IB European History

Life in the III Reich: Part 1, 1933-1939

Sources: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (ushmm.org)

**The Nazi Economy and the Enslavement of German Labor**

One of Hitler’s claims to fame was the miraculous recovery of the German economy. Current research shows that German economic recovery began as early as 1932; Hitler simply received the credit for something that was already in motion the last days of Weimar. Under the Nazis, unemployment was reduced from six million in 1932, to 1.1 million in 1937, to less than a million by 1938. National production rose 102% from 1932 to 1937 and the national income of the III Reich doubled. To an observer in Germany in 1936 or 1937 the country was one massive beehive. The wheels of industry were humming and everybody seemed to be as busy as a bee. But the real basis of Germany’s recovery was rearmament, to which the Nazi government directed the energies of business and labor from 1934 on. Stalin was not far from the mark when he commented in 1937 that, “Nazi Germany represented the most advanced and corrupt stage of cannibalistic capitalism in the history of the world.” The reality was under the Nazi regime big business and German entrepreneurs made enormous profits at the expense of the German working class. German industrialists, business owners and bankers supported the Nazi party as early as 1929. This was because the Nazis were anti-labor. The Nazis painted the German labor movement as “Red.” National Socialism was anti-SPD and pathologically hated the KPD, the blood-enemy of the free market economy. In May 1933 the Nazi government crushed the German labor movement. The leadership of the SPD was decapitated and sent into the concentration camps, as union leaders were rounded up and arrested. A half a century of the most progressive labor legislation in the world was casually destroyed. By the end of 1933 the German worker had lost the right to strike, the right to negotiate wages and the right to change jobs. Thanks to the SPD and its agenda of German labor reform, in 1928 the average German worked a forty-hour week and earned ten times as much as his grandfather a generation earlier. That same year, wages had increased 21% since 1918, making the German worker the best paid in Europe. By the spring of 1936 after just three short years of National Socialism, blue collar Germans were working between 60 and 72 hours a week, were earning 25% less than in 1928 and were facing an increase in food prices between 27-40%. While the III Reich was a capitalist paradise for big money and big business it was a worker’s nightmare. If Karl Marx had thought European industrialization was bad in 1848, he would have been appalled at the excesses of Nazi exploitation of the German proletariat. The German Labor Front replaced organized labor on 24 October 1934. In theory the Labor Front represented the German worker. In reality it was one vast propaganda machine of the Nazi Party.

Deprived of a political voice in the Reichstag, deprived of their traditional political parties, deprived of his trade unions, deprived of the right to strike or even the right to quit for that matter, the German worker in the III Reich became an industrial serf. Whereas the Russian serf was chained to the mir and bound to the land of his boyar master, the German worker became a slave to his employer. The Law Regulating National Labor of 20 January 1934 put the German working class in their place and raised the business owner or the employer to his old position of absolute master. In a speech to the all-Nazi Reichstag in 1936 Hitler was quite frank about keeping wages low. “It has been the iron principle of the National Socialist Leadership not to permit any rise in the hourly wage rates but to raise income solely by an increase in performance.” In Nazi Germany where most wages were based on production, this meant that a worker could hope to earn more only by a speed-up and by longer hours. While the German worker was working longer hours for less pay, 1933-1938 profits for German business and industry increased 146%. Although virtually all Germans had jobs by 1936, the share of all German workers in the national income fell from 56% in the depression year of 1932 to 53% in the economic boom year of 1938. The take-home pay of the German worker shrank after 1933. Besides stiff income taxes, mandatory contributions to health, unemployment and disability insurance, compulsory dues for the National Labor Front, the German blue-collar worker saw taxes and fees eat away 35% of his gross pay. This compares to roughly 21% before 1933.

