

# Introduction

## Nazi Responses to Popular Protest in the Reich

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This book seeks to show that popular mobilizations of protest have a place in the histories of Nazi Germany. The term “protest” does occur in existing histories, but identifies a very broad array of actions. In this book, protest is defined as a heightened form of social unrest by the “German blooded” Volk within the Reich, that was public and cooperative but spontaneous or loosely improvised, and caused the regime to respond. Popular dissatisfaction and its most strident form of street protest have posed a fundamental departure point for histories of the East German dictatorship, while it is frequently missing altogether in treatments of the Nazi dictatorship. There are various important reasons for this, and yet at least some of this discrepancy is due to interpretations of the Nazi period which became firmly established before historians were accustomed to considering the function of ordinary persons. Over the decades, histories of Nazi Germany have changed to take the German people into account, but attention has continued to shy away from the rare but compelling popular mobilizations of dissent. This book investigates the history of social dissent in Nazi Germany, focusing on popular protest as its most strident form, to show that it was a specific form of popular behavior within the spectrum of popular responses to the dictatorship. The regime’s reactions to this form of protest also provide valuable perspectives for understanding the importance of the Volk for the way the dictatorship consolidated and held power.

Of course there were relatively few incidents of popular protest, not only because of Nazi terror but also because many, many Germans were invested in the belief that Hitler was a rare great Leader. Further, the history of protest is difficult because the records of protest are even more rare than was protest itself. A regime determined to make it appear as though all Germans supported it, was equally determined to minimize any evidence

that protest existed and so the sparseness of records about popular protest cannot indicate that there was no significant events of protest, nor does the absence of repression and punishment of ordinary Germans who protested show that the regime was unconcerned about it. Rather, it indicates that this dictatorship had an acute anxiety about maintaining popular morale, which it never attempted to address merely by means of terror. This challenges the perception that protest was merely an aberration, or that the Gestapo always repressed all signs of dissent.

It might be surmised that the regime would have responded to popular protest more firmly, had there been more of it. Terror did preempt most open and organized opposition, and its effectiveness was amplified by popular support for it. But the realization that brute force was not equally well suited for achieving all his goals for the Volk was a key to Hitler's "criminal cunning."<sup>1</sup> The Nazi leadership lived with anxiety about discord among Germans, a concern that reached an apex during war. Jill Stephenson's study, in chapter 2, shows that the incidence of public protests by the Volk, rare as they were, did not decrease during World War II, but increased. Further, the regime continued to appease them, without punishing dissidents and sometimes making concessions, which it considered to be temporary. These protests, Stephenson finds, were largely the initiative of women, the large majority on the home front.

To find the rationale for the dictatorship's appeasement of popular dissidence, it is not necessary to posit some semblance of civil society or elements of a constitutional democracy. Rather, it resulted from Hitler's self-serving beliefs that Germany had lost World War I because of a "stab in the back" rather than military defeat, while keeping in mind the Nazi leader's determination to convince the people that he represented their collective will and interests—the new mass age as appropriated by fascism. The "stab-in-the-back" myth was shared by many Germans and provided the basis for effective Nazi propaganda as well as Nazi domestic policies.<sup>2</sup> Also conducive to Hitler's decisions to make temporary concessions to the Volk as a whole were his wildly unrealistic ambitions to reshape the Volk's attitudes from the bottom up, to form the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*—Hitler's National Community.

Working toward his plan to transition his Volk into a Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* that would serve as a cornerstone for his fantasy of a thousand-year Reich, Hitler deployed a variety of means to consolidate power and diffuse popular dissent. The dictatorship sought to lead the Volk convincingly phase by phase, so that they followed even as the dictatorship substituted new perspectives for long-established values. While some German traditions went hand in glove with the new Nazi policies, Volk dissent, when it expressed stubborn popular habits, could cause the dictatorship to change course on

a particular policy in order to mitigate dissent, and shift public appearances into alignment with its claims of popular consensus. The dictatorship sometimes made concessions in the methods or pace at which it pursued its course, as it pushed to align popular attitudes more completely with Nazism, struggling to avoid the violation of popular customs too abruptly. The dictatorship did not view these concessions as defeats but rather as lessons learned about the limits of how fast the Volk could be pushed.<sup>3</sup>

