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Volksgeminschaft : A Modern Perspective on National Socialist Society

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Volksgemeinschaft
A Modern Perspective on National Socialist Society

Michael Wildt

In Germany since the nineteenth century, the term *Gemeinschaft* ('community')
has often been contrasted with *Gesellschaft* ('society'). The two concepts are seen as
radically different and they form an oppositional framework for critical discourse
on the increasingly dynamic and pluralized social conditions that have developed
from industrialization, secularization, market orientation, and political liberalism.
'The yearning for *Gemeinschaft*', we are told, 'always springs from a reaction against
the present, which is seen as bad. Therefore, the reality of such *Gemeinschaft* ideals
is not to be found in the past, which is frequently invoked, but in the present.'[1]
The idea of *Gemeinschaft* is constantly invoked as an ideal in critiques of modern
Gesellschaft, and is an essential component of the soul-searching discourse sur-
rounding the crisis of modernity. No German scholar has written more prolifically
on this tension than Ferdinand Tönnies, whose book *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*,
published in 1887, elucidated the spirit of his age and defined the social discourse
on this theme that would follow.[2]

The concept of *Gemeinschaft* conveys a yearning to overcome alienation,
through both revolution and restoration. This ambivalence, between the restora-
tion of what appears to be lost and the instigation of a seemingly better future
society, was inherent in the idea of *Gemeinschaft* from the very start. When using
Volksgemeinschaft as a historiographical term, therefore, one would be mistaken in
assuming that it refers to a social reality that actually existed. The political leverage
gained from invoking the *Volksgemeinschaft* lay not in its ability to define any soci-
ety that had already been achieved, but rather in its future promise and its power
to mobilize.[3]

In this essay I will first show that the concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* was not
originally a National Socialist one. Well before 1933 it had become the 'dom-
inant political interpretative formula' in Germany, as Hans-Ulrich Thamer has

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[1] Gérard Raulet, 'Die Modernität der "Gemeinschaft"', in Micha Brumlik and Hauke Brunkhorst
(eds), *Gemeinschaft und Gerechtigkeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1993), 72–93, at 73.
[2] Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, ed. Jose Harris (Cambridge, 2001).
[3] See Frank Bajohr and Michael Wildt (eds), *Volksgemeinschaft: Neue Forschungen zur Gesellschaft
des Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 2009).

demonstrated (I).[4] With this background established, I will examine historiograph-
ical analyses of the *Volksgemeinschaft* (II). This will give us the perspective to view
Volksgemeinschaft not as an achieved social reality, but rather as a social practice that
drew ever-shifting borders between belonging and ostracism in everyday life (III).
This view also suggests new lines of enquiry which are by no means exhausted, but
demonstrate the fruitfulness of investigating the practices subsumed within this
conception of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. The practices include collectivity-building,
ostracism, and self-empowerment (IV).

I

The notion of *Volksgemeinschaft* was promoted early on as a key concept within
right-wing *völkisch* circles, oriented around the ethno-nationalist conception of
Volk or 'people'. But its popularity was really established during the First World
War, when the leadership needed to unite the German population behind the
imperial war flag. The sentiment expressed by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1914, that he
no longer recognized political parties but simply Germans, was a simple but apt
summation of the situation. It underlined not only the political necessity of mobi-
lizing the entire population behind the war effort, but also the need to include and
integrate individuals within a larger whole—and this was also the desire of the
Social Democrats and German Jews. Even though class conflicts soon re-emerged
in wartime society, and old anti-Semitic sentiments became common once again,
the notion of *Volksgemeinschaft*, with its promise of a better future based upon a
mythic past, never lost its magic.[5]

   In the early twentieth century, use of the term *Volk* increasingly overtook refer-
ences to the German *Nation* (nation). *Volk* has more flexible meanings, and this is
precisely what made it more attractive than *Nation*, which was loaded with ambiv-
alences connected with the 'nation-state' and the *Kulturnation* (cultural nation),
and which unavoidably harked back to the archetypal French 'nation' with its birth
through revolution. The idea of *Nation* was far more strongly connected to the
idea of 'state' than the *Volk* concept was. And the term *Volk* was much better
than *Nation* for conveying an agenda of ethnicization, biological determinism,
and Social Darwinism. Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out that ethnic membership
and semantic usage became central criteria for defining the nation at the end of the
nineteenth century. In particular, special interest groups that declared themselves

to be a *Volk* or *Nation* but had no separate state of their own generally based their claims on an ethnic argument.[6]

Unlike the French or the British, the Germans had long been divided into many small states and thus could not define themselves as a classical nation-state. This made them particularly susceptible to the ethnicizing ideology of the *Volk*. The concept of the *Volk* as *demos*, which is central to a civil society based on the ideals of constitutional solidarity and legal equality, was contrasted with the idea of *Volk* as *ethnos*, which combined imaginary shared genetic inheritances, mythic histories, and fantasies of shared blood and soil. With the emergence of biological determinism, alterity—the notion of the 'other'—was formalized as a fact of nature, so that simple genealogical details became inescapable genetic incompatibilities, which by definition could not be assimilated. As a result, the original project of assimilation was replaced by policies of segregation and elimination, which ultimately became genocidal.[7]

Carl Schmitt recognized these ambivalences and tried to bend them towards an anti-parliamentary, anti-liberal stance by insisting that every democratic constitutional order had to be founded upon a politically anchored *Volk* defined by identity and homogeneity.[8] German legal theorists who supported a strong state considered the civil state, as conceived by Hugo Preuß, father of the Weimar constitution, incapable of ever winning a majority; and while the Social Democrats, who were the leading power behind the November Revolution, may have been successful in installing a parliamentary republic (as opposed to the competing Soviet Republic system), they failed to create a constitutional theory of their own that could do more than simply call for parliamentarianism.[9] The idea of *Gemeinschaft*, especially *Volksgemeinschaft*, seemed to offer a semantic strategy for countering resentments against the unpopular Republic, without abandoning the republican principle of sovereignty vested in the people.[10]

Gemeinschaft was, as the sociologist Helmuth Plessner, an astute observer of the period, remarked in 1924, the 'idol of this age'.[11] Nearly all political parties advocated the *Volksgemeinschaft* as a political programme. Their respective concepts were, however, marked by differences that were sometimes fundamental, sometimes merely a question of degree. The Left Liberals proposed a conception of *Volksgemeinschaft* that was meant to negate notions of class struggle and encourage the social unity of the nation. In 1928, the German Democratic Party (DDP) stated in its election manifesto: 'The basic principle of our domestic policy will forever be the idea of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, which we promote in contrast to those

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[6] See Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990).

