

PLEASURE, POWER, AND EVERYDAY LIFE UNDER NATIONAL SOCIALISM

Workshop held at the GHI Paris, September 13–14, 2007. Co-organized by the GHI Paris, the Institut d'histoire du temps présent (Paris), GHI Washington and GHI London, with support from the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung. Conveners: Fabrice d'Almeida (Institut d'histoire du temps présent), Corey Ross (University of Birmingham), Pamela Swett (McMaster University), and Richard F. Wetzell (GHI). Participants: Elizabeth Harvey (University of Nottingham), Dagmar Herzog (CUNY Graduate Center), Jean-Luc Leleu (University of Caen), Chris Lorenz (University of Amsterdam), Patrick Major (University of Warwick), Stefan Martens (GHI Paris), Patrick Merziger (Free University, Berlin), Daniel Mühlenfeld (University of Jena), David Pan (University of California, Irvine), Werner Paravicini (GHI Paris), Martin Sabrow (Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung, Potsdam), Jonathan Wiesen (Southern Illinois University, Carbondale).

Is it odd that the Germans also enjoyed themselves during the Nazi period and the Second World War? Insofar as the dark sides of National Socialism have rightly stood in the foreground of research, this notion may seem somewhat disconcerting. Naturally, most contemporaries never even asked the question, since entertainment, fun, and pleasure were integral parts of everyday life in Germany as elsewhere. Social historical research has become more conscious of this over recent years, as evidenced in a plethora of studies on topics such as sport, film, radio, leisure time, tourism, sexuality, and smoking in the Third Reich. The focus of the conference "Pleasure, Power, and Everyday Life under National Socialism" was not so much the phenomenon of pleasure per se but rather the many interconnections between the aim of securing and stabilizing the Nazi regime, on the one hand, and the popular desire for entertainment and diversion on the other. The conference was therefore not intended only for historians, but instead sought to pursue an interdisciplinary approach of interest also to German Studies scholars as well as scholars of media and communications.

After a word of welcome from Stefan Martens, Corey Ross opened the conference on behalf of the organizers with an introduction that emphasized the importance of entertainment and pleasure as a source of social placation and stability in the twentieth century. Although the Nazis could not possibly exploit every cultural event and free-time activity for their own ends, entertainment and diversion were an extremely useful part of the wider strategy to maximize popular satisfaction with—and

thus also acceptance of—the regime. In this sense, large-scale sporting events, *Kraft durch Freude*-sponsored tourism, or popular feature films often promised greater political advantage than repressive measures or deliberate attempts at indoctrination.

The extent to which a desire for pleasure became a matter of concern for the National Socialist leadership was the subject of the first section of the conference. Daniel Mühlenfeld explored the ambiguous relationship between pleasure and a sense of duty. Using NSDAP members and functionaries as examples, he demonstrated how the early adherents to the movement in particular developed a diffuse and potentially pleasurable understanding of duty to the Fatherland. Yet even this feeling of responsibility and importance did not stop many party functionaries and *Blockleiter* from soon perceiving their activities as tiresome chores. As a result, beer-drenched evenings of reverie often served as compensation. Pleasure was not in itself a meaningful category in the self-understanding of the Nazi leadership, who idealized the Spartan figure of the “political soldier” instead. Stories of drunken excesses and the like thus undermined the image they sought to convey. Mühlenfeld singled out two self-reinforcing tendencies at work. While the boozed-up sociability was necessary to maintain enthusiasm for rendering service to the party, it simultaneously damaged the image of Nazi functionaries. News of such drunken antics greatly detracted from the popular reputation of the party, not least due to its constant claims to moral superiority over its opponents. In turn, this loss of prestige further undermined the attractiveness of working for the party.

In his commentary on the first section, Chris Lorenz first turned to the basic arguments of Thymian Bussemer’s paper on “Propaganda und Unterhaltung im Nationalsozialismus.” Bussemer, who unfortunately could not attend, showed how the propaganda specialists centered around Goebbels continually tried to deploy the culture of popular entertainment as an object of political persuasion. For instance, following the tactics of the Trojan horse, apparently “unpolitical” feature films were intended at the very least to minimize dissatisfaction and divert attention away from the problems of everyday life, and at best to encourage a positive identification with the political system. Bussemer confirmed the widely held thesis that there were no “unpolitical” films under National Socialism, but at the most films without manifest political content. The thesis of an active and selective audience was a matter of universal consensus in the broader discussion.