Ambivalence is a state of having simultaneous and conflicting feelings. Ambivalence best describes the feelings of many Germans towards the III Reich. American historian Peter Fritzsche poses a provocative question in his revisionist book *Life and Death in the III Reich* (2008). Fritzsche ponders whether it was possible for Germans to hate Hitler and the Nazis but to love the III Reich. Take the German working class, for example. Few German factory workers grumbled about the Nazis. On the one hand they were working longer hours for less pay. They had lost the right to strike, the right to change jobs and the right to negotiate labor contracts. Yet on the other hand, the 35 marks a week a German factory worker earned by 1936 was ten times higher than the unemployment check of 1932. The Nazis promised worldly goods and vacations, unthinkable to the average German worker during Weimar. The 1934 *Kraft durch Freude* (KdF or Strength-through-Joy) program organized by the Labor Front was seductive in itself. For 28 marks, or less than a typical week’s wages, a worker and his family could spend a week vacationing in the Rhine Valley, or in the Black Forest, or in the Bavarian Alps, or on the Baltic Coast. The Strength-through-Joy program offered a lucky few, chosen for hard work and party loyalty, a cruise on one of four KdF ocean liners built especially for the program. On the cruises, all passengers regardless of social status drew lots for their cabin accommodations, demonstrating to the German working class that the III Reich was truly a classless society. For 155 marks, ordinary German workers and their families could cruise through the Norwegian fjords or in the Italian Mediterranean. In 1938 alone, 180,000 German workers participated in the KdF program and went on vacations for the first time in their lives. In 1934, at the Berlin Automobile Show, Hitler announced that designer Ferdinand Porsche had drawn up plans for a KdF *Volkswagen* or “KdF People’s Car” and that the VW would be made available to citizens of even modest means. For 5 marks a week any German could buy government-issued savings stamps over a four-year period toward the purchase of one of Porsche’s glossy black, beetle-shaped cars. Spurred by a massive advertising campaign, in 1935 alone 336,668 Germans invested 280 million marks in the VW plan. In 1935 the Nazis opened the first *Autobahn* (interstate highway) in the world, connecting Berlin to Darmstadt and between 1933 and 1938 German, workers added 2000 miles to the *Führerautobahnen* (“highways for the Führer”). Thus the question in Fritzsche’s own words, “How did the German working class truly feel about the Nazis?”

**Education in the Nazi State**

“These boys and girls enter our organizations [at] ten years of age, and often for the first time get a little fresh air; after four years of the Young Folk they go on to the Hitler Youth, where we have them for another four years . . . And even if they are still not complete National Socialists, they go to Labor Service and are smoothed out there for another six, seven months . . . And whatever class consciousness or social status might still be left . . . the Wehrmacht [German armed forces] will take care of that.”-Adolf Hitler (1938)

From the 1920s onwards, the Nazi Party targeted German youth as a special audience for its propaganda messages. These messages emphasized that the Party was a movement of youth: dynamic, resilient, forward-looking, and hopeful. Millions of German young people were won over to Nazism in the classroom and through extracurricular activities. In January 1933, the Hitler Youth had only 50,000 members, but by the end of the year this figure had increased to more than 2 million. By 1936 membership in the Hitler Youth increased to 5.4 million before it became mandatory that same year. The German authorities then prohibited or dissolved competing youth organizations.

Education in the Third Reich served to indoctrinate students with the National Socialist worldview. Nazi scholars and educators glorified Nordic and other “Aryan” races, while denigrating Jews and other so-called inferior peoples as parasitic “bastard races” incapable of creating culture or civilization. With the Civil Service Act of April 1933, the Nazi regime purged the public school system of teachers deemed to be Jews or to be “politically unreliable.” Most educators, however, remained in their posts and joined the National Socialist Teachers League. 97% of all public school teachers, some 300,000 teachers, had joined the League by 1936. In fact, teachers joined the Nazi Party in greater numbers than any other profession in Germany.

Every person in the teaching profession, from kindergarten through the universities, had to join the National Socialist Teachers League in order to keep their jobs. The Civil Service of Act of 1937 further stipulated that all German teachers must be held, “responsible for the execution of the ideological and political *Gleichschaltung* (synchronization in the sense of ideological coordination) in accordance with the National Socialist doctrine and at any time to defend without reservation the Nazi State.” Jews of course were forbidden to teach. All teachers were required by law to take a loyalty oath to be, “loyal and obedient to the Führer, Adolf Hitler.” Teacher candidates had to attend a six-week observation camp where their views and character were studied by Nazi experts and reported to the Ministry of Education, which issued teacher licenses to teach based on the candidates’, “political and racial reliability.”

In the classroom and in the Hitler Youth, instruction aimed to produce race-conscious, obedient, self-sacrificing Germans who would be willing to die for Führer and Fatherland. Devotion to Adolf Hitler was a key component of Hitler Youth training. German young people celebrated his birthday (April 20)—a national holiday—for membership inductions. German adolescents swore allegiance to Hitler and pledged to serve the nation and its leader as future soldiers. Schools played an important role in spreading Nazi ideas to German youth. While censors removed some books from the classroom, German educators introduced new textbooks that taught students love for Hitler, obedience to state authority, militarism, racism, and anti-Semitism. From their first days in school, German children were indoctrinated with the cult of Adolf Hitler. His portrait was a standard fixture in classrooms. Textbooks frequently described the thrill of a child seeing the German leader for the first time. Board games and toys for children served as another way to spread racial and political propaganda to German youth. The most popular children’s game during the III Reich was called *Juden Raus!* (Jews Get Out!) Played like monopoly, the goal of the game was to role dice and to round up Jews. The child that had sent the most Jews to Palestine was the winner.