[7] See Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge, 2005).

[8] See William E. Scheuerman, *Carl Schmitt: The End of Law* (Lanham, Md., 1999).

[9] See Peter C. Caldwell and William Scheuerman (eds), *From Liberal Democracy to Fascism: Legal and Political Thought in the Weimar Republic* (Boston, 2000).

[10] See Michael Wildt, 'Die Ungleichheit des Volkes: "Volksgemeinschaft" in der politischen Kommunikation der Weimarer Republik', in Bajohr and Wildt (eds), *Volksgemeinschaft*, 24–40.

[11] Helmuth Plessner, *The Limits of Community: A Critique of Social Radicalism* (New York, 1999), 65.

political parties that try to inflame conflicts between "nationalist" and Marxist, between urban and rural, and between races, religions, and classes.'[12] For the Left Liberals the concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* was inextricably linked with democracy. According to Gustav Schneider, a trade union figure who spoke at the DDP party congress in 1924, the Weimar constitution represented a basic foundation, and 'the only one on which a true *Volksgemeinschaft* is possible'.[13]

Similarly, the German Centre Party (*Zentrum*), which represented Catholics, saw itself as a 'broadly based Christian party which explicitly stands for the German *Volksgemeinschaft*'.[14] However, the Centre Party resolutely opposed far-right, anti-Christian interpretations: 'We explicitly reject all divisive differentiations that divide our *Volk*. We defend ourselves against a new schism which is being precipitated by a so-called "neo-Germanic" spirituality that confuses our *Volk*.'[15]

Even the Social Democrats flirted with the notion of *Volksgemeinschaft*. The instability after the collapse of the old Reich, when the Social Democrats took up the political mantle but felt threatened by revolutionary leftists and their attempted rebellions, led to a rhetoric of domestic cohesion and unity, and to a rejection of any divisiveness. For the Social Democrats the working class had, in the course of its history, become the large majority. They juxtaposed that majority with an infinitesimally small—and unjustifiably powerful—minority of entrepreneurs and estate owners.

After his election as president in February 1919, Friedrich Ebert appealed for unity among *Volksgenossen* on his very first day in office.[16] Until his death in 1925, his speeches often included references to the *Volksgemeinschaft*, which he saw as essential for achieving unity, cohesion, and sovereignty. Within the Hofgeismar Circle, in many other Social Democratic youth groups, and especially in the Social Democratic paramilitary organization, the Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold, the notion of *Volksgemeinschaft* assumed central significance in the political discourse. The constitutional scholar Hermann Heller, whose democratic convictions were impeccable, attempted to formulate a Social Democratic answer to the nationalist challenge: 'By no means does socialism signify the end of the national *Gemeinschaft*, but rather its fulfilment; it is not the extermination of the national *Volksgemeinschaft* by class, but the extermination of class by a truly national *Volksgemeinschaft*.'[17]

[12] Quoted in Werner Schneider, *Die Deutsche Demokratische Partei in der Weimarer Republik 1924–1930* (Munich, 1978), 48 n. 82; see Eric Kurlander, *Living with Hitler: Liberal Democrats in the Third Reich* (New Haven, 2009).

[13] Reichsgeschäftsstelle of the DDP Berlin, *Staat und Wirtschaft: Rede von Gustav Schneider, Bundesvorsitzender des Gewerkschaftsbundes der Angestellten auf dem Reichsparteitag der Deutschen Demokratischen Partei in Weimar am 6. April 1924* (Berlin, n.d.), 3.

[14] 'Richtlinien der Deutschen Zentrumspartei, 16.1.1922', printed in Herbert Lepper (ed.), *Volk, Kirche, Vaterland: Wahlaufrufe, Aufrufe, Satzungen und Statuten des Zentrums 1870–1933* (Düsseldorf, 1998), 418.

[15] 'Wahlaufruf der Deutschen Zentrumspartei zu den Reichstagswahlen, 14.3.1924', in Lepper (ed.), *Volk, Kirche, Vaterland*, 430.

[16] Friedrich Ebert, *Schriften, Aufzeichnungen, Reden*, 2 vols (Dresden, 1926), ii., 159.

[17] Hermann Heller, 'Sozialismus und Nation' [1925], in Hermann Heller, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Leiden, 1971), i, 468. See Franz Walter, *'Republik, das ist nicht viel': Partei und Jugend in der*

This was not just lip service. Energized by the shared experience of serving in the trenches on the front line, where differences in social rank, education, and class had become irrelevant, many people after the war had a strong impulse to merge 'into the *Volk*'. This was especially so among young academics, as with the youth movement in general, and the tendency was closely linked to calls for a *Volksgemeinschaft*. Thus at the first German Students' Day in July 1919, the Catholic social reformer and student leader Carl Sonnenschein proclaimed: 'We need academics who love their *Volk* and stand by their *Volk*, whose gospel is not "detachment" but rather the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Down with snobbery and caste thinking! We want to belong to our *Volk*.'[18] Supporters of the popular education movement in the Weimar Republic took a similar stance. The Social Democrat Konrad Haenisch, who was Prussia's Minister of Education and Culture, justified the establishment of centres for adult education (*Volkshochschulen*) by underlining the need for a 'cooperative effort between all parts of the *Volk*. We need to build bridges between that small section of the *Volk* that does intellectual work, and the ever-growing section made up of *Volksgenossen* who may work with their hands, but are mentally hungry.'[19]

