German Historical Institute
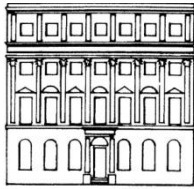# London

BULLETIN

German Society in the Nazi Era: **Volksgemeinschaft** *between Ideological Projection and Social Practice*, conference organized by the Institut für Zeitgeschichte München/Berlin and the German Historical Institute London and held at the GHIL, 25–7 Mar. 2010. Conveners: Horst Möller, Bernhard Gotto (IfZ, München/Berlin); Andreas Gestrich, Martina Steber (GHIL).

This conference began by referring to an earlier one. In 1979 the German Historical Institute London held a conference entitled 'Herrschaftsstruktur und Gesellschaft des Dritten Reiches', which is remembered mainly for its passionate and embittered debates.[1] At the time, the conference provided a forum for discussion in which 'intentionalists' and 'functionalists' confronted each other directly, thus raising the temperature of the debate,[2] and controversies about the retrospective evaluation of this conference pushed the discussion even further.[3] At the 1979 conference, one paper had seemed uncontroversial. Lothar Kettenacker had suggested that the term *Volksgemeinschaft* 'should not be dismissed as a mere propaganda phrase',[4] and called for acknowledgement that it went beyond 'propaganda and represented reality for the people'.[5] What had been considered a relatively uncontroversial statement in the polarized debate between

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[1] The proceedings were published as Gerhard Hirschfeld and Lothar Kettenacker (eds.), *Der 'Führerstaat': Mythos und Realität. Studien zur Struktur und Politik des Dritten Reiches* (Stuttgart, 1981).

[2] The terms 'intentionalists' and 'functionalists' were coined by Timothy Mason at this conference.

[3] See the report by Karl Heinz Bohrer, 'Hitler oder die Deutschen: Englisch-deutsche Historikerkonferenz über das Dritte Reich', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 25 May 1979, p. 23, and the discussion of Klaus Hildebrand's conference report, 'Nationalsozialismus ohne Hitler? Das Dritte Reich als Forschungsgegenstand der Geschichtswissenschaft', *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* (1980), 289–304, carried on in the journals *Geschichtsdidaktik* (1980), 325–7, (1981), 233–8; and *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* (1981), 197–204, 738–43.

[4] Bohrer, 'Hitler oder die Deutschen'.

[5] Hildebrand, 'Nationalsozialismus ohne Hitler', 295. See also Lothar Kettenacker, 'Sozialpsychologische Aspekte der Führer-Herrschaft', in Hirschfeld and Kettenacker (eds.), *Der 'Führerstaat'*, 98–132, esp. 111–18.

the 'intentionalists' and 'functionalists' of the late 1970s,[6] has for some years been the subject of intense discussions, and the GHIL, in cooperation with the Institut für Zeitgeschichte München/Berlin, once again provided a forum for direct confrontation. As Martina Steber (London) and Bernhard Gotto (Munich) explained in their introduction, the main purpose of the conference was to explore the scope and usefulness of the *Volksgemeinschaft* approach in a British–German dialogue. They argued that the *Volksgemeinschaft* should be seen as an 'imagined order' that, because of its action-driving character, had shaped Nazi society. Consequently, they suggested, the social dynamic deriving from the notion of *Volksgemeinschaft*, which held out a utopian promise and shaped a political programme, must be taken seriously. The connections that can be established between the *Volksgemeinschaft* approach and various other theoretical approaches and methods, they argued, represented one of its main potentials.

The papers delivered at the conference therefore took different perspectives. The first group of papers looked at the structural inequalities of Nazi society. Claus-Christian Szejnmann (Loughborough) examined the categories of class and race, and argued that class became less significant under National Socialism. Although social classes had largely remained in place, they had exerted little influence on attitudes, mentalities, and lifestyles. Race, by contrast, had produced a change at this level, as contemporaries had increasingly perceived their social surroundings in racist categories. Similar conclusions were reached by Winfried Süß (Potsdam). Starting from the position that the idea of social order associated with the *Volksgemeinschaft* was linked to practices of inclusion and exclusion, he asked how existing social inequalities changed, and new ones were created. Süß also stressed that inequalities in the social structure persisted, but argued that the increasingly racist structuring of society placed them in a new context and thus influenced their character. Elizabeth Harvey (Nottingham) investigated changes in relations

