The Nazis were obviously anxious to avoid any repeat of this in the Second World War and were wary about causing the population too much hardship. Interestingly, conditions for the majority of Germans (at least those considered members of the *Volksgemeinschaft*) were relatively good during the first few years of the war. Food supplies, although strained, generally remained superior to levels during the First World War. This was due to a drive for greater self-sufficiency and more food being produced at home, as well as the fact that the Nazis were able to plunder resources from the occupied territories.

The rationing of clothing and household goods, though, was more problematic. A black market did still emerge and the SD noted people's grumblings about food prices, the hoarding of goods and the

less than exemplary behaviour of the 'better-off'. For all of the regime's talk about national unity, class divisions were still apparent and some people were able to enrich themselves at the expense of others.

When considering the issue of morale, the history of the Home Front can be divided into two distinct periods:

- the *Blitzkrieg* years of 1939–41
- the period of war in Russia from 1942

Morale was closely linked to military success. Put simply, when the war was going well, people were happy and proud of Germany's achievements. Indeed, while there may have been little enthusiasm for war at its outbreak in 1939, the rapid series of victories in western Europe impressed the population — and enabled them to remain optimistic that the conflict would be over quickly. After the 1942–43 **Battle of Stalingrad**, though, public support for the war declined. By 1944, increased air raids by the Allies were also adding to a sense of chaos and disillusionment.

It was in this climate that resistance began to grow. The SD reported a growing number of anti-Hitler jokes being told from spring 1943 and it was in the latter stages of the war that conservative members of the armed forces began to formulate plans for a

'stab in the back':

the popular myth that Germany did not lose the First World War as the result of any military failure, but as a result of a betrayal by the Home Front. This betrayal was associated with socialists and Jews.

SD: *Sicherheitsdienst*, the intelligence branch of the SS, which monitored public opinion and compiled regular reports on morale.

Blitzkrieg: 'Lightning war', a term used to denote the rapid military success that the regime enjoyed between 1939 and 1941.

Battle of Stalingrad: between August 1942 and February 1943, German troops fought Soviet forces for control of Stalingrad. It was one of the biggest battles of the war and the Germans suffered a devastating defeat.



Buying food with ration cards in 1939

- One of the Nazis' key concerns during the war was to maintain morale. In this way they hoped they could avoid a repeat of the collapse of the Home Front that they associated with defeat in the First World War.
- Popular morale, though, was closely linked to military fortunes. As the war began to go against Germany, there was increased grumbling against the regime and some people, such as conservative army figures, became more prepared to contemplate acts of resistance.
- Nazi propaganda emphasised the importance of everyone pulling together for the sake of the war effort, but historians debate the extent to which their dream of a *Volksgemeinschaft* was ever realised as social divisions still remained.
- The experience of the German Home Front cannot be divorced from Nazi racial policy. Membership of the *Volksgemeinschaft* was defined by race, and there was much debate over how to reconcile the use of female or forced foreign labour in the war industries with the larger aims of Nazi ideology. Under the cover of war, the persecution of 'racial enemies' also increased.
- The threat of terror against ordinary Germans also increased as the war situation became more desperate and the regime struggled to maintain its grip over the population.
- The experience of the German Home Front is a contradictory one of both genuine victimhood and complicity in maintaining the war effort until the bitter end.

Germany without the Führer. While the extent of German resistance may have been exaggerated in the aftermath of the conflict, it is important to remember that organised opposition to Nazism was never really that widespread.