Young teachers and clergymen also heeded the call to build up the *Volksgemeinschaft*. In the Weimar Republic, some two thousand rural clergymen belonged to the village church movement (*Dorfkirchenbewegung*), bringing a new '*Volk* consciousness' to the villages. The aim was to lead the locals out of the narrow confines of village concerns into the greater mass consciousness of a liberated *Volk* nationwide. This vision of the *Volksgemeinschaft* 'bestowed a religious consecration; a secular subject was reframed as the great white hope of the village church'.[20]

In the political discourse of the Weimar Republic, a significant characteristic of the *Volksgemeinschaft* notion was clearly its potential for translating the supposed unity of the *Volk* (whether in political, social, or cultural terms) into homogeneity. This is why the concept resonated in so many ways for the political Right, which was similarly promoting its vision of *Volksgemeinschaft*. However, the Right's ideal of homogeneity was primarily geared towards eliminating any political diversity. It defined membership in the *Gemeinschaft* in racist categories and was ultimately prepared to achieve homogeneity by violent means.

Krise des Weimarer Sozialismus (Bielefeld, 2011); Stefan Vogt, *Nationaler Sozialismus und Soziale Demokratie: Die sozialdemokratische Junge Rechte 1918–1945* (Bonn, 2006).

[18] Quoted by Jens Wietschorke, '"Ins Volk gehen!": Zur kulturellen Logik der Volksfreundschaft im deutschen Bürgertum vor 1933', *Historische Anthropologie*, 18/1 (2010), 88–119, at 103.

[19] Quoted by Paul Ciupke, 'Diskurse über Volk, Gemeinschaft und Demokratie in der Erwachsenenbildung der Weimarer Zeit', in Paul Ciupke et al. (eds), *'Die Erziehung zum deutschen Menschen': Völkische und nationalkonservative Erwachsenenbildung in der Weimarer Republik* (Essen, 2007), 11–30, at 13. One of the most influential Weimar intellectuals on *Volk* and *Volksgemeinschaft* was Max Hildebert Boehm. See Ulrich Prehn, *Max Hildebert Boehm: Radikales Ordnungsdenken vom Ersten Weltkrieg bis in die Bundesrepublik* (Göttingen, 2013).

[20] Wolfram Pyta, *Dorfgemeinschaft und Parteipolitik 1918–1933: Die Verschränkung von Milieu und Parteien in den protestantischen Landgebieten Deutschlands in der Weimarer Republik* (Düsseldorf, 1996), 247; Tanja Hetzer, *'Deutsche Stunde': Volksgemeinschaft und Antisemitismus in der politischen Theologie bei Paul Althaus* (Munich, 2009).

According to Hans-Ulrich Thamer, the notion of *Volksgemeinschaft* was of central significance in Hitler's worldview.[21] The Nazi Party presented itself as a youthful *Volkspartei*—a party that appealed to all classes—and Adolf Hitler took on the charismatic role of *Führer* for the entire *Volk*, dedicated to fulfilling people's yearnings for both continuity and change, and for unity and salvation within a future *Volksgemeinschaft*.[22] For example, in the politically liberal south-west of Germany, the Nazi Party was successful in taking over the stagnating local culture of clubs and associations. It persuaded local party branches to coordinate their activities with those of existing clubs and associations, and it rejected elitist membership regulations, thereby inviting all *Volksgenossen* to participate, whether Catholic or Protestant, farmer or tradesman, merchant or labourer, male or female. The Catholic petite bourgeoisie was especially eager to accept this invitation to join the mainstream, having been culturally excluded ever since the Second Reich's foundation under Protestant/Prussian dominance, followed by Bismarck's implementation of the anti-Catholic *Kulturkampf*.[23]

Despite all the rhetoric of inclusion propounded by the political Right, their version of the *Volksgemeinschaft* was, in fact, defined by limits and exclusions. The Right was less concerned about who belonged to the *Volksgemeinschaft* than with who could not belong, that is, those who were already being semantically ostracized as *Gemeinschaftsfremde* (community aliens), primarily the Jews. This was clearly not to be the civil society of the liberal nation-state. Here, anti-Semitism played a central part. The racist and anti-Semitic borderline became inextricably embedded in this construction of the *Volk* as a 'natural blood-based *Gemeinschaft*' striving to define its own political system. Anti-Semitism was the founding bedrock of the National Socialist *Volksgemeinschaft*, exacerbating its radical nature and destructive potential. The Nazi Party platform of 1920 explicitly stated that 'one can be a citizen only if one is a *Volksgenosse*. One can be a *Volksgenosse* only if one is of German blood, regardless of religious confession. Therefore no Jew can be a *Volksgenosse*.'

Anti-Semitism was the main feature differentiating this Nazi notion of *Volksgemeinschaft* from the competing one that harked back to the 'spirit of 1914'. The 'August experience' then was explicitly inclusive of all Germans, even Social Democrats and Jews, who had grounds to hope that a show of patriotism would ultimately lead to their acceptance into mainstream society.[24] Conversely, anti-Semitism and the National Socialist version of *Volksgemeinschaft* were so

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[21] Hans-Ulrich Thamer, 'Nation als Volksgemeinschaft: Völkische Vorstellungen, Nationalsozialismus und Gemeinschaftsideologie', in Jörg-Dieter Gauger and Klaus Weigelt (eds), *Soziales Denken in Deutschland zwischen Tradition und Innovation* (Bonn, 1990), 112–28, at 122.

[22] See Ludolf Herbst, *Hitlers Charisma: Die Erfindung eines deutschen Messias* (Frankfurt am Main, 2010).

[23] See Oded Heilbronner, *'Freiheit, Gleichheit, Brüderlichkeit und Dynamit': Populäre Kultur, populärer Liberalismus und Bürgertum im ländlichen Süddeutschland von den 1860ern bis zu den 1930ern* (Munich, 2007), 82–92.