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[6] However, at the conference Martin Broszat pointed out that 'the unity of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, which was so strongly stressed in the propaganda . . . fell apart . . . in an increasing chaos of specific powers'. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, 'Einleitung', in Hirschfeld and Kettenacker (eds.), *Der 'Führerstaat'*, 9–19, at 18.

between men and women. In her view, the occupied areas of Eastern Europe in particular offered women activists chances to develop new forms of solidarity between the sexes via the notion of comradeship. Yet relations between the sexes in these areas were overlaid by the racist division between *Reichsdeutsche* and *Volksdeutsche*. While they, too, could have made a claim to equal rights, their relations had remained as hierarchical as those between the sexes.

The second group of papers focused on specific social groups and their position in Nazi society, concentrating on the extent of social cohesion in the 1930s and 1940s. Jill Stephenson (Edinburgh), looking at Württemberg villages, asked to what extent the Nazi aim to replace existing social communities was realized. With reference to the research hypothesis that the new mass media had produced a feeling of community embracing the whole of society, she pointed to the limited opportunities for listening to the radio or attending the cinema in rural areas. In other respects, too, Stephenson suggested, Nazi attempts to influence rural society were largely unsuccessful, so that we cannot see the impact of *Volksgemeinschaft* ideas and practices in Württemberg villages. The paper by Willi Oberkrome (Freiburg), looking at Nazi blueprints for rural communities and their resonance in agrarian society, followed on thematically from this. Against the background of a large-scale flight from the land, he argued, securing the continued existence of the rural population was a central challenge to which various Nazi drafts for order responded in different ways. However, these concepts, which also aspired to transform village life into a Nazi *Gemeinschaft*, did not succeed. Rüdiger Hachtmann (Potsdam), looking at functional elites, placed a second social group at the focus of attention. His paper concentrated on institutional places where members of the traditional elite and the new Nazi elite met regularly. He found that these meetings tended to result in the new Nazi elites adopting traditional patterns of behaviour and manners, while the traditional elites were not shaped by National Socialism to the same extent. Their commitment to Nazi aims, Hachtmann suggested, can be explained by their exposure to radical nationalism and militarism in the late Wilhelmine period. His conclusion that the elite was little changed by National Socialism was supported by Johannes Hürter (Munich) in his paper on the army generals. The social opening up and modernization of the officer corps had little impact on the generals, he found. Yet especially in the

1930s, there had been a consensus among them supporting the *Volksgemeinschaft* as a vision of a nation freed from internal tensions—racial exclusion was not seen as part of this vision. In his paper on the relationship between religion and National Socialism, Friedrich Wilhelm Graf (Munich) also underlined the potential of the *Volksgemeinschaft* idea to link up with other concepts. Both components of the word, *Volk* and *Gemeinschaft*, had offered theologians many possible connections. Consequently, the revolution of 1933 represented a broad canvas on which theologians had projected various expectations, going as far as hoping for a wide-ranging re-Christianization, while rejecting central elements of Nazi ideology.

A third group of papers asked more widely about perceptions of Nazi policies and the attitudes of society as a whole. In his analysis of perceptions of concentration camps in the 1930s, Nikolaus Wachsmann (London) pointed out that these must be assessed differently for different social groups at different times. By distinguishing between official and private knowledge, he was able to show that in 1933 there was an extensive private awareness of the camps, although it varied by social class and region. By the end of the 1930s, this knowledge was limited to social groups on the margins of society. In her paper Birthe Kundrus (Hamburg) investigated social perceptions of Nazi consumption policy, arguing that the Nazis had used the socially utopian character of consumption to make their vision of the *Volksgemeinschaft* more plausible. Yet the promise of a future *völkische Konsumgemeinschaft* had remained ambivalent, and the danger of disappointment was always inherent in it. In practice, therefore, sophisticated crisis management was required, as Kundrus showed using the example of family maintenance during the war. Nick Stargardt (Oxford) in his paper dealt with the social legitimation of the war and proposed a new psychological periodization. He concentrated on the long middle phase of the war, from December 1941 to December 1944, when the end was no longer expected, but self-sacrifice was not yet pointless. During this period support for the war did not decline in a linear manner, he explained. Rather, we see the public mood swinging between hope and fear. Stargardt used two examples to show that the feeling of powerlessness gave rise to even more radical support for the war.

