

Web 5.6

Case Study 5.5: An example of a complete initial post (Truro 3)

Truro 3 Proposal

Truro Group 3 – Wednesday, 11 May 2005, 11 :26 AM

Whilst several of the sources and an exploration of the massive apparatus of terror that was available to the Nazis would seem to suggest a rule of fear and repression, it is, alternatively, arguable that most of the sources seem to reflect an entirely different side to the history of the NSDAP's rule in Germany, namely that it was an essentially popular regime that only used terror where absolutely necessary on minorities within the community. This is backed up by figures such as just over a third of all adult Germans eligible for the vote supported the Nazis in the last free elections of autumn 1932.

Dr Gareth Pritchard states that 'the Nazi regime depended for its success on widespread voluntary collaboration. This was certainly a more important factor in stabilising the regime than the use of terror though the latter should not be overlooked. But a distinction should be drawn between an emotional allegiance to the regime and a willingness to collaborate in its work. By the third year of the war, the 'popularity' of the regime was in any case irrelevant, because Hitler's policy had placed the German people in a position where the survival of the regime and the survival of Germany itself were one and the same thing.'

The source from Peukert's 1989 book *'Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life'* highlights the reasons for what he describes as 'active consent or passive participation' in the Nazi regime as being due to foreign policy successes, 'economic miracle' ('work and bread'), 'mass events' that allowed Germans to have fun under the regime and Hitler's own immense popularity. Peukert even goes as far as to explicitly state that the regime's welcome 'promise to create order' meant that terror itself was accepted by the public as simple enforcement of this order with a 'firm hand'. All this resulted in 'a certain basic consent to the system on the part of the majority of the population', and whilst admitting terror, Peukert says that Nazi control was only 'supposedly' unchallengeable, implying that this idea of the Nazis having impenetrable power was not actually the case at all, and that in fact, the Nazis were reliant, at least in the early years, on popularity as a basis for power.

The example of Nazi propaganda demonstrates to an historian how the Nazis desperately wanted popularity feeling the need to justify the concentration camps, which a truly dictatorial government that didn't rely or popular support would not have done. The Nazis openly admitted the existence of such camps but merely as positive rehabilitation units for those

who were bad for the German Reich (stereotypical Jews, Communists and other minorities). Similarly, the Night of the Long Knives was covered up as a necessary action to prevent an SA coup. The Nazi obsession with power is also demonstrated by the constant surveillance of the people by the Gestapo, detailed in many reports.

Propaganda such as the source demonstrates Goebbels' subtle techniques of indoctrination by portraying the concentration camps in a positive light that makes their existence seem reasonable, whilst including derogatory references to and digs at non-Nazi minorities (such as the Jewish *Cafe Megalomania*, and the derogatory depiction of the stereotypical scruffy Communist). This propaganda does not reveal the sinister side to the concentration camps and although it also does not detail the reaction that this propaganda received, the popularity of the Nazis can partly be put down to the ignorance of the general public as to the actual brutality of the Nazi regime.

The effect of this indoctrination and attitude of the propaganda is clearly demonstrated and replicated in Mettelmann's interview. Mettelmann was a member of the Hitler Youth and later the Panzer Division. Adolf Hitler came from a socialist background and, as a child, was completely taken in by the Nazi ideals of a strong and prosperous Germany, free of 'anti-Reich elements' that posed a threat to the security of the nation. He is representative of many young Germans at the time, and a prime example of how, if one genuinely supported the regime, one was not in danger.

He says 'As for concentration camps, we knew little', and this alongside the propaganda source and the stereotypical portrayal of Jews, Communists, homosexuals, gypsies, etc as lazy and unpatriotic justifies how Mettelmann felt at that time about the positive nature of concentration camps and provides us with an insight into the psychological effects that constant propaganda bombardment had, particularly on the young. This is also consistent with Peukert's view that even terror could be justified.

The extracts from letters to the press would also seem to reflect the general popularity of the Fuhrer as described by Peukert. In fact, these extreme supporters even stretch to talk of Hitler as a god, one calling him 'my creator'. This could clearly be seen as the result of propaganda in addition to the Fuhrer Myth – 'Every flower which blooms here blooms in gratitude to him.' There is then the question of whether this seemingly fanatical view is representative of German people in general at the time, or whether to view it as a means used by some to clear their name and get them out of the firing line – a cover up so-to-speak. The press was highly censored so obviously only positive letters would be printed, given that anybody dared to send negative ones anyway, but could this be an example of propaganda?

It seems more likely that these letters are genuine, as this type of hyperbolic praise doesn't really reflect Goebbels' more subtle style, and photographic evidence as well as testimony has revealed Hitler's hugely

charismatic personality as being attractive and magnetic to some people almost to the point of obsession.

The photographic source has been used as an example of resistance although it seems to back up the idea that the majority were in agreement with the regime. After all, this picture only *appears* to show one man in at least seventy resisting, so, if anything, it shows the ineffectiveness of resistance amongst mass support for the regime.

However, this source, like the letters to the press, raises questions such as who took the photograph and why? Is it a propaganda photograph? Has it been staged? Why are workers who would probably have had socialist sympathies saluting? Are they genuinely happy with the regime or is this conformity a manifestation of the fear felt by Germans of constant surveillance and threat?