Upon entering the classroom, all German school children were racially classified. German teachers all dutifully recorded hair and eye color, forehead width, the shape of the skull and the distance between a student’s eyes. This racial profile beginning in Kindergarten and continuing to the end of the child’s school career became part of the student’s school record which included grades, participation in sports, youth group activities and “political reliability.” For example from eight Aryan racial classifications, blonde hair and blue eyes earned a classification of Nordic, while brown hair and brown eyes was recorded as East Baltic.

Prior to 1933 the German public school and university system was the envy of the western world. Academic Germany was the epicenter of pure research and applied science. Academic freedom, that is the right to set curriculum and to determine methods of instruction at the local level, was a cherished principal going back two centuries. German schools of the Weimar Republic were rigorous, challenging and demanded critical thinking skills. All this changed in 1933. German schools and universities had been under the jurisdiction of local authorities. After 1933, all was brought under the iron rule of the Reich Minister of Science, Education and Popular Culture, Bernhard Rust. It was Rust who personally appointed the rectors and deans of the universities, who formerly had been elected full professors of the faculty. He appointed the leaders of the National Socialist Students’ Union, to which all university students had to belong, and the National Socialist Lecturers Union, comprising all university professors and instructors.

The result of so much Nazification was catastrophic for German education and for German learning. History was so falsified in the new textbooks and by the teachers in their lectures (For example, “Jesus Christ, like Alexander the Great, were both Aryans.”) that it became ludicrous. Nazi ideology polluted every aspect of the German curriculum. The teaching of “racial sciences,” trumpeting the Germans as the *Herrn Volk* (master race) and the Jews as the source of all social ills became an integral part of math, science and biology. In the University of Berlin alone, which had been one of the most prestigious academic institutions of Western Civilization, the new president of the university in 1934 was an ex-SA man with barely a high school education. He instituted twenty-five new courses in *Rassenkunde* (racial science) and by the time he had virtually destroyed all true academic courses in 1943, he had eighty-six courses connected with his old profession, vegetarian science.

The teaching of natural sciences, in which Germany had been so pre-eminent for generations, deteriorated rapidly. The brain drain was disastrous for the intellectual well being of the country. World renowned professors such as Einstein and Franck in physics, Haber, Willstätter and Warburg in chemistry were fired or forced to resign. Those who remained were hardened Nazis and went out of their way to apply the principles of National Socialism to every aspect of German education. They began to teach what they called *German physics*, *German chemistry*, *German biology*, and the most absurd of all, *German mathematics*. At every German high school and at every German university there were required courses entitled *The Jew and Science* or *The Parasitic Jew and the Destruction of Western Civilization*. The Ministry of Education demanded that in every German classroom, from Kindergarten to post-graduate degrees, German students must be taught that, “the Jews are intellectually inferior to the Aryan Master Race and that Jews fundamentally lack the ability to understand the truth.” And yet from 1905 to 1931, more German Jews had been awarded the Noble Prize than any other national group.

The *Nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalten*—National Political Institutes of Learning—(NAPOLA) were established to train the élite of Hitler’s Thousand-Year Reich. Thirty such schools were established in the Reich by 1936, two reserved just for girls. There were forty-three Adolf Hitler schools by 1943 with close to 16,000 students. The official title of the NAPOLA cadets was *Jungmann* (Plural: *Jungmannen*.) The NAPOLA Schools were organized and staffed by the SS. The uniforms of the NAPOLA were virtually identical to those of the SS; all that was missing was the double SS runes on the collar tab and the SS Deaths Head on the NAPOLA field cap. NAPOLA ranks within the schools were also identical to those in the SS. NAPOLA graduates were thus groomed to be the future leaders in the III Reich. The schools were designed to produce the best officers, doctors, engineers and scientists in Germany. Creating this élite involved hours of propaganda education to break down mental and physical resistance. The goal of the NAPOLA schools was to produce a core of blindly obedient men and women fully devoted to Adolf Hitler and the Aryan Master Race. 18% of all NAPOLA graduates joined the SS after graduation. This number represents six times the national average of SS volunteers. Those that did not join the SS usually went directly to Officer Training School in the Wehrmacht.

