

The Failed *Volksgemeinschaft*

Adolph Hitler and his Nazi party tried fanatically to create a *volkisch* state, where all pure and native (Aryan) Germans would be united into a classless *volksgemeinschaft*. Hitler saw the *volksgemeinschaft*, or people's community, as an essential element for uniting Germans behind his "secretly"¹ planned war to acquire *Lebensraum*. Hitler wanted to acquire *Lebensraum*, or living space, because he felt that the German people needed more room to expand, in order to live up to their full potential. Only after they lived up to their potential, Hitler believed, could Germany be transformed into the top power in the world (Spielvogel, p. 43). For *Lebensraum* to become a reality, Hitler had to mold the lives of his citizens within "functionally defined social groups" in the *volksgemeinschaft*, so that each group would do its part to help in the war effort (Sax and Kuntz, p. 275). Of all the groups within the *volksgemeinschaft*, having the unity and cooperation of women, workers, and farmers was especially important for achieving success in the war. However, because of their subtle resistance to the Nazis, caused by failed expectations from Nazi propaganda, changing wartime needs, and a general dislike for the Nazi party, the Nazi campaign only enjoyed limited success.

Women within the *volksgemeinschaft* were asked to play a subordinate role to men. According to Hitler, the main role of a German woman was to take care of "her husband, her family, her children, and her house" (Hitler in Sax and Kuntz, p. 262). The National Socialist Women's League, a parasite organization for Hitler's ideology, helped to instill this belief into women, preaching that a woman's "entire education,

¹ Hitler explained his intentions in *Mein Kampf*, but his book did not enjoy wide readership.

development, vocational pursuit, and position within *Volk* and state must be directed toward the physical and spiritual task of motherhood” (Sax and Kuntz, p. 264). As a result of that ideal, women were restricted in the line of work they could find and were completely prohibited from entering the military (Botwinick, p. 103). These limitations placed on women help to demonstrate Hitler’s outlook that women were intended to lead separate, but converging lives with men. Hitler explained, “providence has assigned women the task of caring for this world of her own, and only from this can the man construct and mold his world” (Hitler in Sax and Kuntz, p. 262). But in Hitler’s world, a woman’s only value was to create, nurture, and raise more men, who could fight in Hitler’s army, so that he could rule the world.

Increasing the potential number of men to help him rule the world was therefore a main priority of Hitler and the Nazis. To speed up the process, Aryan girls, upon coming of age, were pressured into getting married and told that it was their patriotic duty to have as many Aryan offspring as possible (Botwinick, p. 103). The Nazis hoped that this pressure and patriotic claim would encourage these girls to have large families so that the declining birthrate would be reversed. Birthrates had been steadily declining because of the number of women who had entered the workforce since the start of the Industrial Revolution (Sax and Kuntz, p. 265). To help the process along, loans were given to married women who agreed to leave the workplace so that they would spend their time taking care of their children (Sax and Kuntz, p. 276). Historian Jackson Spielvogel observes that the “population policies of the third Reich,” including the marriage loans and the restricted professional opportunities available to women, helped to “increase the

number of 'pure Germans,'" since live births steadily increased after the Nazis came to power (Spielvogel, p. 184).

However, Spielvogel's observation is quite misleading if one applies it to the number of women in the work place because while "the proportion of women in the work force declined...the total number of working women actually increased" (Sax and Kuntz, p. 276). Many women, who previously held professional positions, which were taken away from them when the Nazis came to power, resorted to working in lower-end jobs, as opposed to staying at home. They refused to accept the narrow views of one Nazi party member, who proclaimed that an Aryan woman should "offer herself for the sake of the nation so that the nation might have eternity...that is the life purpose of the German mother..." (Sax and Kuntz, p. 267). The Nazis yearning for women to focus on their families was intended to keep women from challenging any of the Nazis' desires or goals. But many women had other ideas and refused to be put in their place.

During the war years, the limited role the Nazis desired for women in the *volksgemeinschaft* was further undermined because of a shortage of labor in the factories, as well as in other occupations. Suddenly, the National Socialist Women's League began telling women that "selecting an occupation [was] no longer a problem, in financial terms, for the young female job aspirant" (Sax and Kuntz, p. 280). They were now encouraging women to enter the workforce. But this enticement was not as successful as it was anticipated to be, as the number of working women only doubled from seven to fourteen and a half million (Sax and Kuntz, p. 276).

“The expected voluntary assumption of jobs [had] not materialized” enough to meet the labor shortage caused by the war because most of the women who wanted to work were already working, while the women who were not working, were women who had no desire to work, as they were enjoying government loans as compensation for their lackadaisical lifestyle (Sax and Kuntz, p. 284-85). This new acceptance of allowing women to work in professional positions, on the other hand, did have a benefit; it gave workingwomen the chance to improve their social status. This change in itself was a violation of Nazi ideals for their *volksgemeinschaft*. It also showed that German women had successfully resisted the whims of the Nazis and helped to break down the *volksgemeinschaft*.