In his book *'Topography of Terror: a Documentation'*, Rurup suggests that the population did indeed live in fear. He talks of the Nazi attempt to 'eliminate [opposition] systematically' (including Communists, Socialists, labour unions and Jews) and about how the 'terror and legal vacuum' created the '*desired* atmosphere of fear and intimidation' implying that it was *deliberately* brought about by the Nazis as a means to their ends, namely the 'Nazification of the German people' to achieve their larger racial goals. Rurup frequently uses words and phrases equated with fear such as 'flee', 'intimidation' and 'torture basements of the SA' and focuses primarily on the Nazi Party's tight control; on their banning of political parties, persecution of Germans, etc...

Whilst this is to some extent true, it is important to note that it was still a minority being terrorised, and Rurup never directly mentions the majority of Germans who actually consented to and even supported the regime in one way or another. Michael Burleigh uses the statistic that in 1938, only a third of the inmates at Buchenwald were political prisoners, but this is not really a valid statistic as many prisoners, with, perhaps, the exception of Communists, were released after serving a few years, and this evidence is not a cumulative figure.

Nor does Rurup take into account the initial mystery surrounding the nature of terror; Peukert, on the other hand, would suggest that only those in direct opposition to the Nazis were actually in any danger.

In truth the existence of a widespread terror apparatus meant that opposing the regime was a potentially lethal standpoint to adopt. The Enabling Act of March 1933 allowed Hitler to rule by decree with no democratic intervention, and the offices of President and Chancellor were merged in 1934 after the death of Hindenburg, leaving Hitler with unlimited power. In February 1933 civil rights were suspended in Germany and the establishment of the People's Courts and Protective Custody effectively put the Nazi Party above the law. The KZ system advanced after it was taken over by the SS following the Night of the Long Knives and the decapitation of the SA, but the population of the camps was

quite low before the outbreak of war, suggesting that the system of systematic mental and physical degradation was not needed in the more popular times of early Nazi rule. Burleigh claims that any German could become the victim of terror as long as he or she opposed the regime and he cites various examples, but these are, once again, in a minority. What Burleigh does not give is a figure for how many Germans was *not* victims in the Third Reich.

It has also been pointed out that most people were happy with, or at least tolerant of the regime, and less than 1 % of Germans were willing to violently resist the regime. There is here the problem of interpreting this statistic – did it mean that Germans were too afraid? With hindsight, would a German person who lived through the regime be willing to admit that they were happy with it? Were Germans happy? Resistance in Germany was not effective for a number of reasons. The army, for example, did not actively resist until the Bomb Plot of 1944, because the regime was militarily successful, so the army had no good reason to resist. Lack of unity and strong leadership, commitment to democratic methods, sympathy with Nazism, lack of popular support, isolation, indifference, improved standards of living, Hitler's popularity and the Hitler Myth all contributed to there being no successful resistance in Germany during the Nazi rule.

The SOPADE report from Wurttemberg talks of growing discontent and disillusionment with the regime and the Nazification of everyday life, saying 'one is only allowed to say yea or amen to it.' The informant quotes one man as having said 'If one cannot say what one thinks in public it is better to stay within one's own four walls. Then at least one does not run the risk of ending up in Dachau.' This suggests that people that were unhappy with the regime were too afraid to even go to the pub, preferring instead to become 'privatised', remaining inside their own homes. (The informant talks of the decline in business that non-Nazi public houses and other organisations experienced following the 'coordination') It also demonstrates a clear awareness of Dachau, although does not detail to what extent the speaker knew about what actually happened there.

However, this source also hints that before 1937, dissent was not as extreme – 'it was mostly some personal annoyance', suggesting perhaps that popularity became less important as the Nazis tightened their grip on power, or that people became unhappy as Hitler's foreign policy moves became more aggressive and war drew nearer. Gellately notes that as the regime became more unpopular, denunciations dried up and terror intensified, so popularity and terror can be seen as a balance in Nazi Germany.

Furthermore, the evident Socialist bias in the source could easily distort the truth as the informant searches deeply for dissent and resentment in order to ascertain a perfect time to overthrow the government

of the NSDAP. Could he be impatient or is his testimony truthful, aiming to secure the *best* time for takeover and therefore the best possible chance of success? The question is also raised as to, given the informant's Socialist ideals, whether the attitudes spoken of are those of the everyday German, or those of like-minded Germans with Socialist sympathies. It seems more likely that they are the latter, as a Socialist would surely be more likely to be naturally associated with others who had similar political leanings.

Gellately commented that despite the existence of terror mechanisms, top down terrorisation of the population was structurally impossible due to the small numbers of Gestapo (some 32,000) in comparison to the large population. Popularity was therefore an essential part of terror itself as the Gestapo relied heavily on denunciations from informants for its information. The fact that 80–90% of arrests were made as a result of denunciations shows that the German people must indeed have been willing to participate actively in the regime. In fact, Himmler even made moves to restrict denunciations as he suspected they were being used as a means to initiate divorce!

It would seem sensible to conclude that the structuralist view is a more realistic view of Nazi Germany, as terror did not become central to the regime until the lapse in popularity Nazism experienced as failure in the war became imminent. Whilst terror always played a role in the running of the Nazi state, it was indeed marginal and directed against minorities until Nazi paranoia took over, and the Nazi obsession with popularity and public opinion, coupled with the indoctrination of the young and the patriotic clearly demonstrates that propaganda and genuine popularity played a larger and more vital role in Germany than terror.