[24] This was still being expressed by trade unions in the spring of 1933, when the call for May Day included an appeal that the German worker should become 'a fully entitled member of the German *Volksgemeinschaft*'. Quoted in Thamer, 'Volksgemeinschaft: Mensch und Masse', 384.

inextricably intertwined that those who felt a resonance with the Nazi promise of inclusion and agreed with the Nazi regime's *Volksgemeinschaft* propaganda after 1933 necessarily supported anti-Semitic exclusion, even though they might not have been anti-Semites before.

This vision of *Volksgemeinschaft* with its anti-pluralistic yearnings that so rabidly rejected the existing Weimar democracy was strongly oriented towards the future. The *Volksgemeinschaft* was not a reality that already existed, but still needed to be achieved—it was *Volksgemeinschaft* as a 'politics of promise', as Thomas Mergel puts it.[25] This inspirational concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* combined a criticism of the existing situation with a 'will to change', ultimately, according to Martin Broszat, unleashing a powerful 'social impetus to the benefit of the Nazi Party, expressing itself as an unprecedented frenzy of activity, inventiveness, self-sacrifice, and energy among Nazi members and supporters, as could already be seen during the Party's pre-1933 struggle to power. It especially helps to explain the extraordinary motivation and dedication shown by large parts of the nation under the Hitler regime.'[26]

II

For a long time German historians treated the *Volksgemeinschaft* as merely a propaganda buzzword. Heinrich August Winkler spoke of its 'Mythos', while Bernd Weisbrod referred to its 'illusoriness'.[27] In particular, Hans Mommsen insisted that the notion of *Volksgemeinschaft* was only a pretence at supporting social integration, and that the middle classes were much more susceptible to its line of argument than the working classes. It is in this belief that, even today, Mommsen argues that the term *Volksgemeinschaft* should be avoided in analytical contexts, because it is too much coloured by Goebbels's propaganda.[28]

But it would be a mistake to think that the *Volksgemeinschaft* really did signify a social reality in Nazi Germany in which class differences, disparities of wealth, and property entitlements had been levelled out. As I have pointed out, the concept of the *Volksgemeinschaft* drew its political power not from a social reality achieved, but rather from its promise, and the mobilization it inspired. In the 1970s, Martin

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[25] Thomas Mergel, 'Führer, Volksgemeinschaft und Maschine: Politische Erwartungsstrukturen in der Weimarer Republik und dem Nationalsozialismus 1918–1936', in Wolfgang Hardtwig (ed.), *Politische Kulturgeschichte der Zwischenkriegszeit 1918–1939* (Göttingen, 2005), 91–127.

[26] Martin Broszat, 'Soziale Motivation und Führer-Bindung des Nationalsozialismus', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 18/4 (1970), 392–409, at 396.

[27] Heinrich August Winkler, 'Vom Mythos der Volksgemeinschaft', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 17 (1977), 484–90, at 485; Bernd Weisbrod, 'Der Schein der Modernität: Zur Historisierung der "Volksgemeinschaft"', in Karsten Rudolph and Christl Wickert (eds), *Geschichte als Möglichkeit: Über die Chancen von Demokratie* (Essen, 1995), 224–42.

[28] Hans Mommsen, 'Forschungskontroversen zum Nationalsozialismus', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 14–5 (2007), 14–21; see also Hans Mommsen, 'Hitler und der Mythos der Volksgemeinschaft: Zur Auflösung der bürgerlichen Nation', in Dan Diner, Gideon Reuveni and Yfaat Weiss (eds), *Deutsche Zeiten: Geschichte und Lebenswelt* (Göttingen, 2012), 132–140.

Broszat was already able to state that the 'insufficient clarity and dishonesty of the Nazi Party's social promises do not invalidate the social dynamics which actually underpinned the Party's success among the masses and were kept in motion by the Nazi regime'.[29] Broszat spoke of the 'appeal of both modernity and mobilization in the Nazi movement',[30] and stressed that the *Volksgemeinschaft* slogan was 'a call to sweep aside relics of the social hierarchies and norms that existed before the emergence of industrial civil society, and a call to build a modern, mobile, national civil society for the masses'.[31] Unless National Socialism's dynamic power to motivate society is taken into consideration, Broszat noted, 'neither the regime's character as a mass movement nor the extraordinarily ambitious energy it mobilized can be completely understood'.[32] Hans-Ulrich Wehler, in his social history of Germany, also emphasized that the *Volksgemeinschaft* was associated with the 'appeal of modernity' and a mobilization push, precipitating a broader transformational dynamic. This was decisive in legitimizing the regime, especially for the younger generation.[33]

Frank Bajohr's recent research on armaments production suggests that this economic upswing benefited certain industries and regions more than others. The armaments boom, in particular, produced many inequalities and disparities. Beyond the Ruhr, one of the biggest regional winners was central Germany, where new industrial centres were growing. In cities such as Magdeburg, Halle, Dessau, Halberstadt, and Bitterfeld the number of industrial workers doubled within a few years. Furthermore, the city of Rostock, with its shipyards and Heinkel aircraft factory, saw its population increase by one-third in just six years, from 90,000 in 1933 to 120,000 in 1939. Overall, the biggest boom took place in the aircraft industry, with an unprecedented increase in the workforce involved, rising from fewer than 4,000 workers in January 1933 to some 325,000 in 1939. The aircraft industry attracted workers with its wage premiums, modern production facilities, impressive performance statistics, newly built housing, and elevated social prestige as a 'high-tech' sector. In 1935, a Social Democratic union steward accused aircraft workers of being excessively self-centred because they had no appetite for political action, meaning union organization. As described by Frank Bajohr, these predominantly younger workers, with their strong individualism and ambitions, were no longer receptive to the message of the traditional workers' movement; instead, they opened themselves wholeheartedly to the efforts the Nazi regime made to integrate them.[34]

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[29] Broszat, 'Soziale Motivation', 393.
[30] Martin Broszat, 'Zur Struktur der NS-Massenbewegung', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 31/1 (1983), 52–76, at 66.
[31] Broszat 'Zur Struktur der NS-Massenbewegung'; see also David Welch, 'Nazi Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft: Constructing a People's Community', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39/2 (2004), 213–38.
[32] Broszat, 'Soziale Motivation', 397.
[33] Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, iv: *Vom Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges bis zur Gründung der beiden deutschen Staaten 1914–1949* (Munich, 2003), at 681.
[34] Frank Bajohr, 'Dynamik and Disparität: Die nationalsozialistische Rüstungsmobilisierung und die "Volksgemeinschaft"', in Bajohr and Wildt (eds), *Volksgemeinschaft*, 78–93.