The preemption of social unrest was important because it served the propaganda image that Germans were united behind the Führer, and thus dissent was desperately isolated and suicidal. Ameliorating troublesome popular unrest required what the Führer, along with those who shared his perspective, thought of as methods “appropriate” for any given stage of development in the evolution toward this *Volksgemeinschaft*. Tactics to dispel dissent should not draw further attention to dissent. This is illustrated by the interactions between Volk and dictatorship regarding Nazi “euthanasia,” examined by Winfried Süß in chapter 4. Although regime leaders agreed that Bishop August von Galen had committed treason from his pulpit, Hitler prohibited executing or even punishing the bishop because of fears that this would cause the multitudes of the bishop’s followers to lose enthusiasm for fighting war, since his dissent represented the opinion of millions around the Reich. The adjustments the dictatorship made to appease popular defiance remained limited to specific policies, although these were sometimes policies that touched on its basic purposes, such as the “racial hygiene” intentions behind “euthanasia.” In 1934, the refusal of Protestants in southern Germany to merge with the Reich Church caused Hitler to suspend his dream of unifying German Lutherans within one unit, under a single bishop (see chapter 3 by Christiane Kuller). This frustrated Hitler’s drive to directly centralize his control over the churches.

Even as some regime agencies increased their use of terror following the Wehrmacht’s debacle at Stalingrad by February 1943, Hitler continued to ameliorate causes of unrest that stemmed from traditional practices; the regime recognized that the people drew strength from these customs to fight the war. Dissent, when expressing the sentiment of masses, remained a compelling concern for the Führer, even during the war. The weight of popular opinion when it was expressed across society, is documented in July 1943, as German fear of defeat deepened with the Wehrmacht’s debacle at Kursk, its final major offensive on the Eastern Front: a state prosecutor set aside the trial of a woman who had said the Nazi “big wigs” sat at home rather than fighting on the front—in contrast to the Soviet commissars. Antagonistic expressions “and jokes deriding the state—even about the Führer—have increased substantially,” one SD report noted, so that singling out just this one

woman for punishment would raise difficulties.<sup>4</sup> The courts did begin to issue harsher sentences for certain crimes, and the military executed tens of thousands of soldiers, most for defeatism. At the same time, Hitler sought to ingratiate the dictatorship with the home front, proffering the Nazi Party and in particular its National Welfare Organization as the best ally of the German Volk, as the people struggled to withstand Allied bombings. As Gerhard Weinberg writes in chapter 1, Hitler remained willing to make compromises for as long as he thought Germany might still win the war (and his perception that winning was possible—even into 1945—rested in part on his self-satisfying observation that there was no uprising on the home front this time as there had been in 1918).

Julia Torrie examines a popular protest in October 1943 for which regime records survive, in chapter 5. According to an SD account, a disciplined protest by several hundred women in the Ruhr city of Witten caused official consternation but was not punished. This Witten protest of women, gathered to express their limited dissent with one orderly and common voice, was followed by somewhat more disorderly mass dissent in the nearby cities of Lünen, Bochum, and Hamm. The women's Rosenstrasse protest, earlier in 1943, began as spontaneous acts by individuals, but over the course of a week it grew, at least at times, into a collective action. As the Gestapo attempted to drive the protesters away, but backed down after each threat without harming them, the protesters began to hope that their desperate efforts to do something might have an impact. Few documents directly about this protest survived the regime's desire to minimize evidence concerning such dissent, but Joachim Neander and Antonia Leugers, in chapters 7 and 8, have placed these events in the context of other reports in order to get as close to what happened as possible.

Of course the dictatorship could not allow its subjects to think they had methods for influencing the regime, any more than it wished to publicize news of popular protest. In early November 1943, reflecting on the Witten-area protests several weeks earlier, Goebbels mulled the question of whether to resolve the matter with force: "One dare not bend to the will of the people in this point [evacuations]," he wrote, but had rather "dam up" the stream of returning evacuees with "appropriate measures." If "friendly cajoling" (*guetliches Zureden*) could not stop the wild evacuees, he continued, "then one must use force . . . Should we toughen our stance where we have been soft up until now, then the will of the people will bend to the will of the state. Currently we are on the best path to bending the will of the state to the will of the people. The state may never, against its better insight, give in to the pressure of the street."<sup>5</sup> Giving in to the street was increasingly dangerous, wrote Goebbels, because each time this happened the state lost authority and in the end would lose all authority.