While the papers discussed so far all examined the attitude of the German people and thus the mental integration of German society

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into the Nazi state, a fourth group looked at the functional integration of society by means of social praxis.[7] In his paper Detlef Schmiechen-Ackermann (Hanover) spoke in support of *Volksgemeinschaft* as an analytical concept. Using examples of social and political control in National Socialism, he emphasized that *Volksgemeinschaft* had been produced not following a top-down model, but in social practices. In his paper, Armin Nolzen (Bochum) identified six strategic practices used by the Nazi Party. Of these, he focused most closely on registration, ideological training, and social assistance. The vision of the *Volksgemeinschaft* attained central significance within these, he suggested, and its application produced a (self-)binding power between the Nazi Party and German society. In this way Nolzen identified linkages between a social history of the Nazi state informed by system theory. Nicole Kramer (Potsdam) was interested in the mobilization of women in the war, and in the entanglement between Nazi rule and society created by social praxis. She also emphasized the significance of Nazi organizations which, as networks of communication, both carried propaganda into society 'from above' and offered opportunities to articulate dissatisfaction 'from below'. Kramer stressed that women's work for survival in the war had not been a private matter, but was embedded in a network of relationships between *Herrschaft* and society identified by the term *Volksgemeinschaft*. Nazi organizations also played a part in the paper by Dieter Pohl (Munich), which dealt with society's empowerment and disempowerment. After the *Gleichschaltung* of 1933, there could be no question of a frozen society. The expansion of the system of functionaries and the conquests of the war in particular meant that many new positions of power were created which, within the boundaries set by the regime, had extended society's scope for action. Pohl emphasized that most of these newly created minor functionaries worked in line with the regime's demands, but did not necessarily ideologically identify with it. The relationship between ideology and social praxis was the theme of Frank Bajohr's (Hamburg) paper. Taking three examples, he argued that social commitment should be measured not by individual attitudes, but by actual behaviour. He

[7] Michael Wildt's paper on the connection between violence and social change was to have been part of this session, but unfortunately he was unable to attend because of illness.

emphasized the significance of individual interests for participation in the practices of Nazi rule and concluded that social integration under National Socialism was the result less of ideological conversion than of social praxis. Regardless of the attitudes of individual actors, they had all contributed to the creation of the social hierarchies of the *Volksgemeinschaft* through their behaviour. However, Lutz Raphael's (Trier) deliberations showed that an analysis of practices could also contribute to a better understanding of Nazi ideology. Raphael suggested that research should focus less on the effect of Nazi ideology than on its production. This should be imagined as a field of ideas, he said, which could attach to many different notions of order, and not as a set of fixed beliefs. This ideological field, within which *Volksgemeinschaft* represented an important concept, defined what could be said and what could be thought during the Nazi period, and pluralism and substantive differences were permitted within its borders. Specific practices of participation, especially among experts, had been associated with this discursive field, he claimed.

The final group of papers complemented these contributions, which focused strongly on the Nazi period, by taking a longer-term perspective. Andreas Wirsching (Augsburg) concentrated on the interaction between the public and the private sphere from the 1920s, which he saw as especially significant for an understanding of the social and cultural function of the *Volksgemeinschaft* idea. The central motif of this interaction, he suggested, was a longing for 'normality' and 'private happiness' which grew out of a feeling that individual life paths had been blocked. Even before 1933 the Germans had seen themselves not only politically, but also privately, as a 'community of victims' which would have to be overcome in 'battle'. The success of National Socialism was firmly grounded on this mental image, to which it appealed via its vision of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Ulrich Herbert (Freiburg) investigated the transition from National Socialism to the Federal Republic, concentrating on five different factors. He examined the social structure, in particular, the experience of contemporaries and their relevance for this political transformation. In addition to strengthening social mobility and individualization, wartime experiences produced expectations of stability and the rule of law, which the Federal Republic ultimately delivered. A comparison with other European societies showed, he suggested, that

Germany's long-term development was not influenced by the National Socialists. In his paper, Richard Bessel (York) asked about the repercussions of the *Volksgemeinschaft* for the transition to the German Democratic Republic. Instead of strengthening solidarity and social harmony, the final phase of the war had produced social isolation and self-pity, leaving behind only the belief that the Germans were part of a 'community of victims'. Thus Bessel suggested that after 1945, forms of communalization were not directly based on the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*. However he pointed out that despite the impossibility of a public debate, the awareness of being a 'community of victims' had also been preserved in the private sphere in the GDR. This resulted in the sense of community splitting into a public and a private part.

