

Changing Historical Perspectives on the Nazi Dictatorship

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This paper discusses the change of the leading paradigms in the field of contemporary history in the Federal Republic of Germany. While, during the early post-Second World War period, the study of the interwar period was dominated by the theory of totalitarian dictatorship and the discussion of the deficiencies of the Paris peace treaty system, thereby focusing on the charismatic leadership of Adolf Hitler, the post-war generation of German historians analysed the emerging political system of the Third Reich from a more systematic perspective, depicting behind the Hitlerian façade the antagonistic political structure that resulted in an accelerating cumulative radicalisation of the Nazi regime. This functionalist approach, however, has recently been attacked for indirectly exculpating the Nazi crimes by underlining the systemic factors leading to the accumulation of terror and violence and is about to be replaced by a rather moralist interpretation of Nazi politics, accentuating the function of the ‘Volksgemeinschaft’ and the impact of Hitler’s charismatic leadership.

In Germany, research into the history of the Third Reich and the Second World War first originated with the *Institut zur Erforschung der nationalsozialistischen Zeit*, founded in 1948. Although born then, outside of the historical profession as traditionally practised at German universities, 60 years later the research field in question is well represented by separate chairs in almost all German history departments. In the meantime, interest has shifted to the history of the Federal Republic, and the German Democratic Republic as its counterpart. Still, the study of the history of the interwar period remains an important area of research, and the relevant findings fill entire libraries. After a period in which the ‘Zeitgeschichte’ approach – a term created by Hans Rothfels who acted as editor of the influential *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* – had to prove its scholarly legitimacy, the representatives of this orientation have gained international

recognition. In what follows I concentrate on the impact of generational change on the leading historical paradigms in this field.

The generational shift I allude to is reflected in a 2003 book by Nicholas Berg, dealing with the reaction of West German historians to the challenge of the Nazi genocide policy. Berg claimed that during the 1950s and 1960s the German 'Zeitgeschichte' approach evaded the topic of the Holocaust, and was more or less resolved to downplay the criminal features of the Nazi regime. He indicted almost all German historians of an older generation, claiming that they were guided by a clandestine feeling of personal guilt. In his Freiburg PhD dissertation, Berg took the surviving Jewish–German historians in West Germany as an indicator of the unwillingness of their German fellow historians to come to grips with the thoroughly criminal nature of the Nazi system and to cooperate in displaying the undesirable truth.¹ By taking this rather radical position, he postulated a new start in the exploration of the Third Reich by younger cohorts of historians who did not have anything to hide.

Berg's claim that the West German historical profession avoided the study of Jewish persecution and particularly of the Holocaust is, however, only partially true and overlooks the fact that this field had been even more neglected by English and American historians, for whom the issues of Jewish persecution and particularly the genocide of the Jews undeniably played a minor role during the 1950s and 1960s. In any case, in the meantime Holocaust studies, although they do not have any institutionalized background – there are no chairs for Holocaust history – have gained ground considerably, and, at present, studies dealing with different aspects of Jewish persecution and of the Holocaust are numerically leading the field.

Next to intensive research dealing in detail with the persecution of the Jews, the implementation of the Holocaust, and the impact of anti-Semitism in the interwar-period, the Holocaust complex emerged as a leading paradigm for the study of Nazi Germany. Any analysis contributing to the study of the Nazi political system, of its ideology, and of the stages of the Second World War, chooses as a starting point and focus of interest the sources of the criminal nature of Nazi rule that culminated in the Holocaust.