Yet as Torrie argues, public popular protest prevailed in the case of Witten, since the state wished to maintain willing support from the Volk as a whole. In January 1944, Hitler ruled that the methods to procure civilian cooperation with the regime's evacuation programs that had led to the Witten protest was not "appropriate," and banned Gauleiters, the reigning Nazi officials in geographic segments of the Reich, from using them. In Hitler's calculations, even the soft coercion of manipulating the distribution of food rations to procure compliance was not the most productive method. "The Führer believes that the goal we aim for can be reached particularly through propaganda activities that once again bring before parents' eyes quite graphically the dangers their children face," Goebbels told the Gauleiters.<sup>6</sup> Thus Hitler's recommended means for keeping the Volk in line with the leadership on evacuations had not changed since his orders on the same matter early in the war. In late July 1944 Bormann and Himmler issued a joint declaration stating that "the use of coercive measures" to prevent evacuees from returning "continues to be seen as inappropriate," although forcible evacuations might be possible in some urgent situations. Following this, Martin Bormann confirmed yet again in October that coercion was not to be used against "wild returnees"—Germans disregarding regulations—or to prevent evacuees to return home without permission.<sup>7</sup>

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While expressing defiance, the Germans investigated here were uninterested in provoking a violent response from authorities, even as they showed that they believed in their dissent strongly enough to risk expressing it in public. Thus this book does not include incidents like the demonstrations of Catholic Youth activists in Vienna during October 7 and 8, 1938, which attacked a sentry of Hitler Youth and was immediately crushed.<sup>8</sup> It also does not encompass important acts of conspiratorial resistance like the White Rose. A study of collective and mass defiance against Nazi fanaticism by the Jehovah's Witnesses, however, might have found a home within these pages had we found an author to write it.

While it focuses on the dictatorship's response to unrest in its various forms, this book does not focus on advancing arguments that forms of unrest that the regime appeased constitute resistance. David Clay Large, an expert on the massive resistance historiography, does identify the protests as resistance, and he also briefly discusses them in the context of the "bottom-up" and "top-down" paradigms for explaining the nature of Hitler's power. The focus here is on the regime's perspective, as it responds to popular unrest in ways it thinks will best manage the Volk's attitudes toward their dictatorship,

sometimes bending to the Volk will for the moment, to sustain authority in Volk opinion, as the surest way forward to victory in the end.

This study does argue for supplementing the categories of Volk response to the dictatorship that are already commonly found in studies of the Third Reich. It casts popular protest as one form of behavior that can be found within the spectrum of actions already identified between perpetrators (*Täter/in*) and resistance aimed at overthrowing the regime itself (*Widerstand*). In chapter 8, Antonia Leugers points to Detlev Peukert's identification of popular protest as an escalated level of resistance beyond "non-conformity," and "refusal," but less than "revolution." Although incidences of popular unrest that altered the regime's course at the time were unusual, they represent a specific type of behavior that enlarges our recognition of types of behaviors, particularly defiance. Nazi officials themselves documented specific Nazi responses to specific popular protests, defining opposition in a broad range of categories.

Scholarship on open, mass dissent in Nazi Germany has frequently focused on discovering what motivated "ordinary Germans" to take the risk. Or it examines protest without studying the way the regime calculated its responses. For example, the case of Bishop Meiser and the mass, public defiance among southern German Protestants in 1934, as Kuller points out here, has been studied as religious rather than political history. Historians have worked valiantly to create a field of milieu studies, in order to unearth signals about why certain persons and communities had a capacity for expressing opposition publicly, and together. Fine social-cultural studies are done on local conditions and attitudes as a way of understanding the people's stand in the face of the dictatorship, and the wall of society that appeared to be backing it.<sup>9</sup>

This concern about motivation for opposition has often overlooked the rich documentation on dissent from the dictatorship's perspective, even as opportunities for oral history to investigate such questions have become as scarce as contemporaneous documentation of popular motivation. Because decisions about how best to lead the Volk forward when dissent erupted publicly was so important, the dictatorship's response to it is best found by examining the actions of Nazi leaders at the highest levels—in Berlin, as well as in the capitals of regions ruled by Nazi Gauleiters and Governors.