The second section, on the “Aesthetics of Pleasure,” investigated the realms of literature and photography. David Pan’s contribution on Nazi theater explained that despite the competition between Göring and Goebbels for pre-eminence in the Berlin theater scene, both men prioritized the

entertainment value of the theater over propagandistic intentions. Using Goethe's *Faust* as an example, Pan endeavored to trace how the controlled production of theatrical "pleasure" was realized in practice. He argued that certain central themes of the play, in particular the "escapist" episode of the *Walpurgisnacht* in relation to the values conveyed by the Gretchen tragedy, fit effortlessly into the National Socialist worldview. Contrary to the widely held opinion that the *Faust* text was ideologically distorted for these productions, Pan emphasized rather the overarching effort to remain as faithful to the original text as possible. His argument, which led to lively debate, was that the willingness of the Nazis to use Goethe's original text was a logical consequence of the aesthetic structure of *Faust* itself. Although Goethe opposes Nazi ideology in fundamental respects—as defender of an individualistic view of humankind at odds with the idea of self-sacrifice for the good of the collective—in the case of *Werther*, the audience reaction showed that it did not understand Goethe's parody of sacrifice. In *Faust*, Gretchen embodies the ideal of self-sacrifice. The contemporary reception of *Faust* in this sense reflects the enthusiasm of the Nazis for the idea of a restless striving for "something higher."

In the next paper, Elizabeth Harvey presented three female photographers who worked as travel reporters during the Nazi period. Special attention was devoted to the photographic essays of Liselotte Purper during the first half of the war. As Harvey argued, the mandatory membership in the *Reichsverband der deutschen Presse* helped make the illustrated reports of these women into a useful tool for underscoring the alleged normality and tolerance of the Third Reich in the lands it occupied. These reports were a symbol of the broader contradictions of Nazi cultural policy, in this case satisfying the curiosity and Wanderlust of readers while at the same time emphasizing their own cultural particularity. The thematic selection of the images and the way in which they were assembled led Harvey to the conclusion that these photographers were not merely purveyors of popular visual pleasure, but must also be seen as propagandists of the Third Reich.

The third section, on "Pleasure and Entertainment," dealt with various forms of popular amusement in the Third Reich. In the first paper, Patrick Merziger explored the concept of "German Humor" in literature and other media of the period. Contrary to the conventional view that laughing was "lethal" under the totalitarian regime, he stressed the absolutely central role played by comical forms and genres in the popular media. Satire, for example, functioned—in stark contrast to the subversive criticism along the lines of Kurt Tucholsky—as a means of discrediting the opponents of state propaganda. Such genuinely popular comedy, whether initiated or supported by the state, is what Merziger means

by “German Humor,” which he sees as having been hitherto undervalued by researchers. Alongside radio, film, and television, he emphasized the popularity of “light” literature as a medium of communication. Here, too, “German Humor” was characterized above all by depictions of minor deviations from the norm that were not so serious as to exclude the individual completely from the collective. Whether Merziger’s description of the idealized “authentic German who leads his life with humor”, in contrast to the “earnest (Jewish) foreigner”, suffices as a definition for the concept of “German Humor” as a special form of German literature was questioned in the discussion by Martin Sabrow. Sabrow also suggested that the concept of “caricature” was more appropriate than “satire” when discussing state-sponsored publications.

Corey Ross then spoke about media-based entertainments during the war, focusing especially on their contradictory roles as a means of mobilization and distraction. He described how audiences streamed in record numbers into the cinema after the outbreak of the war to gain a vicarious experience of the fighting—up-to-date newsreel reports and (macabre) diversion in one, a potent amalgam of political mobilization and aesthetic appeal. Ross took the extraordinarily popular film *Wunschkonzert* (1940) as an example to illustrate how a romantic/dramatic plot was interwoven with contemporary events in order to suggest a convergence of individual and collective fate during the war. In this sense, the ideology of *Volksgemeinschaft*, though prioritizing collective over individual interests, could itself seek support through the promise of individual fulfillment. Popular music of the period similarly propounded a sometimes overbearing sense of optimism that, especially after the summer of 1941, sought to distract attention from the rising tide of suffering and doubts about the final victory. The importance of radio and film as a means of entertainment and escapism—rather than the mobilization function of the first half of the war—only increased with the closure of theaters and concert halls in the summer of 1944. Whereas Goebbels interpreted the continually high demand for film in early 1945 as evidence that the nation stood behind the leadership through thick and thin, other reports more accurately suggested that the seemingly hedonistic exploitation of every available source of pleasure reflected the attitude of living merely day-to-day. Thus the “infotainment” formula of the successful early war years was, for both producers and consumers, increasingly displaced by escapism.