The regime's efforts to pay symbolic tribute to the workforce should not be underestimated, especially in a society in which they had traditionally been seen as inferior to the middle class, not to mention the aristocracy. As early as May Day 1933, the 'honour of work' was frequently mentioned. In the following months there were numerous factory visits by Robert Ley, the leader of the German Labour Front, the National Socialist corporatist successor to the independent trade unions. During these visits, he always made a point of shaking hands with employees at the workbench.[35] The term *'deutsche Qualitätsarbeit'* (high-quality work from Germany), promoted by entrepreneurs and trade unions from the end of the nineteenth century, was still on the agenda during the National Socialist regime, instilling an element of pride in workers for their skill and competence. Moreover, German workers, who made up the majority of the German army, could go on to regard their murderous wartime duties as 'Qualitätsarbeit'. Alf Lüdtke quotes a letter written by Herbert Habermalz, a sergeant who had previously been employed as a clerk. After a flight from Cracow to Warsaw in June 1943, he wrote to his colleagues: 'We flew several circles above the city. And with great satisfaction we could recognize the complete extermination of the Jewish Ghetto. There our folks did a really fantastic job. There is no house which has not been totally destroyed. This we saw the day before yesterday. And yesterday we took off to Odessa. We received special food, extra cookies, additional milk and butter, and, above all, a very big bar of bittersweet chocolate.'[36]

Volksgemeinschaft did not mean socialist equality, as Götz Aly claims,[37] but deliberate inequality. Although National Socialist propaganda emphasized the elimination of class barriers and the unity of the *Volk*, in reality its version of *Volksgemeinschaft* was structured according to new inequalities, in which the inclusiveness of the *Volksgenossen* was accompanied by massive processes of exclusion. In the early 1980s, Detlev Peukert was already underlining this dualism between *Volksgenossen* and *Gemeinschaftsfremde*.[38] Norbert Frei has since highlighted the testimonies of contemporaries who, despite the continuing prevalence of material and social disparities, nonetheless experienced a 'perceived equality', which was an important factor in building loyalty.[39]

However, even *Volksgenossen* were not citizens with guaranteed civil rights; the system was not concerned with the legal equality of individuals. Instead, the

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[35] Alf Lüdtke, 'The "Honor of Labor": Industrial Workers and the Power of Symbols under National Socialism', in David F. Crew (ed.), *Nazism and German Society, 1933–1945* (New York, 1994), 67–109, at 69–71.

[36] Alf Lüdtke, 'The Appeal of Exterminating "Others": German Workers and the Limits of Resistance', in Christian Leitz (ed.), *The Third Reich: Essential Readings* (Oxford, 1999), 151–78, at 175; see also Alf Lüdtke, 'People Working: Everyday Life and German Fascism', *History Workshop Journal*, 50 (2000), 77–92.

[37] Götz Aly, *Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* (New York, 2007).

[38] Detlev J. K. Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life* (London, 1998).

[39] Norbert Frei, '"Volksgemeinschaft": Erfahrungsgeschichte und Lebenswirklichkeit der Hitler-Zeit', in Norbert Frei, *1945 und wir: Das Dritte Reich im Bewußtsein der Deutschen* (Munich, 2005), 107–28; see also Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, 1998).

Volksgemeinschaft focused on the *Volk* itself, particularly in the biological or organic sense of its collective body (*Volkskörper*). The regime's central slogan was: 'You are nothing, your *Volk* is everything'. The *Volksgemeinschaft* was not about egalitarian satisfaction, but about racial mobilization; not about socialism for the nation, but about increased performance towards the development of the German *Volkskörper*.[40]

In this context, it is worth considering Michel Foucault's thesis that after the end of the eighteenth century Europe saw the emergence of a new form of sovereign power that was no longer derived from the power to kill, but from the control of life processes through technologies of power, such as birth control, fertility rates, hygiene, and disease prevention. Foucault calls this new style of sovereign power 'biopolitics'. 'One might say that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death.'[41]

There is no doubt that this concept was a central component of National Socialist propaganda. At the same time, it cannot be denied that for large sections of the German public, the *Volksgemeinschaft* really did represent a worthwhile social aspiration, although different groups may have applied very different meanings to the term. In whatever way it was understood, it offered a possible point of contact or of sympathetic alignment with the Nazi regime, and this is a significant aspect for analysing the nature of authority and society under National Socialism. According to Norbert Frei, 'the question of the *Volksgemeinschaft* lies at the heart of the problem'.[42]

III

Everyday life saw the drawing of borders between those who did and those who did not belong to the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Beate Meyer tells the illuminating story of a boy who, as a 'Jewish half-breed', was not yet excluded by his classmates in the pre-war years. But when they decided to imitate the novels of Karl May by conducting a blood-brother ritual like the one performed by Winnetou and Old Shatterhand, the act of exclusion took place. As skins were nicked and blood was mixed, his friends drew a line he could not cross. Later, in a 1993 interview, he recounted: 'Then they told me: "That's not allowed." They explained it to me and were a bit ashamed, but they stuck to it. They had already learned this much.'[43] This anecdote supports Ian Kershaw's contention that the concept of the *Volksgemeinschaft* could prove especially valuable 'as a conceptual device to explore the ways in which ordinary Germans gradually committed themselves to a trajectory of escalating persecution ending in the death camps'.[44]

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[40] See also Ute Planert, 'Der dreifache Körper des Volkes: Sexualität, Biopolitik und die Wissenschaft vom Leben', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 26 (2000), 539–76.
[41] Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality* (London 1990), i., 138.
[42] Frei, 'Volksgemeinschaft', 128.
[43] Beate Meyer, 'Erfühlte und erdachte "Volksgemeinschaft": Erfahrungen "jüdischer Mischlinge" zwischen Integration und Ausgrenzung', in Bajohr and Wildt (eds), *Volksgemeinschaft*, 144–64, at 151.
[44] Kershaw, in this volume, p. 35.