The collapse of the Third Reich

Another contradiction of the Third Reich is that it was not really until the final throes of the war that any semblance of a *Volksgemeinschaft* became apparent, by which time, of course, it was all too late. In October 1944 the Nazis created the *Volkssturm*, which clung to the belief that the Allies could be repelled and the regime saved. Ordinary people were armed with primitive weapons in a final blurring of the home and military fronts. They fought to the end and had the power to enact harsh punishments against those members of the population who seemed to be giving up. One order issued by the *Volkssturm*, for example, declared, 'Where a white flag appears, all male persons of the house concerned are to be shot.' Denunciations to the Gestapo also continued throughout the final stages of the war and many



Questions

- How successful were the Nazis in creating a *Volksgemeinschaft*?
- In what ways has the history of the German Home Front been mythologised since 1945?
- To what extent did defeat at Stalingrad affect popular attitudes to the regime?
- How useful is the concept of German victimhood in describing the civilian experience during the Second World War?

Weblink

<http://tinyurl.com/3e9k7fl>: this informative website has some good source material. Another useful website can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/3tev6gm>. It will ask you for a password but ignore this, click it out and carry on reading.

A poster warning 'The enemy sees your light!' tells citizens to blackout against Allied bombing raids

Volkssturm: a People's Army, established in October 1944, which conscripted those previously deemed unfit for military service. The militia lacked proper training or weapons but was compelled to fight to the bitter end.

Germans still hoped for the 'miracle' weapon that could yet turn everything around.

As the Allies marched upon Berlin, though, Hitler came to a different conclusion about the fate of the Home Front. Determined not to let the enemy get their hands on German industrial plant, he issued the 'Scorched Earth' decree in March 1945, with little regard for the future of Germany or its people. Fortunately for them, Speer was able to check Hitler's orders.

By the time the fighting ceased on 8 May 1945, nonetheless, much of Germany lay in ruins. Many ordinary Germans found themselves homeless, particularly those who had been living in the eastern territories and were expelled by Soviet forces. For many Germans, the worst was yet to come as the advancing Red Army extracted terrible reprisals for all the suffering that German forces had inflicted upon the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

The history of the German Home Front has many contradictory features. The Nazis finally achieved a militarisation of society with the creation of civilian fighting units, but only when the war was already lost. Germans can be seen as victims of the regime but they also upheld it and kept fighting until the very end.

In the aftermath of the conflict, an emphasis on the Nazis' 'misleading' propaganda and the constant threat of terror underscored the rhetoric of German suffering. At the same time, however, the experience of foreign occupation, together with a food and housing crisis, prompted a sense of nostalgia among some for the living conditions they had enjoyed during the Nazi era.

Nor did the trials and tribulations of the German population end with the total defeat of 1945. The next few years would be characterised by the enormous reconstruction programme, while the emerging Cold War would present a brand new set of challenges for the people in terms of the physical and ideological division of East and West Germany.

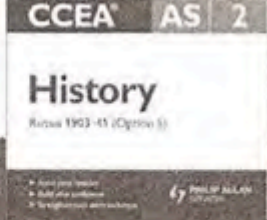
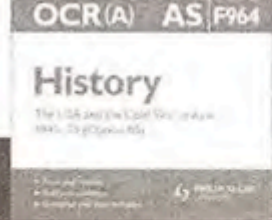
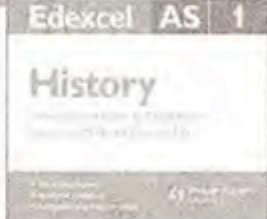
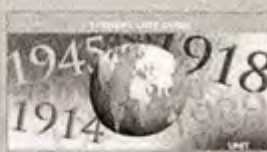
Dr Caroline Sharples lectures in modern history at the University of Liverpool. She has previously published various articles on the *Kindertransport*.

'Scorched Earth'

decree: also known as the 'Nero Order', this was issued by Hitler on 19 March 1945 and called for the destruction of German infrastructure to prevent anything falling into Allied hands. Speer protested on the grounds that it would destroy the foundations of the country.

Further reading

- Beck, E. R. (1986) *Under the Bombs: the German Home Front, 1942–1945*, University Press of Kentucky.
- Kitchen, M. (1995) *Nazi Germany at War*, Longman.
- Peukert, D. J. K. (1987) *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life*, Penguin.



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