In the summer of 1941, Bavarian Governor (*Statthalter*) Franz Ritter von Epp summarized the dismay of National Socialism when the Volk expressed themselves collectively in public opposition to a Nazi Party policy. Statthalter Epp complained bitterly about the widespread brouhaha caused by the decree of Munich Gauleiter and Bavarian Culture Minister Adolf Wagner to remove crucifixes from schools, in this heavily Catholic province. Epp accused the Catholic Church of going on the offensive by using Nazi tactics, and compared its mobilization of opinion and public assemblies

with the methods the party used to extend its own support. Wagner, Epp said, “has provoked demonstrations, school strikes, and unrest in the entire province. . . . Much worse, the inner devastation of the people and with it the erection of a front of psychological resistance has remained.” Wagner’s real role as a responsible domestic leader during wartime, chided Epp, was to preserve morale on the home front “during the hardships of war and [to avoid] unnecessary strains on that morale since, as every participant in the First World War was aware, morale at home could lift or depress morale at the Front.”<sup>10</sup>

The Bavarian governor did not suppose that brute force to implement the decree was the means for maximizing Nazi support and power at the moment, as it was becoming clear that the Reich had seriously underestimated Soviet resistance to its invasion. The hypothesis that the regime was especially sensitive to popular attitudes during war is explored only briefly in these pages; Winfried Süß, an expert on Bishop August von Galen’s opposition to Nazi “euthanasia,” has viewed public protest as more influential when the regime’s prestige was weakened due to its failures to live up to its haughty claims.<sup>11</sup> The Gauleiter of the region that included Bishop August von Galen’s diocese demanded that Galen be executed for treason during the late summer of 1941, proposing that this could be done at a moment of German war victories, which would be cheered on so loudly that the jubilation would overshadow Galen’s “removal.”<sup>12</sup>

One popular protest, until recent decades an obscure narrative, has become a source of contention. The protests by gentile wives for Jewish family members on Berlin’s Rosenstrasse in the late winter of 1943, more than any other event, has opened discussions on popular street protest in Nazi Germany. Antonia Leugers has refuted arguments that the churches were the rescuers of intermarried Jews, and in these pages as well, Joachim Neander has added considerable evidence in support of previous arguments that the regime intended to deport as many intermarried Jews as possible during what it called the “Entjudungaktionen,” or the “Elimination of Jews from German Territory” beginning February 27, 1943 (dubbed the “Factory Action” after the war).<sup>13</sup> They find that the interpretation that the non-Jewish women had nothing to do with the fate of their Jewish family members imprisoned at Rosenstrasse 2-4 (because the regime did not intend any harm to these Jews at this time), does not correspond with the sources. Katharina von Kellenbach, in chapter 6, relates the impulse to deny that the protesters had any influence to the fact that Rosenstrasse protests were initiated and carried through by women. Evidence that the regime planned to deport intermarried Berlin Jews who wore the Jewish Star of David in March 1943, is examined in chapter 9 by Nathan Stoltzfus.

In Germany as in countries around Europe the interpretation of the national past is seen as crucial to contemporary national identity and cohesion. Indeed, according to a French historian, “the progress of historical studies is often a danger for national identity,” and West Germany’s first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, was willing to include Nazis in the new democracy. “Too much memory [about Germany’s recent past] would undermine a still fragile popular psyche,” it was said.<sup>14</sup> As the West German community became increasingly sturdier, the implication goes, repression was necessary in increasingly smaller proportions.

As countries across Europe denied reality in favor of a sheltering amnesia, Germans plotted an exemplary confrontation with their past, relative to others. Still, as the history of popularly mobilized protest illustrates, not all of the Nazi past has been integrated. Karl Jaspers, Germany’s philosopher of German guilt, wrote that “political tact may at times exact silence” and also that silence “for a short time” may be justified “to catch one’s breath and clear one’s head,” although “we must guard against evasion . . . silence as an act of combat.”<sup>15</sup>

Still today, challenging frontiers remain.<sup>16</sup> While the methods and inquiries characterizing the study of the Nazi dictatorship have often led the way in the approaches to the study of twentieth-century tyrannies, the study of popular protest lags, despite the Nazi dictatorship’s peculiar need for popular adulation. This book seeks to create a further context for the examination of the Nazi leadership’s perspective, through a study of the limited popular protests that occurred during the Third Reich, and the implications this has for the current national memory. It was not Nazi terror alone that made it so dangerous. Together with an ideology that did not change, the dictatorship’s capacity to rely on a range of tactics other than terror, moving quickly to improvise ways to sustain and build its movement among the Volk of the Reich, increased the tactics it had for exercising dominion beyond those of terror.