Putting it even more explicitly than Kershaw, I want to emphasize that this border between inclusion and exclusion was not a given fact. Such borders did not simply exist; they had to be actively drawn. After coming to power, the National Socialists took the cultivation of the *Volksgemeinschaft* as their primary mission, to be pursued even out in the provinces, villages, and smallest communities. This meant drawing a racist border through local populations, trampling on civil society's existing legal system, and implementing the grassroots expulsion of Jews as a first step towards the ultimate 'removal of the Jews' altogether. *Volksgemeinschaft* policies were first and foremost policies directed against the Jews in the local neighbourhood, along with Roma, Sinti, other *Gemeinschaftsfremde* and *Fremdvölkische* (members of foreign races).

The boycott of Jewish businesses on 1 April 1933 was suspended after just one day in the big cities, which had police and foreign observers to exercise control; however, out in the provinces, small towns, and villages, the boycott opened up a political arena in which the local chapters of the SS and the Nazi Party could influence the social, cultural, and political patterns of the community. The boycott allowed experimentation with various forms of activism, such as putting up street posters and banners, standing guard outside Jewish shops, directly asking customers not to enter such businesses, and even using insults and violence.[45]

In addition to these aggressive boycotts, the summer of 1935 saw more campaigns to denounce marriage or sexual relations with Jewish partners as 'race defilement' (*Rassenschande*). This was several months before the decree in the Nuremberg Laws was issued in September. Accusations were made all across the Reich, with constant attacks in newspapers, flyers, and demonstrations, and the alleged 'race defilers' were forced to march through the streets. These marches passed through busy streets in broad daylight. Looking at the photographic documentation, one notices the crowds, including women, children, and teenagers, who walked alongside the victims, laughing, teasing, insulting, and spitting at them. Their voyeuristic pleasure, over and above collusion and participation in punishing this transgression against 'racial honour', is unmistakeable. With these 1935 campaigns against *Rassenschande*, the National Socialists had found another field of everyday life in which they could effectively draw a border around the *Volksgemeinschaft*.[46]

Everybody could join in and take part, without needing to assume individual responsibility or leadership. Even the most cowardly could punch, kick, and otherwise exercise violence, without fear of retaliation from the victim. The backing of the community of perpetrators ensured that violence against the victim was multiplied and minimized any perpetrator's fear of being hurt himself, or of suffering injuries to his own body. This collective act of violence against the Jews was not only a brutal way of excluding the 'other', but also served to build the

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[45] Cf. Hannah Ahlheim, *'Deutsche, kauft nicht bei Juden!': Antisemitismus und politischer Boykott in Deutschland 1924 bis 1935* (Göttingen, 2011); Michael Wildt, *Hitler's Volksgemeinschaft and the Dynamics of Racial Exclusion: Violence against Jews in Provincial Germany, 1919–1939* (New York, 2011), 105–32.

[46] See Alexandra Przyrembel, *'Rassenschande': Reinheitsmythos und Vernichtungslegitimation im Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen, 2003).

Volksgemeinschaft that Nazi propaganda had otherwise only talked about. This was a community that defined itself not through laws, which could have strict limits— rather, it was a community that only created itself through action. The Nazi regime communalized the violence, allowing its fellow *Volksgenossen* to participate. Every act of violence broke psychological barriers and shifted the rules of the system, since things previously forbidden could now be done without fear of legal penalties; it was a system in which new options for action that had never been conceivable before now became available. The violent campaigns against the Jews did not in themselves create the *Volksgemeinschaft*, but the exercise of violence anticipated its realization, even if this was limited in time and space. The practice of exclusionary violence gave self-empowerment concrete form, and even made it physically tangible, by suspending the old order and allowing the establishment of a new political order of racist inequality.

The abrogation of the Weimar Republic's constitutional status quo in 1933 offered numerous elites the 'enabling space' they had long desired. The Law for the Prevention of Genetically Defective Offspring, enacted in July of that year, finally permitted doctors to 'heal' the German *Volkskörper*. For the first time in Germany, the sterilization of patients against their will was authorized. Newly convened 'genetic health courts', each consisting of a judge and two doctors, examined some 224,000 cases in the first three years alone, and ordered sterilization in some 199,000 cases (around 90 per cent of those examined). Police officers, finally freed from legislative and judicial limitations, believed they could now achieve a society without criminals, and eagerly accepted theories of criminal biology that defined certain social groups in racial terms as 'anti-social elements', justifying their internment in concentration camps and, ultimately, their elimination. Local welfare officers no longer classified their clients according to neediness, but instead rated them according to employability, on the premise that those who cannot work, need not eat. Here, too, racist criteria were soon used to differentiate between those 'useful' to the *Volksgemeinschaft*, and those 'alien' to it. With the new tax law of 1934, whose first paragraph bluntly stated that tax regulations must conform to National Socialist principles, even tax collectors were freed from the rule that all citizens should receive equal treatment before the law: they could now dispense arbitrary and unequal treatment, imposing additional tax burdens, especially on Jews. Thus *Volksgemeinschaft* also signified individualized self-empowerment, opening up new possibilities for action amongst the favoured.