The shift of historical research towards the Holocaust complex, however, also seems to be connected with significant changes in methodological perspective. Thus, the functionalist approach, which focused on analyzing the systemic origins of the cumulative radicalisation and criminalisation of the Nazi regime, tends to become replaced by the exploration of the motivational and ethical backgrounds of this process. Consequently, the analysis of varying types of perpetrators who were directly or indirectly involved in Nazi crimes, and especially in the Jewish genocide, gains in importance. Concurrently, the functionalist interpretation of the Nazi crimes is criticised for playing down the responsibility

of the acting perpetrators. Thus, Ulrich Herbert, Dan Diner and other historians have attacked the representatives of the functionalist school for replacing individual responsibility by abstract structures and thereby covering up the criminal features of the NS-regime.²

Nicolas Berg, in particular, has tried to blame the functionalist school, and especially Martin Broszat and Hans Mommsen, for having pursued a clandestine exculpation of the Nazi regime by describing the political process in some respects as a self-perpetuating phenomenon.³ Thus, the theory of cumulative radicalization was represented as an attempt to diminish the personal responsibility of the Nazi chieftains and even to depersonalize the historical process. As Dan Diner and Ulrich Herbert argued, the functionalists tended to replace moral responsibility by structural determinants, or Hitler's individual person by anonymous structures. The verdict of functionalism as being sterile and promoting moral indifference culminates in the reproach that the functionalist historians suppress the criminal character of the regime and play down the individual responsibility of the perpetrators.

Apparently, this new methodological approach is not to be reconciled with the functionalist perspective, which refers to certain elements of systems theory seeking an answer to the characteristic inability of Nazi politics to stay within the boundaries of the available economic and manpower resources. The opposite tendency, to explain the specific dynamic character of Nazi politics by referring to the mental and ideological disposition of the perpetrators and not so much to systemic factors, necessarily implies accentuating the impact of the ideological factor. From this perspective, the Nazi 'Weltanschauung' appears to be the predominant and almost exclusive element within the motivational background of the Nazi crime perpetrators.

This hypothesis is, however, only partially supported by the empirical Täter-Forschung, which gained much ground in the empirical research of the Nazi regime.⁴ In particular, the pioneering study of Christopher Browning on the Hamburg police battalion 101 proves that the policemen involved acted because of mixed motives, of which ideological indoctrination was not always the most important.⁵ Even if it is possible – as in the case of the KZ-guards (concentration camp guards) – to reconstruct a rather precise picture of the psychological conditions under which the individual perpetrators acted, from these findings one cannot draw general conclusions, not only as to why the criminal deeds of the regime always found 'willing executioners', to use the reproachful term of Daniel Goldhagen,⁶ but also as to what were the reasons for the accelerating criminalisation of the Nazi regime. If we take the example of Adolf Eichmann, it is clear that his criminal energy to carry out the Jewish genocide was certainly spurred on by his anti-Semitism. It is also clear that it is the political and institutional conditions of the Nazi regime that enabled this man to fulfil his

dreadful mission, and that without these conditions criminal actions of the scale Eichmann was involved in could never been put into practice. Yet, these conditions were not exclusively the result of a collective anti-Semitic or racist mentality. Still, in the historical field, the tendency prevails to lend absolute priority to the ideological factor here. It is symptomatic that the role of the party leadership is missing in the spectrum examined.

In conjunction with the general shift of the leading paradigm back to the ideological factor, the former debate over comparative fascism is actually laid *ad acta*. Leading historians such as Ulrich Herbert reject the specific fascist character of Nazism, even where the organisational pattern of the Nazi movement and the priority of mass mobilisation versus constructive politics are concerned, although therein lie the crucial strategic differences between the Nazi movement and its right-wing opponents, whereas there existed no significant divergence with respect to their ideological positions. Thus, Ulrich Herbert tends draw a continuous line from the *völkisch* and imperialist movements of the late Wilhelmine empire to the rise of the Nazi movement. This interpretation overrates the importance of the ideological factor and the elements of continuity between imperialist nationalism and Nazism, and overlooks the fact that the politics of fascism brought a qualitative chance to the political scene and the style of politics.⁷