Capping off the third section, Patrick Major considered what he views as the “love-hate” relationship between Hollywood and Nazi Germany. On one level, Nazi themes presented Hollywood with rich material for developing a combination of spy and gangster films with *film noir*, while on another level Hollywood itself made a strong distinction be-

tween “bad” members of the political and military elite and the “good” average German (a distinction that was kept after the war as well so as not to scare off the lucrative German market). In its Hollywood depiction, Nazi Germany was both a negative stereotype of “jackbooted nightmare” and a positive cliché of a pre-modern society, all of which reflected the views and escapist expectations of the Anglo-American audiences. It is thus worth emphasizing that wartime “escapism” and entertainment were primary goals of Hollywood as well as of Babelsberg, and that Hollywood producers were generally reluctant to jeopardize the entertainment value of their films in the interest of conveying certain political messages. The Office of War Information, which was present throughout Hollywood, was therefore only moderately successful. Major nonetheless emphasized that the US film industry, above all in its relation to Nazi Germany, was by no means “apolitical.” It was more a matter of producers wanting to decide for themselves how to combine entertainment with political messages rather than bowing to government guidelines.

In his commentary on this section, Richard Wetzell focused attention on the ideological intentions of National Socialist-controlled entertainment and their degree of success. Clearly, humor that was recognizably an attempt at political disciplining would exert little if any popular attraction. Yet an interesting question is whether there were nonetheless certain indirect disciplining effects at work. Could one, for instance, interpret the officially invoked and—to all appearances—genuinely popular wish for a “jolly community” as a form of indirect support for the regime and its policies?

In the fourth section, on the theme of “Sex under National Socialism,” Dagmar Herzog began by reminding the audience that the sexual politics of the Third Reich do not fit readily into any available conceptual framework. However, she highlighted the potential usefulness of Herbert Marcuse’s “repressive desublimation” theory, and she lauded Marcuse’s early recognition that the Nazi obsession with race would inevitably require a reorganization of sexual practices. Herzog went on to list four ways in which sexuality was important to the regime, pointedly rejecting the previous consensus that the sexual politics of the Third Reich were unambiguously repressive. She argued that trends toward sexual liberation, in combination with the undoubtedly repressive treatment of certain practices, contributed to the attractiveness of National Socialism. In the ensuing discussion, participants debated whether the concept of “liberalization” can fruitfully be applied to Nazi Germany, not least its sexual and reproductive policies.

Pamela Swett’s paper connected to this theme by exploring the relationship between the state, industry, and the sex lives of consumers through the example of a popular male impotence remedy (*Titus-Perlen*)

invented by the famous Jewish sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld. The coming of the Third Reich forced Hirschfeld to flee from Germany, and the company quickly reworked its ad campaigns to fit the new market. If the happiness of the married couple served as the central marketing strategy during the Weimar Republic, after the Nazi takeover, the focus shifted more and more to the pleasure of the man alone, whose sexual fulfillment was central to an overall sense of youthful vigor and spiritual contentment. At first glance, downplaying the language of sexual success for the married couple can be seen as a result of the era's sexual conservatism. However, Swett argued instead that the ads reflect the Nazi period's glorification of the male body and its emphasis on the necessity of sex beyond the bounds of marriage and procreation.

The sex lives of SS soldiers in occupied Western Europe was the subject of the paper by Jean-Luc Leleu. According to Leleu, the SS leadership asserted its authority to control the sex lives of its soldiers on two grounds: first, as a means of limiting sexually transmitted diseases and raising the "Aryan" birth rate, and second, as a system of rewards and penalties designed to guarantee the unconditional obedience of the troops. The suggestion put forward in the discussion that extensive or rapacious sexual activity on the part of soldiers may in some way have helped overcome the inhibition to kill was flatly rejected by Leleu on the basis of the evidence at his disposal. In his view, a far more convincing and important cause for unbridled violence was the excessive consumption of alcohol, which indeed was deliberately encouraged.