Though the Adolf Hitler schools were supposedly reserved for the crème de la crème of the III Reich, the NAPOLA schools had a very poor academic reputation. Hitler’s decision to Nazify German education in April 1934 had disastrous results. Prior to 1933, Weimar Germany was considered to have the best education system in the world. By 1943 many members of the Nazi Party did everything in their power to keep their sons and daughters out of the NAPOLA. The NAPOLA academic standards were simply too political and too dummied down for any hope of a quality education. The cost of such failure was great. By 1939, after six intense years of Nazification, the number of university students dropped by 50%, from 128,000 to 58,000. The decline in enrollment at the German institutes of technology that had been the best in the world before 1933 was even greater, from 20,000 to 8000. Academic standards were abysmally low. The brain-drain of German intellectuals leaving or being driven form the country was the III Reich’s loss but the free world’s gain. Heinrich Himmler, the leader of the SS, hamstrung and refused to fund Germany’s atomic energy program. It was one of the ironies of fate that the development of the atomic bomb in the United States owed so much to two men who had been exiled from the Nazi and Fascist dictatorships: Einstein from Germany and Fermi from Italy.

**National Socialist Youth Organizations**

The Hitler Youth (*Hitlerjugend* or HJ) and the League of German Girls (*Bund Deutsche Mädel* or BDM) were the primary tools that the Nazis used to shape the beliefs, thinking and actions of German youth. Youth leaders used tightly controlled group activities and staged propaganda events such as mass rallies full of ritual and spectacle to create the illusion of one national community reaching across class and religious divisions that characterized Germany before 1933. For this reason uniforms were everywhere in Nazi Germany. The uniform was not a symbol of militarism, but rather as a demonstration of “socialism” in National Socialism. With much of the population in uniform, the III Reich seemed to be a classless society.

Founded in 1926, the original purpose of the Hitler Youth was to train boys to enter the SA. After 1933, however, youth leaders sought to integrate boys into the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* (German Racial Community) and to prepare them for service as soldiers in the armed forces or, later, in the SS. Boxing was an integral part of HJ training. Boxing epitomized many of the Nazi ideals: the worship of violence, the victory of the strong over the weak, the glory of single combat. *Kampfball* (battle ball) was another popular Hitler Youth activity. Developed by the SA in 1925, Kampfball was played on a field 100 meters long by 100 meters wide. The goal of the game was to push a four-foot diameter ball over the line of, “the enemy,” that is, the opposing team. There were no rules. All was fair including biting, kicking, the gouging of eyes and testicle punches. Besides Kampfball Hitler Youth boys were trained in basic military tactics, specifically shooting and the throwing of live grenades. The HJ trained German youth to swim with full packs, to navigate and to fly gliders, and to survive in the wilderness on long overnight marches. Much of the appeal of the Hitler Youth was the Nazi obsession with nature. By 1933 Germany was one of the most heavily industrialized countries in the world. Much of the population lived in overcrowded cities. For German children to have the opportunity to spend time in the countryside away from the squalor of the inner city was both magnetic and seductive.

The Hitler Youth combined sports and outdoor activities with ideology. Similarly, the League of German Girls emphasized collective athletics, such as rhythmic gymnastics, which German health authorities deemed less strenuous to the female body and better geared to preparing them for motherhood. Their public displays of these values encouraged young men and women to abandon their individuality in favor of the goals of the Aryan collective. One consequence of the Nazi Youth Movement was a spike in teenage pregnancy. After 1933 teenage pregnancy rates were three times higher than during Weimar. One reason for this was the Nazi view of children born out of wedlock. Following the establishment of the SS *Lebensborn* (Well of Life) policy in December 1935 there was no designation for “illegitimate children” in the III Reich. The Nazi state guaranteed to care for children born out of wedlock to women whom the Nazi racial experts deemed, “racially suitable.” German women were encouraged to have as many children as possible. Hitler’s goal was to populate the III Reich with 100 million pure-blooded Aryans by 1950. To fulfill the Führer’s goal, Hitler Youth and League of German Girls were actively encouraged to have sex and to procreate *Hitlerkinder* “children for Hitler.” Babies born outside the institution of marriage were awarded the honor of having “Adolf Hitler” listed as the “father” on their birth certificates. The juxtaposition of so many HJ and BDM summer camps so close to each other provided multiple opportunities for promiscuous sex.