Symptomatic for this approach is the widely accepted use of the term '*Volksgemeinschaft*' not only as a propagandistic, but also as a structural term to describe the Nazi political system. Undeniably, the notion of the *Volksgemeinschaft* had not only been used by right-wing parties, it had even been adopted by social democrat politicians during the 1920s. But this was anything but a distinct political programme, although its appeal to the vision of overcoming class conflict and achieving national unity elicited broad sympathy. The NSDAP propaganda exploited the vision of the *Volksgemeinschaft* by reinterpreting it in a racist context and using it as keyword to describe the rather vague target of achieving a classless society. The slogan reflected the ambiguous social promises of the Nazi propaganda and served as a pledge to achieve social equality, as described in David Schoenbaum's 'Hitler's Social Revolution'.⁸

Recently, authors such as Norbert Frei, Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Michael Wildt, although with different accents, have refrained from the earlier consensus, which held that the idea of the *Volksgemeinschaft* had been used for propagandistic purposes only. Instead, they see it as a substantial element of Nazi politics, and not just as a fiction that in reality was not actively pursued. It was Norbert Frei who first argued, in his booklet on 'The Third Reich in the German Consciousness', that the *Volksgemeinschaft* 'ideologem' served not just for propaganda, but that it was part of Nazi political reality, and that an overwhelming majority of the German population had voluntarily subscribed to it. According to Frei, Nazi policy had successfully propagated the notion of the

Volksgemeinschaft, and during the phase of consolidated Nazi rule (*konsolidierter Herrschaft*) the theorem had not only been invested with real power, it seemed to have been appreciated by the majority of the population as well. Stressing the viewpoint of the ‘*Erfahrungsgeschichte*’, i.e. the impact of actual popular feeling, Frei claims that there existed a ‘*Gefühl sozialer Gleichheit*’, an impression of social equality. He maintains that this emerging social solidarity gained even greater strength during the first years of the war, although it is also obvious that from June 1941 on popular support for the regime, and therefore also for the impact of the *Volksgemeinschaft* idea, started to wane.⁹ Similarly, Hans Ulrich Wehler argued in his ‘*Gesellschaftsgeschichte*’ that the idea of the *Volksgemeinschaft* carried remarkable social suggestiveness, and was an indispensable integrating factor.¹⁰

This thesis contains two assumptions that appear to be problematic, even setting aside the fact that the far-reaching conclusions drawn by Frei and Wehler do not have any reliable statistical basis and are mainly derived from the propagandistic self-depiction of the regime. The first assumption is that the Nazi leadership, by propagating the growth of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, pursued a constructive political programme. This implies that this idea rested on a more or less rational concept for rebuilding German society. The second assumption is that the *Volksgemeinschaft* as such became an active momentum within the political process.

From this perspective, the feeling of ‘belonging’ to a *Volksgemeinschaft* comprised only of Aryans was the result of a dialectical process of inclusion and exclusion (this theory is derived from the social philosophy of Niklas Luhmann). In particular, the exclusion of Jews, so Wildt argues, strengthened solidarity among its members.¹¹ From this perspective, the Nazi regime promulgated its anti-Jewish measures primarily in order to create and intensify the enthusiasm of those that felt themselves to belong to the *Volksgemeinschaft*. This also helps explain why the great majority of Germans so readily supported the regime, including its criminal activities. The *Volksgemeinschaft* thus gains a momentum of its own. Hence, Michael Wildt talks consequently of a ‘*Selbstermächtigung*’ (self-authorization) on the part of the individual citizens to participate in the mobilisation of violence against outsiders, and especially Jews. This assumption implies that an overwhelming part of the German nation had been penetrated by crucial ingredients of the Nazi *Weltanschauung* and had acted on its own intentions. From this premise, the assertion that – at least until the start of the anti-Soviet campaign on 21 June 1941 – Hitler found increasing public support for his foreign policy, and could corroborate this through repeated public plebiscites, which had the expected results and showed an almost unanimous support of the NS-regime, gains a questionable plausibility, but any detailed statistical analysis would not support generalisations of this kind.