"Private Pleasure versus Public Utility" was the theme of the final section, which Jonathan Wiesen opened with an analysis of the rich material of the Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung (GfK). The GfK was established in 1935 by leading representatives of industry who, like their counterparts elsewhere, wanted to gain better insight into consumer behavior. The reports of the GfK experts on customer wishes thus showed little evidence of tailoring their findings to ideological concerns. Rather, the dominant image of the consumer that emerged was one who simply sought the fulfillment of individual desires with little regard for political matters or priorities. For instance, in spite of the massive anti-smoking campaigns of the Nazis, cigarette sales peaked around the end of the 1930s. Perhaps precisely because of the domestic and international political tensions, many Germans increasingly reached for their cigarettes as a means of relaxation and diversion. Overall, the GfK reports vividly demonstrate the limits of ideological control over popular desires. The analyses of consumer researchers reveal instead the tensions between power and pleasure in the Third Reich, between Nazi ideas and reality. The continuing evolution of consumer behavior and expectations could not be halted in the Third Reich any more than elsewhere, and thus

closely paralleled contemporary developments in other advanced industrial societies.

In the second paper of this section Fabrice d'Almeida investigated the role of luxury goods in the Third Reich and the various meanings they possessed for their users. He argued that luxuries were considered legitimate in National Socialist ideology only as long as they benefited the Aryan race. An important means by which leading Nazis defined themselves as the elites of the new regime was indeed by publicly exhibiting their luxuries. Yet the luxuries enjoyed by the upper crust of Nazi Germany were not always seen in a positive light. Hitler had already condemned the inappropriate display of wealth in *Mein Kampf*, viewing it as a primary cause of social conflict. Insofar as Nazi elites demanded or at least expected to possess luxury goods, this meant that other groups, above all Jews, would inevitably be excluded from having them. After 1933, one's Aryan racial credentials played an increasingly important role in determining one's access to high-quality and expensive products. After the outbreak of the war, more and more Germans profited from the systematic plundering of the occupied territories.

In his commentary on the final section, Stefan Martens emphasized how much the image of National Socialism had changed in recent research. The old black-and-white stereotypes are increasingly being displaced by studies of everyday life and cultural practices that, like Wiesen's investigation of consumer behavior, paint a much more nuanced and colorful picture, in which the seeming "normality" of life under the Nazis finds its place. The key for future research was, in his view, to outline what characteristics were specific to Nazi Germany. In response to d'Almeida's paper, he also suggested an important distinction between private luxury, which most Germans disapproved of, and state-sponsored pomp, which was broadly accepted. Thus, whereas the corruption of Nazi officials was vigorously criticized and indeed punished, Göring's ostentatiously luxurious lifestyle was largely accepted—and cynically presented—as a part of his various official roles.

Finally, in his summary of the conference as a whole, Martin Sabrow began by posing the question of what the various contributions said about the current state of research on National Socialism. In the course of two days, it had become clear that many of the questions we are now asking revolve around everyday life and reflect the currency of cultural history approaches, thus moving beyond the old paradigm of the demonic NS state. Looking back, one might single out the appearance of Hans-Ulrich Thamer's book *Verführung und Gewalt* (1986) as the beginning of a gradual move away from the "special path" thesis of the 1970s and 1980s. We have become more and more adept at spotting societal trends that are largely independent of, or at least by no means reducible

to, certain political systems. Everyday “normality” has moved more and more into focus. The conference further demonstrated the advantages of adopting everyday-life approaches that allow us to view German society under the Nazis as more than just a “special case,” and thus help us more easily integrate it into transnational patterns and developments. The case of “pleasure” as an analytical category highlights the ambiguities and overlaps involved: In the relationship between pleasure and power, it served first and foremost the cause of entertainment and diversion, yet could also be harnessed by the regime as a means of mobilization. Sabrow therefore called for a more precise set of concepts in order to unravel the many complexities involved. “Pleasure” (*Vergnügen*) does not commonly appear in the sources of the period and is difficult to define with sufficient clarity. As a result, one runs the danger of unwittingly transposing present-day horizons of thought on to the period of National Socialism.

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