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Essay

Was Pre-war Nazi Germany a Society Built on Consent or Terror?

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Abstract

In reference to Nazi Germany and Hitler's rise to power, there is a tendency to believe the public were forced and terrorised into complying with the Nazi order. However, when analyzing the occurrence of events, it is quite obvious that the public gave their consent when it came to the rise of the Nazi power. This paper will discuss how Hitler was able to use the failure of the Weimar government to attract the public, how he built the "People's Community" with the approval of all the sections included within the community, and finally how the documentary film *Triumph of the Will* shows the support the Germans had for Hitler and the Nazi regime.

Clearly the Nazis strove for a totality by targeting all categories of the state including men, women and even youth. Efficiency and productivity was their main objective and to make sure that occurred, society was built on a form of consent for people to believe in the new Nazi government. Hitler's constant attacks on the Weimar government were the main reason behind gaining the people's consent in building Nazi Germany. He began by pointing out the problems and issues the Germans were faced with following World War I, and spoke of how these issues were neglected by the Weimar



government (Spielvogel, 2004). It was clear the people had been persuaded when they found, in Hitler, someone publicly addressing their problems with willingness to fix them. He often spoke to the fact that Weimar was unable to repair the major economic problems Germany faced, and was able to attract an audience whilst taking advantage of their hope to create a better Germany (Spielvogel, 2004). In addition, Hitler also spoke of his disappointment with the Treaty of Versailles, thus gaining more support from the German public. Desperate for change, the people accepted Hitler's visions of rebuilding Germany (Spielvogel, 2004).

When constructing a new nationalistic community, the Nazis divided the society into segments they believed would eventually contribute as parts to a whole *Volksgemeinschaft*, or "people's community" of Germany (Burleigh & Wippermann, 1991). When Hitler first proposed the idea of having this people's community, a society where racially pure Aryans would live in equality without affecting their social status, the German public was eager to individually participate (Welch, 1993). In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's objective was to have the Aryan race thrive and eliminate others he believed unworthy of joining the community. Despite this quest for racial dominance and superiority in Germany, the public still chose to willingly support him (Hitler, 1943). Each sector within the *Volksgemeinschaft* were more focused on self-interest, rather than focusing on the impending call for racial war and unambiguous discrimination against other societies. The first sector besieged by the Nazis was the "youth", as they were

perceived to be the future and the continuity of the Nazi state. Influencing and indoctrinating the youth in Nazi ideology revived in them something to dedicate themselves to work toward (Burleigh & Wippermann, 1991). It became their ultimate goal, along with their respective families, to join the Nazi organisation for youth which would lead to unique opportunities including gaining a higher education (Burleigh & Wippermann, 1991). They believed that by joining and supporting the *Volksgemeinschaft*, their lives would be both determined and secured.

Moreover, another example of how different groups in German society were dedicated to the Nazi cause was the “mothers” of the Aryan race. Mothers were one of the intrinsically key sectors the Nazis believed to be essential in forming and perpetuating their community. Thus according to Nazi ideology, a woman’s role is most essential because they raise the children who will one day be producers in the *Volksgemeinschaft*. They were also expected to be efficient housewives; which is considered the foundation of the entire family structure (Burleigh & Wippermann, 1991). The support and role of women became absolutely essential to the success of mobilizing the German community, were put on pedestals, and truly believed in their newly found elevated status in Germany, and in the survival of the community. To further demonstrate this point, mothers with more than two children below 10 years old were awarded with an honour cross (Burleigh & Wippermann, 1991).

Mobilizing women to support the creation of the *Volksgemeinschaft* leads to the last sector, the “men”. Not unlike women, men were indoctrinated in Nazi ideology and willingly accepted their role as soldiers, workers, officials, and persons of significance who would guide and mentor the people of Germany. Men were seen as the present and convenient tool through which the Nazis spread their ideologies. The effect fathers would display on their own children, in their own households, was not only essential to the Reich but to the future (Burleigh & Wippermann, 1991). Clearly those supporting the Nazis knew there were opportunities for advancement in life, men eagerly supported the *Volksgemeinschaft* in the hope of gaining power by becoming officials within the Nazi organisation. This was also applicable to those who pursued more a more artistic passion, as opposed to joining the organisation in an official capacity. Examples of less bureaucratic employment are writers, musicians, and artists that knew that the Nazis would promote their works with the possibility of obtaining national fame (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016).

The approval of Germans for the community and the Nazi state is particularly obvious in *Triumph of the Will*, a documentary film which displays Nazi power and proficiency. In *Triumph of the Will*, Hitler addressed each and every sector of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, especially the youth, women and men, making sure that each of group had major significance within the state. An example of this is while Hitler was speaking to the “Hitler Youth”. Here, he addresses them as his own

youth, appearing as the father of the state while they were his children. He demonstrated himself as the father figure to Germany, while simultaneously being married to her (the motherland), (Riefenstahl, 2006). In the film, the youth were honoured and proud to stand in front of Hitler, showing their approval regarding how the state and community were constructed. Different scenarios in the film make clear that the common woman appeared to be joyful (Riefenstahl, 2006). Women shown were either standing in the crowded streets or in balconies waving to Hitler to show their support and dedication. They appear happy and welcoming, though affected by his charisma in ways where the women are humble, meek and meager in his presence. Yet, women were empowered by the Nazis given their role as perpetuator of life, the Aryan race and the Third Reich. The film shows how the Nazis addressed the emotions of Germans by highlighting important concepts like unity and loyalty which would guarantee them a better life (Riefenstahl, 2006). As *Triumph of the Will* plays, it is clear that Hitler's speeches invoked much emotion, something which could not be captured, in essence, by a newspaper report.

As previously stated, people were inspired by the Nazis' novel ideas which they believed would lead them to a better life and were encouraged by the new government, an accomplishment for Germans coming recently out of the imposed Weimar Republic. Workers had a rejuvenated sense of pride to perform for Hitler, fully dressed with their shovels, at the ready to demonstrate the ability of each sector to mobilize in the *Volksgemeinschaft* (Riefenstahl, 2006). Although,

Hitler's speeches were significant, much shrewder in giving people a sense of importance and prestige in what they were contributing to Germany, and to Hitler himself. Furthermore, the film was successful in spreading the hegemony of Nazi leadership, having been played in theatres and cinemas across Germany. This film became an important tool of propaganda where people in small towns and villages were to be motivated by the change from a weak Weimar to a strong nation-state within the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Hitler stated "we can stand for our enemies", implying that the new state was not only going to be much stronger than before, but it will take revenge for the presumed wrongdoing of all who punished Germany in the Great War (Riefenstahl, 2006). As demonstrated in the film, people were attracted to Nazi ideology because Germans were promised a renaissance of hope and pride, something for which there was a desperate outcry.

In conclusion, pre-war Nazi Germany was built with the consent of the people. It could be the case that during the war and by the end of the Nazi era people were terrorised into approving with what was occurring. Yet it is clear that from the very beginning, before Hitler had attained power, the people deeply approved of the idea of a Nazi state. This is particularly apparent as before his rise to power, Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* was a very lucid indicator of his ideas concerning racial policy and the public completely disregarded this ideology in favor of joining the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Additionally, those who desired and envisioned a better future for themselves and their families enthusiastically supported the Nazis whilst

disregarding notions of Aryan superiority at the expense of all others. Thus, not only was public consent behind the meteoric rise of the Nazis to power, but was responsible for the perpetuation of their ideology and implementation of their policies as seen with creating the *Volksgemeinschaft*, or people's community.

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