The tendency to describe the *Volksgemeinschaft* as a self-sustaining instrument of public mobilisation and momentum for cumulative radicalisation stands in sharp contrast to the findings of previous research, which had emphasised totalitarian manipulation as a basic element of the process of political mobilisation. Most historians agree that propagandist indoctrination had a greater impact than coercion by the expanding police state. However, some historians overlook the fact that the elimination of all free public communication did not leave much room for the individual to choose even an indifferent position. Hence the term of the ‘*Gefälligkeitsdiktatur*’, which has been coined by Götz Aly,¹² feeds the illusion that under the NS-regime there could exist something like an ‘open society’. This does not contradict the fact that considerable segments of the German population willingly profited from the economic and social rewards distributed by the regime.

In the present debate, the mythification of the *Volksgemeinschaft* tends to replace the notion of nationalism, which earlier served as the dominant factor to explain the relative obedience of the rank and file to the regime, but does so without including the formation of any common solidarity. Because of Germany’s supposedly weak national consciousness, some historians refer to the idea of the ‘*Volksgemeinschaft*’ as an additional explanation for the relatively high degree of national solidarity of the German population with the Nazi government, and which went unquestioned as long as the regime avoided the decision to go to war. There is agreement that the alleged *Volksgemeinschaft* lost its attractiveness when the phase of the lightning victories came to its end and the population feared a prolonged war in the East.

If one wants to look for the reasons for the emergence of solidarity among Germans, there is no doubt that the common experience of the Allied area bombings created even more feelings of social coherence than the Nazi reference to the allegedly insoluble ties of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. It is important to realize that Martin Bormann did everything in his power to instrumentalise the support for the victims of the air raids in order to stabilize the *Volksgemeinschaft*, which was coming apart, and also the weakened position of the Nazi party.

Thus, it is utterly misleading to take the example of the NSV (National Socialist Welfare Organisation), whose mass apparatus comprised in the end almost 16 million members, and whose public care became indispensable for the sheer survival, under war conditions, of ever-growing parts of the civil population – on the front as well as in the destroyed German cities – as proof for the efficiency of the *Volksgemeinschaft*.¹³ This example shows impressively that it is not the solidarity among the German population evoked by the *Volksgemeinschaft* discourse, but rather the pressure of the state apparatus which explains why the NS-regime, especially under the conditions of war, could claim the loyal collaboration of the majority of the German population.

The historical paradigm I am referring to culminates in the myth of a self-sustaining *Volksgemeinschaft* and finds increasing acceptance in the field – especially so against the background of a more or less depoliticised interpretation of the Nazi regime. In a parallel move, the thesis, defended by Hans Ulrich Wehler, that Hitler was a charismatic ruler, implies a willingness on the part of the Germans to accept him as their long-overdue leader. Wehler argues that the mental preparedness of the Germans to accept charismatic leadership as an imagined solution of the social and political cleavages within the German society was a precondition for the success of the Führer-cult.¹⁴ However, the widespread adoration of Hitler, and the build-up of the leadership cult by Joseph Goebbels, were not identical with loyalty towards the NSDAP, the SS and the Nazi-chieftains and, therefore, the regime. On the contrary, there was a growing hiatus between the Führer cult and the support of the Nazi government and it was reflected in the formula: ‘If that the Führer would know’ (‘Wenn das der Führer wüsste’).¹⁵

From the twin premises of the charismatic leadership of Hitler and the active role played of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the central issues of the functionalist approach – namely to stress the continuous extension of targets and the over-stressing of the available resources by the NS-system – appear only of secondary importance. The functionalist approach focuses on describing the dynamics of the political process that emerges from the lack of options for the regime, and the increasing rivalry between competing position holders within the regime. These factors were enhanced by Hitler’s inclination not to change orders once given, and to promote a kind of socio-Darwinist competition between the position-holders of the regime. Hitler’s factionalism was a successful recipe during the movement phase, but it resulted in increasing contradictions in the regime phase, and it was an important cause of continuous radicalisation of means and targets. Hence, this political structure contributed greatly to the accelerating accumulation of terror, violence and crime, and the destruction of the legislative process.