## Notes

1. The phrase is from Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt* (New York: Fordham University, 2001 [orig. 1947]), 48.
2. Timothy Mason, “The Legacy of 1918 for National Socialism,” in *Social Policy in the Third Reich: The Working Class and the National Community*, ed. Timothy W. Mason and Jane Caplan (Providence, RI: Berg, 1993), 19–40.
3. For similar reasons of deal making, the dictatorship also reached compromises in foreign policy and even in the destruction of European Jews. In some respects Hitler had to “temporize and compromise” to achieve his dictatorship in 1933, but that “had the advantage of making the revolution appear less abrupt.” Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Hitler’s Foreign Policy 1933–1939: The Road to World War II* (New York: Enigma Books, 2005), 26. For illustrations of the dictatorship’s compromises related to foreign policy in the genocide of European Jews see Gerhard L. Weinberg,



- Germany, Hitler, and World War II: Essays in Modern German and World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 236–241.
4. Heinz Boberach, *Meldungen aus dem Reich, 1938–1945: Die geheimen Lageberichte des Sicherheitsdienstes der SS*, 17 vols. (Herrsching: Pawlak Verlag, 1984), July 8, 1943, vol. 14, 5445–5447.
  5. Joseph Goebbels, *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, ed. Elke Fröhlich, Part 2, vol. 10 (Munich: K.G. Saur, 1998), November 2, 1943, 222. Julia S. Torrie, “*For Their Own Good*”: *Civilian Evacuations in Germany and France, 1939–1945* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 107–108.
  6. Goebbels to all Gauleiters, January 28, 1944, in Torrie, *For Their Own Good*, 110.
  7. See Appendix 9, Himmler and Bormann’s order of July 29, 1944, from a document from the Baden interior minister, August 21, 1944, and Bormann’s confirmation of this order on October 12, 1944, to the Gauleiter’s representative in Essen. Julia S. Torrie, *For Their Own Good*, 111.
  8. Evan Burr Bukey, *Hitler’s Austria: Popular Sentiment in the Nazi Era, 1938–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 102–103.
  9. See for example, *Katholisches Milieu und Widerstand Der Kreuzkampf im Oldenburger Land im Kontext des nationalsozialistischen Herrschaftsgefüges*, ed. Maria Anna Zumholz (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2012).
  10. Quoted in Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich, Bavaria 1933–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 353.
  11. Winfried Stüß, “Dann ist keiner von uns seines Lebens mehr sicher:” Bischof von Galen, der katholische Protest gegen die “Euthanasie” und der Stopp der “Aktion T4”, ed. Martin Sabrow, *Skandal und Öffentlichkeit in der Diktatur*. Göttingen 2004, 102–129, here 106–107.
  12. Meyer to Bormann, August 13, 1941, in Beth Griech-Poelle, *Bishop von Galen: German Catholicism and National Socialism* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2002), 88.
  13. Joachim Neander, “Die Auschwitz-Rückkehrer vom 21. März 1943,” and Antonia Leugers, “Der Protest in der *Rosenstraße* 1943 und die *Kirchen*,” in *Berlin, Rosenstraße 2–4: Protest in der NS-Diktatur. Neue Forschungen zum Frauenprotest in der Rosenstraße 1943*, ed. Antonia Leugers (Annweiler: Plöger, 2004), 47–80, 115–143.
  14. Ernst Renan, quoted in Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 803.
  15. Jaspers, *German Guilt*, 3, 11.
  16. The transformation of perspectives on the Holocaust has remained limited by a historiography that remains comparatively bounded by traditional postwar points of view. Dan Stone, “Holocaust Historiography and Cultural History,” *Dapim Journal: Studies on the Holocaust*, vol. 23, No. 1 (2009): 52–68.