Workers, another important group in the *volksgemeinschaft*, also resisted the Nazis, especially because much of the Nazi propaganda failed to materialize in a way that would improve their lives. This resistance caused by failed expectations of Nazi propaganda was a great blow to the Nazis because workers were especially important to the *volksgemeinschaft*, explains historian Jackson Spielvogel, since they were needed “to pursue rearmament to fulfill [the Nazis] major tasks of foreign policy.” For that reason, Spielvogel notes, there was a great “need for worker acceptance of the regime [in order] to make rearmament possible” (Spielvogel, p. 99).

Initially, “the Nazis were successful in convincing [many unemployed workers] that they could provide increased employment and reduce poverty” (Wilke in Bessel, p. 21). However, to achieve *Gleichschaltung* and bring all workers into line with Nazi ideology, the Nazis used tactics such as “[bringing] in storm troopers from neighboring

villages to seize the assets of working-class organizations” (Wilke in Bessel, p. 20). This was done to ensure that workers could not voice their grievances about Nazi policies. As a result, workers were forced to suffer with low wages, while the prices of food items needed for daily consumption skyrocketed (Botwinick, p. 98-99, Report for Gestapo in Sax and Kuntz, p.464). Historian Rita Botwinick explains, “the economic welfare of individuals was never a concern of the Nazi hierarchy; the emphasis was always on doing what must be done to assure Germany’s victory in the coming war” (Botwinick, p. 99).

In order to get workers to comply with Nazi demands, the German Labor Front, which replaced the independent labor unions, promised workers a better life in the near future. Higher, more stable salaries, the availability of emergency loans, and the chance to get a better education were promised by this organization in order to improve the morale of workers (Botwinick, p.98). These assurances, as well as most of the programs created by the German Labor Front were designed to improve worker morale (Botwinick, p.98). Programs, such as Strength Through Joy were initiated to give workers the chance to attend various mediums of entertainment, such as concerts and sporting events that they could not have afford in previous times by participating in a weekly savings program. While another program, Beauty of Labor, a subdivision of the Strength Through Joy organization, attempted to improve working conditions, adding things such as, increased lighting and more decorative surroundings in the workplace (*Völkischer Beobachter* in Sax and Kuntz, p.270).

However, the Strength Through Joy program was not able to improve morale. The sentiment of workers became, “All must, of course, yield to the present pressure, but

whenever possible they show that they really have very little interest in all of Hitler's gibberish" (Social Democrats Report in Sax and Kuntz, p. 295). As another report prepared for the Gestapo confirms, while "Strength Through Joy is still accepted by a segment [of the workers]...a larger segment contends that the advantages of the organization are worthless if a worker is not in a position even to basically support his family..." (Report for Gestapo in Sax and Kuntz, p. 264) As a result of worker dissatisfaction with the Nazi regime, the number of people calling-out sick during the Second World War increased. These people who called out sick did not fear losing their jobs because there was already a shortage of labor. This form of rebellion enabled workers to undermine Nazi goals of expansion and helped to break down the *volksgemeinschaft* (SD Report in Sax and Kuntz, p. 296-97).

Farmers too, grew tired of the Nazi regime and this was supposed to be the group that the "continuation or destruction" of the German people depended on (Hitler in Sax and Kuntz, p. 267). Walter Darré, head of the farm and food ministries of the Reich, believed that "the Aryan race sprang from some mythical interaction of German blood and German soil" (Botwinick, p. 98). But while this propaganda claim helped Hitler to explain the so-called superiority of the Aryan race and to justify expansion, it did nothing to help farmers. Farmers were angered at the Nazi regime for actions, such as instituting production quotas and price controls on their goods (Botwinick, 98). While this was done for their own good, to help increase prices, farmers did not like to be told what and how much they could grow on their land. As a result, many farmers withheld food from the Nazis or refused to farm on their land, feeling that the Nazis had instituted a modified

form of collectivization, a communist principle, which the Nazis had promised to protect farmers against (Social Democrats Report, in Sax and Kuntz, p. 286-87). This resistance to Nazi policy had the effect of leaving fewer goods available for workers in the factories, causing workers to become angered at the Nazi regime because of the ensuing price increases caused by the shortage of goods.

Further dissatisfaction on the part of farmers came from the Hereditary Farm Law of 1933. This law was designed to prevent inherited farmland from being mortgaged or foreclosed on so that property rights or societal status would not be diminished. It was also intended to prevent farmland of fewer than three hundred and eight acres from being divided into smaller acres by requiring that the land be passed on to a single heir. With the land passed on to a single heir, it was seen as the heir's responsibility to take care of his brothers and sisters. However, as payment for their maintenance, the heir's brothers and sisters were required to work on the heir's land. Historian Rita Botwinick believes this maintenance payment had a resounding and "certain similarity to medieval serfdom (Botwinick, p. 98).

Instituting policies that failed to look after the best interests of all the individuals within each group in the *volksgemeinschaft* was the main reason why the Nazi attempt to acquire *Lebensraum* was not successful. Most of the policies they created were driven by their obsession to acquire more land at the expense of the needs of the German people. This lack of care for the German people helps to explain the reason why the *volksgemeinschaft* was a failure and also why Germany was defeated in World War II.