By a mono-causal recourse to the ideological factor, historians tend to lose the ability to describe the process character of Nazi rule. It is symptomatic that the elimination of the European Jews was a process of stop and go, and Karl Schleunes has already coined the formula of the ‘twisted road to Auschwitz’.¹⁶ The escalation of terror cannot be explained just by referring to the impact of the Nazi Weltanschauung, and it is erroneous to assume that Hitler and his chieftains at any time held a precise recipe for the alleged ‘New Order’ programme, as the prosecution at the Nuremberg War Criminals Trials eventually came to realize. Nobody could have anticipated in 1933 the far-reaching consequences of Nazi politics, and it is necessary to avoid a pre-determined and moralist approach when exploring the origins as well as the repercussions of these politics. In some respects, the more empirical methodological experiences of Anglo-American historiography might here serve as a remedy.

References and Notes

1. Cf. N. Berg (2003) *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker. Erforschung und Erinnerung* (Wallstein, Göttingen), p. 542; cf. P. Nowick (1999) *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston), p. 103 ff.
2. U. Herbert (ed.) (1998) *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik 1939–1945* (Frankfurt), p. 20 f.; U. Herbert (2006) The Holocaust in German history, in: M. Zimmermann (ed.), *The Germans and the Jews under the Nazi Regime, Jerusalem*, p. 74; D. Diner, *Vergangenheit und Schuld*, in: *Evangelische Kirche im geteilten Deutschland*, ed. by C. Hepp, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001, p. 96, quoted in N. Berg (2003) *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker. Erforschung und Erinnerung* (Göttingen), p. 566.
3. N. Berg (2003) *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker. Erforschung und Erinnerung* (Göttingen), p. 513.
4. Cf. G. Paul (ed.) (2002) *Die Täter der Shoah, Fanatische Nationalsozialisten oder ganz normale Deutsche* (Göttingen); K.-M. Mallmann and G. Paul (eds) (2004) *Karrieren der Gewalt. Nationalsozialistische Täterbiographien* (Darmstadt).
5. S. C. Browning (1991) *Ordinary Men, Reserve Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York), p. 168 ff., 188 f.
6. D. Goldhagen (1996) *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (New York).
7. Cf. U. Herbert (1996) *Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft, 1903–1989* (Bonn).
8. S. M. Wildt (2007) Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung, *Gewalt gegen Juden in der deutschen Provinz 1919 bis 1939* (Hamburg), p. 68; cf. D. Schoenbaum (1980) *Die braune Revolution*, new edn (Köln), p. 97 ff.
9. N. Frei (2005) *1945 und Wir. Das Dritte Reich im Bewusstsein der Deutschen* (Munich), p. 113 ff.
10. H.-U. Wehler (2003) *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, Vol. 4 (Munich), p. 681.
11. S. M. Wildt (2007) Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung, *Gewalt gegen Juden in der deutschen Provinz 1919 bis 1939* (Hamburg), pp. 68 and 361.
12. G. Aly (2005) *Hitlers Volksstaat* (Frankfurt am Main), p. 49.
13. Cf. N. Frei (2005) *1945 und Wir. Das Dritte Reich im Bewusstsein der Deutschen* (Munich), p. 115; for the repressive character of the NSV see R. Evans (2005) *Das Dritte Reich*, Vol. II/2 (Munich), p. 582 ff.
14. H.-U. Wehler (2003) *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, Vol. 4 (Munich), p. 67 ff.
15. Cf. I. Kershaw (2002) *Der NS-Staat*, 3rd edn (Hamburg).
16. K. Schleunes (1970) *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz* (Urbana/Chicago/London).

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