This account of the papers in terms of their theoretical approaches makes clear that the term *Volksgemeinschaft* was used in different ways at the conference. In his keynote lecture, Ian Kershaw (Sheffield) identified three overlapping ways of using the term *Volksgemeinschaft*. It was employed, he explained, to explore social change, the affective integration of the people, and the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion. Even if the concept had explanatory power with respect to social mobilization during the Nazi period, he said, the term as a whole was 'not a gift', and was associated with various problems. These kept coming up in the discussions. For example, the temporal scope of the concept was not made clear in the discussions. While Kershaw put the focus on the 1930s, in many papers the period of the war itself was crucial. In his paper Christopher Browning (Illinois) argued that a double connection existed between the idea of the *Volksgemeinschaft* and the Holocaust. Ideologically, the reshaping of the 'spirit of 1914' into an exclusively conceived *Volksgemeinschaft* concept had been of central significance. In addition, the perpetrators of the Holocaust had been able to see their actions as necessary to preserve the *Volksgemeinschaft*. However, there was general agreement that the annihilation of the European Jews could not be explained by reference to the *Volksgemeinschaft* alone. Hans Mommsen (Bochum) in particular pointed to the danger of losing sight of political decision-making processes by focusing on the *Volksgemeinschaft* concept. From the opposite perspective, this was confirmed by Thomas Schaarschmidt (Potsdam), whose paper emphasized the role of the Nazi *Gaue* in mobilizing for war as opposed to the older view

of dysfunctional and self-destructive competition between them. In his paper, which concentrated on the political system, Schaarschmidt paid little attention to the *Volksgemeinschaft*. The question of to what extent the *Volksgemeinschaft* concept had an inherent moral dimension gave rise to a controversial discussion. One objection was that it turned the whole population into 'perpetrators' by claiming that all Germans had become *Volksgenossen*. Against this, it was argued that functional integration through social practices could co-exist with very different motives and convictions. The objections raised by Ulrich Herbert and Birthe Kundrus—convincing precisely because of their moral quality—that the *Volksgemeinschaft* concept suppressed the 'just' who had tried to distance themselves from National Socialism as much as the experiences and perspectives of those who were excluded from it, showed that a simple moralizing approach was inadequate. Ultimately, behind the moralizing objection there seemed to be more fundamental issues concerning the conditions under which individuals acted, subjective identity in dictatorships, and the criteria which we use to assess them. Mary Fulbrook (London) pointed out the basic similarities with the GDR, and called for the development of a broader theoretical concept to take account of conditions when asking how actors behaved and rationalized their behaviour in dictatorships. Whether ambiguous ways of behaving and multiple identities can be treated adequately, and where responsibility for individual behaviour lies—with the conditions imposed by the dictatorship, with the behaviour itself, with the inner attitude, with subjective identity—are questions that will have to be discussed further in future. The question of whether *Volksgemeinschaft* should be seen as a concept or an important subject of research on the Nazis gave rise to a discussion that was no less controversial, and remained open at the end of the conference. Ulrich Herbert and Mary Fulbrook in particular pointed out the need to distinguish consistently between methods of analysis and the subject of research. To understand *Volksgemeinschaft* as an analytical concept, they said, involves the risk of circular argument. In addition, they suggested, the concept lacks analytical force, as all types of behaviour could potentially be understood as participation, thus forfeiting any differentiation. Instead of taking the *Volksgemeinschaft* as a starting point, they proposed, research should start from specific questions. Others clearly contradicted this view. Yet on precisely this point, statements by

advocates of the *Volksgemeinschaft* approach displayed a tentative convergence. Winfried Süß understood the term as an 'organizer of attention' on the basis of which specific questions must be developed, and Andreas Wirsching stressed the concept's heuristic potential when supplemented by concrete questions. In their concluding remarks, Martina Steber and Bernhard Gotto supported the *Volksgemeinschaft* approach, but spoke only of a 'medium-range term'. Despite the lively discussions, this conference, unlike its predecessor in 1979, will perhaps be remembered less for its polarizing effect than for opening up opportunities for further understanding. The planned publication in English of the conference proceedings should help to foster this.

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