In 1936, membership in Nazi youth groups became mandatory for all boys and girls between the ages of ten and seventeen. After-school meetings and weekend camping trips sponsored by the Hitler Youth and the League of German Girls trained children to become faithful to the Nazi Party and the future leaders of the National Socialist state. By September 1939, over 765,000 young people served in leadership roles in Nazi youth organizations, which prepared them for such roles in the military and the German occupation bureaucracy. Upon reaching age eighteen, boys were required to enlist immediately into the Wehrmacht, the SS or into the Reich Labor Service, for which their activities in the Hitler Youth had prepared them. German girls at eighteen were required to spend a year on German farms called the *Landjahr* (year in the countryside). Their task was to help both in the house and in the fields. The girls lived either in the farmhouses or in small camps in rural districts from which they were taken by truck to the farms. Between the Landjahr, HJ and BDM summer camps, and the relaxed Nazi view of babies born out of wedlock, teenage pregnancy during the III Reich was a national epidemic.

**Women in the III Reich**

While German women during the Weimar Republic enjoyed the right to vote, full equality under the law, and were an integral part of Weimar society, the National Socialists were determined to relegate women to more traditional roles. *“Kinder, Küche, und Kirche”* (children, the kitchen and church) defined the Nazi view for German women. In May of 1934, German women were strongly urged by the Ministry of Propaganda to, "take hold of the frying pan, dust pan and broom and marry a man.”

Women played a vital role in Adolf Hitler's plan to create an ideal Volksgemeinschaft. Hitler believed a larger, more racially pure population would enhance Germany's military strength and provide settlers to colonize conquered territory in Eastern Europe. The Third Reich's aggressive population policy encouraged "racially pure" women to bear as many "Aryan" children as possible. This policy took its most radical form in December 1935 when SS leaders created the state-directed program known as *Lebensborn* (Fount of Life). In an extension of the SS Marriage Order of 1932, the 1936 Lebensborn ordinance required that every SS member should father four children, in or out of wedlock. Lebensborn homes sheltered illegitimate offspring and their mothers, provided birth documents and financial support, and recruited adoptive parents for the children. To further encourage motherhood, birth control centers were closed, abortion was made illegal (unless necessary in order to eradicate “genetic defects”), and maternity benefits were increased. Income tax allowances for dependent children were raised and large families enjoyed concessions on expenses like school fees and railway fares.

The Nazi state encouraged matrimony through marriage loans, dispensed family income supplements for each new child, publicly honored "child-rich" families. In December 1936 abortion (“the taking of German life”) became a capital crime. On 16 December 1938 Hitler ordered the creation of a special award for German mothers. *Das Ehrenkreuz der Deutschen Mutter* (The Cross of Honor of the German Mother), nicknamed the “rabbit award” by a cynical German population, consisted of three classes: 1st Class Order, Gold Cross was bestowed on German women with eight or more children; 2nd Class Order, Silver Cross was for mothers of six to seven children; 3rd Class Order, Bronze Cross was awarded to German women with four to five children. Bearing “children for the Führer” was the primary National Socialist mandate for German women.

But it was imperative that only the “racially pure” were allowed to procreate. From 1935, couples needed a certificate of “fitness to marry” before a marriage license could be issued. From 1938, “unproductive” marriages (meaning, those in which no children resulted) could be ended. After 1941, couples found cohabitating after their marriage had been banned were sent to concentration camps. Mothers who failed to support their children’s education or refused to send them to Hitler Youth could face having their children removed from their care. The Nazi Party did well to infiltrate all aspects of family planning so as to benefit the state above all else.

The primary purpose of women became childbearing and rearing under Nazi control. Because of this, the economic freedom they experienced under the Weimar government was drastically changed after 1933. The Great Depression had caused massive unemployment. In order to alleviate this issue women were removed from the workplace through legislation and propaganda. In June 1933, the Law for the Reduction of Unemployment was passed encouraging women to leave work and get married. Generous loans were given to women who complied. In 1934, all married women were forced out of careers in medicine, the legal profession and the Civil Service. They were even declared ineligible for jury service for their inability to think logically. This kind of thinking also meant that politics and political activism was also out of reach for women. Women were banned from senior positions in the Nazi leadership and there were no female Nazi members of the Reichstag. There was of course no way to reverse this under Nazi leadership since only 10% of university entrants were female through the 1930s. Only a shortage of technical experts and a labor shortage during rearmament would lead to a relaxation of the policy. The best way to understand the Nazi policies toward women is to recognize them as complete and utter contradictions.