An intellectually productive analysis of the concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* needs, therefore, to examine its practical application, and should not simply accept it as a *fait accompli*. The important thing is to investigate the practices associated with its active construction, in short, the process of communalization. The focus of such an approach, to borrow a phrase from Alf Lüdtke, would be 'the forms in which people have "appropriated", while simultaneously transforming, "their" world'. This world, and thus its conditional framework, was simultaneously predefined and actively constructed. It therefore provided an ambiguous, multilayered setting, offering diverse options for individual and collective action. For, as Lüdtke reminds us: 'Individuals and groups do not construct the profile of the modes in

which they perceive and act in some sphere *removed and beyond* that of social rela-
tions—no, such a profile is generated *in* and *through* that very web.'[47] People do
not simply conform to the codes and representations of meaning and reality they
are given, but instead utilize images, words, and practices to orient themselves;
they vary them, and when rubbing against the rough edges of real life, they change
them as well as the surrounding social conditions. In this analytical framework, the
Volksgemeinschaft is not to be analysed as a rigid social construct, but as the making
of community, focusing on social practice instead of a societal status quo.

In this analysis, supposed dependents turn into active protagonists, becoming
both subject and object, experiencing powerlessness and subjugation to author-
ity figures, political leaders, and economic forces, and yet also modifying these
experiences through individualized, contrasting, and even contradictory modes of
appropriation, which can also result in non-conforming behaviours. Furthermore,
experiences of pleasure, participation, and prosperity can certainly be intertwined
with repression, exploitation, and dominance. During the Second World War,
members of the German *Volksgemeinschaft* could acquire slave labourers from the
occupied territories for farm or factory work, and thereby experience a feeling
of power and superiority. At the same time, they remained within the National
Socialist terror system, where any lapse in conformity could lead to their own per-
secution. This simultaneity of acquiescence and dissociation is constantly empha-
sized by Alf Lüdtke.

Ian Kershaw, therefore, misses the mark with his central critique, maintaining
that the *Volksgemeinschaft* concept presumes one single identity to be 'completely
predominant'.[48] He is in danger of overlooking, or even ignoring, the cracks in
consensus. The analysis of the *Volksgemeinschaft* as a dynamic process of active
social practice is concerned precisely with this diversity of behavioural strategies,
with joining in and turning away, willingness and reluctance, enthusiasm and the
ability to adapt, distancing the self and 'working against the *Führer*'. The point
is to deconstruct the *Volksgemeinschaft* concept's very suggestion of homogeneity.

IV

The *Volksgemeinschaft* was not based on inclusion alone, despite romanticized
memories which recall the communal spirit produced under National Socialism
as a 'good thing'. This kind of emphasis isolates the experience of belonging from
its dark side, the persecution and extermination of Jews, Roma, Sinti, Poles, Soviet
prisoners of war, the mentally and physically disabled, the chronically ill, and a
host of others. In reality, both aspects were inextricably intertwined—commu-
nalization with ostracism and extermination, inclusion with genocidal exclusion.

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[47] Alf Lüdtke, 'Introduction: What is the History of Everyday Life and Who are its Practitioners',
in Alf Lüdtke (ed.), *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*
(Princeton, 1995), 3–40, at 7 (italics in original).
[48] Kershaw, in this volume, p. 38.

So an analysis of the *Volksgemeinschaft* must always incorporate the gaze of those ostracized at those included, the gaze of the *Gemeinschaftsfremden* at the *Gemeinschaft*. This is why Saul Friedländer (in particular) called for an 'integrated historiography' of the Holocaust, one that does not assume the position of the omniscient narrator, but instead makes the voices of many protagonists audible.

> From the very beginning, all efforts made by Jewish individuals and groups to disrupt the plans of the National Socialists, no matter how slight they might have been, represented an obstacle on the road towards utter annihilation: regardless of whether it meant bribing officials, police officers, or informers, paying families to hide children or adults, escaping to the forests or mountains, retreating into small villages or major cities, changing religion, joining resistance groups, stealing food, or anything else that might have led to survival. This micro-level was the location of fundamental and ongoing interactions between Jews and the authorities who were working towards achieving the 'Final Solution'. It is on this micro-level that Jewish reactions and initiatives must be researched, and thereby integrated into a comprehensive historiography. On this micro-level, events largely revolve around the stories of individuals.[49]

By including these borders, definitions, and actions in our analysis of questions of belonging and ostracism, we can cast a more searching light on the *Volksgemeinschaft*, and avoid succumbing to its claims of unshakeable and unambiguous homogeneity. When talking about *Volksgemeinschaft*, one must also talk about inclusion and exclusion, as well as about social mobilization, participation, and selection; about owning a share and empowering the self, but ultimately, too, about violence, eradication, and murder.

Birthe Kundrus and Gerhard Wolf have researched the administrative disputes that occurred in occupied Poland, where it was necessary to decide who could be classified as German and who as Polish; this led to negotiations between public authorities, SS officials, and the individual subjects themselves.[50] Here, Kershaw's contention that not all perpetrators of the Holocaust were German, and that the *Volksgemeinschaft* concept is therefore not useful for analysing the genocide of European Jews,[51] brings up an important point but still misses the mark. Kershaw correctly maintains that the *Volksgemeinschaft* should be considered primarily in the specific context of National Socialist society, even when this was extended into the annexed territories of western Poland and eastern France. However, the idea of *Gemeinschaft* as a vision of society in opposition to the actual society (*Gesellschaft*) was not a specifically German political construct, but was a common notion all over Europe in the first half of the twentieth century—in Italy and

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[49] Saul Friedländer, *Den Holocaust beschreiben: Auf dem Weg zu einer integrierten Geschichte* (Göttingen, 2007), 14; see also Neil Gregor, Nils Roemer, and Mark Roseman (eds), *German History from the Margins* (Bloomington, Ind., 2006).
[50] Gerhard Wolf, *Ideologie und Herrschaftsrationalität—nationalsozialistische Germanisierungspolitik in Polen* (Hamburg, 2012); Birthe Kundrus, 'Regime der Differenz: Volkstumspolitische Inklusionen und Exklusionen im Warthegau und im Generalgouvernement 1939–1944', in Bajohr and Wildt (eds), *Volksgemeinschaft*, 105–23.
[51] Kershaw, in this volume, p. 41–2.

Spain as much as in Poland, Lithuania, and Social Democratic Sweden.[52] We still need comparative studies that investigate the commonalities and differences in how these *Gemeinschaft* concepts were politically realized in Europe, and how the varying degrees of violent radicalization can be explained—a radicalization that in Germany led to systematic genocide.

Without the acceptance, complicity, and assistance of the resident populations, including both elites and 'ordinary' people, the German occupying forces would not have been able to achieve the ghettoization and deportation of the local Jewish minorities. Beyond terror, murder, and ruthless acts of plunder, beyond expulsion, deportation, and forced labour, there were also opportunities for participation and collaboration. And the local populations developed their own strategies for dealing with the occupying regime, finding ways to survive, even to get ahead and prosper, within the repressive framework. Finally, there were also home-grown political efforts to create 'Jew-free', ethnically homogenous *Volksgemeinschaften*.[53]

In his insightful analysis, Richard Evans describes the network of Nazi Party functionaries within the Third Reich. The terror apparatus of the Nazi regime reached into even the smallest niches of everyday life and the working world. The Nazi Party included some 200,000 leading officials known as *Politische Leiter* and some 2 million *Blockwarte* (Party Wardens), all charged with supervising the general population; workplaces were similarly monitored by officials of the German Labour Front, foremen, and other representatives.[54] That the regime had such an immense pool of functionaries, assistants, and helpers reflects a high degree of participation. In addition to the 5.3 million card-carrying members of the National Socialist Party in late 1939, there were 22 million in the German Labour Front, 14 million in the National Socialist People's Welfare Organization (NSV), around 9 million young people in the Hitler Youth and League of German Girls, and 1.4 million women in the National Socialist Women's League. Armin Nolzen estimates that by the time war broke out, around two-thirds of the German population were members of either a National Socialist Party organization or one that was controlled by the Nazi Party. Ninety per cent of the functionaries worked on a voluntary basis.[55] It would be difficult to interpret this huge number of supporters as simply part of a governmental terror network for the repression of society. It seems more plausible to consider this multiplicity of posts, positions, and sinecures as a system enabling people to take part in a regime which, conversely, could count on the assistance and participation of so many of them to maintain the established political order. Several years ago Robert Gellately pointed out that the

[52] See Thomas Etzemüller (ed.), *Die Ordnung der Moderne: Social Engineering im 20. Jahrhundert* (Bielefeld, 2009); Norbert Götz, *Ungleiche Geschwister: Die Konstruktion von nationalsozialistischer Volksgemeinschaft und schwedischem Volksheim* (Baden-Baden, 2001).

[53] Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in the Ukraine* (Chapel Hill, 2005); Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine, 1941–44* (Basingstoke, 2001); Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London, 2008).

[54] Richard Evans, *The Third Reich in Power: 1933–39* (London, 2005), 108–9.

[55] Armin Nolzen, 'Inklusion und Exklusion im Dritten Reich: Das Beispiel NSDAP', in Bajohr and Wildt (eds), *Volksgemeinschaft*, 60–77.

Gestapo was by no means an all-powerful, all-encompassing terror organization. Instead, he suggests, it focused its efforts mainly on the denunciation of wayward *Volksgenossen*.[56]

The term *Volksgemeinschaft* shows that 'the political' does not emerge solely from the sphere of the state, but also develops *within* the social sphere and emanates *from* it. It makes clear that political systems can derive their foundations from social phenomena such as social experiences and expectations; and that scholarly research into the constitution and transformation of politics should focus not only on the context of state power, but also on the social order.

Our new treatment of the *Volksgemeinschaft* concept accordingly entails an epistemological shift in perspective in the historiography of National Socialism. It moves it towards a cultural history of 'the political' derived from a social history of National Socialism that is itself new. It no longer contrasts society and state in the manner of Hegel, but interprets the political order (and state framework) as what Pierre Bourdieu calls a 'structuring structure', which is not simply predefined by institutions or by a constitution, but is created and altered as a power matrix under continual renegotiation. In their research on the *Volksgemeinschaft* during the aerial attacks of the Second World War, Dietmar Süß and Malte Thießen, among others, have presented new insights into the diverse faultlines within a German society that was not at all homogenous and yet was constantly re-expressing its desire for homogeneity; but questions concerning the people's willingness to endure and the erosion of loyalty towards the Nazi regime have not yet been adequately settled.[57]

This by no means negates the numerous and worthwhile works of the functionalist school which are based on Weber's model of a rational, bureaucratic state and thus see the Nazi regime in terms of destruction and chaos. On the contrary, without the works of Martin Broszat and Hans Mommsen, the question of the *Volksgemeinschaft* could not be analysed today. Nonetheless, the enquiry now extends beyond the functionalist perspective, and the focus is no longer on the state as the sphere of the political, but rather on the political order of broader society: the human protagonists are placed at centre stage. The concepts of social experience and expectation concern themselves less with institutions, structures, and administrative processes, and more with emotions, the media, and collectivizing experiences, with symbolic representations, rituals, and performative actions. This new perspective looks at the political practices of everyday life, and the creation, stabilization, and transformation of political systems by the people themselves.

This means that the concept of *Volksgemeinschaft* does not represent or explain any fixed, static reality, and it certainly does not reveal the internal self-image of

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[56]   Robert Gellately, *Gestapo and Germany Society: Enforcing Racial Policy, 1933–1945* (Oxford, 1992).
[57]   Jörg Arnold, Dietmar Süß, and Malte Thießen (eds), *Luftkrieg: Erinnerungen in Deutschland und Europa* (Göttingen, 2009); Dietmar Süß, *Tod aus der Luft: Kriegsgesellschaft und Luftkrieg in Deutschland und England* (Munich, 2011). See also Nicole Kramer, *Volksgenossinnen an der Heimatfront: Mobilisierung, Verhalten, Erinnerung* (Göttingen, 2011).

National Socialism. Rather, it invites us to understand National Socialist society as something actively manufactured: a 'work in progress'. While not disputing the power of the structural framework, we can thus analyse ongoing social practice with an emphasis on the protagonists, looking at their options for action and strategies for appropriation.