

The Social History of the Third Reich, 1933–1945

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THE SOCIAL
HISTORY
OF THE
THIRD REICH
1933-1945

Translated from the French by Janet Lloyd

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Introduction

THE DIFFICULTIES FACED
BY A HISTORY OF A SOCIETY
UNDER A TOTALITARIAN REGIME

Half a century after its collapse, is it possible to study the Third Reich with detachment? Some scholars in Germany are beginning to claim that it is, as if the reunification of their country has marked a new year zero. Let us be done with the rhetoric of prosecution and defense, they write: surely the years between 1933 and 1945 are no longer of interest to anyone but scholars and reclusive analysts, years which fascinate in the same measure as more ancient periods do.

If I question that ostensible "objectivization," it is not through any visceral anti-Germanism. However, that does not make the task any easier. For no field of study can be more confusing and taxing for a historian. The sources for the period are all polluted, and every word must be treated with suspicion. At every stage ethical debates arise, casting doubt upon the classical rules of methodology. Even history "starting at the bottom," the great innovation of recent years, may be suspected of "political incorrectness." So even a simple account of what is known, such as the present study, must be accompanied by an introductory description of the difficulties encountered in this research, many of which seem insoluble, and the methods chosen to resolve them.

The corrupt language used by Hitler and thousands of his imitators has long been exposed by Viktor Klemperer, who traced its influence even in the words of the most innocent of contemporary writers. But historians are somewhat at a loss when trying to cope with that strange amalgam of borrowings from romantic literature, religious texts, and the human sciences: the archaisms and vulgarities "of Novalis and Barnum"

and the whole vocabulary of *Kitsch*.¹ * One handy way to indicate to the reader that certain terms should be taken with a considerable pinch of salt would be to put these words and phrases in quotation marks. The most fastidious writers might go so far as do likewise with terms used by the opposite camp, such as "Nazi," an acronym that has always been pejorative. But at that rate historical discourse would become virtually unreadable.² In opposition to such exaggerated scruples, common sense suggests that words now accepted as current vocabulary (such as *führer*, Third Reich, Gestapo, SS, SA . . .) should not be translated or even underlined, and that simple equivalents should be proposed for overblown titles and bombastic expressions. Even then, all too many words remain loaded with sinister connotations, words that need to be stigmatized by some external sign each time they appear.

Even the term "Germans" has been the object of many distortions. As well as designating those inhabitants and citizens of the German state living within its original frontiers, it came to cover others who, with varying degrees of willingness, joined it such as Austrians, Sudetens and, during the war, all the "ethnic Germans" transported across Europe to settle in and reinforce the marches of the fatherland—men and women whose membership as German people was defined by the SS anthropologists in purely pseudoscientific terms. Some of these "Germans" were not even German speakers. In contrast, many others such as political exiles were stripped of their nationality or, as in the case of the Jews, their citizenship. There is no reason why a historian anxious to delimit his subject need follow the variations dictated by imperialism, a spirit of vengeance, or racist doctrine. But to avoid extending his field of vision beyond all reasonable measure, he must content himself with allusions to Austrians, Sudetens, and "ethnic Germans." And clearly, he should exclude neither the exiles—even if their dispersion throughout the world may force him to oversimplify—nor the Jews.

The interpretation of documents is even more delicate. It's

not that the deciphering of criminal correspondence presents great problems: all specialists agree that “special treatment” meant “to be killed.” But in less tragic domains, the fastidiousness of critics bent on precision may produce confusing or even contradictory results. On the one hand, the authorities received hundreds of reports from prefects, magistrates, and the *SD* (*Sicherheitsdienst*, the SS information service). The mandate of the SS, which was served by countless informers, was never to conceal the slightest signs of discontent: so presumably one can place one’s trust in the descriptions given by this veritable “early-warning” system.³ Yet it is possible that either as a result of professional pressures or in order to demonstrate the unpopularity of their rivals—the party mandarins—these policemen ascribed undue importance to what were in truth simply manifestations of disgruntlement with the regime. In any event, because of what was considered their exaggerated pessimism,⁴ their activities were certainly curtailed in 1944 following a decision from on high. The police reports thus need to be compared alongside the “reports from Germany” that clandestine militants of the Social Democratic Party and the *Neu Begonnen* group sent to their friends in exile—reports based on identical mandates of total objectivity. The picture that emerges constitutes as it were a negative of the *SD* photograph, showing a working class that is altogether passive if not positively won over by the regime! The symmetry goes even further, for the leading socialist organs, outraged by a pessimism that undermined their hopes, likewise decided to put an end to this correspondence.⁵ How is one to decide which picture to accept? The question is certainly of some importance, for on it depends whether or not the taboo of the immunity of the working class, no less, should be broken. The present state of research on this matter will be described below, but for the moment we should at least note that under this repressive state all written discourse, that of conformists and opponents alike, was affected by a bias: the police saw potential rebels on every side, while those who

resisted the regime detected cowards or accomplices everywhere.

The perversity of the system not only contaminates its legacy to posterity, namely the documents, but also forces whoever wishes to understand it to disobey a fundamental rule of the historian discipline. Historians cannot help remembering Marc Bloch's warning: "One cannot condemn or absolve without taking sides on a set of values that no longer stems from any positive science;"⁶ but at the same time, they cannot forget the virtually contemporary (1939) observation of Karl Barth: "To explain evil is to efface the scandal, and in a sense to accept it as natural, as inevitable . . ." ⁷ The one bids us to explain without judging; the other to judge without explaining. Historians must struggle to resolve the moral dilemma for themselves.

Fortunately the path to follow is well signposted. The same Karl Barth, meditating in 1945 on the notions of collective culpability and responsibility, wrote the following words which may seem to retract his earlier condemnation and to encourage historical research: "It is not primarily a matter of the crimes that took place, but rather . . . of the path that led—and was bound to lead—to those crimes (Ouradour, etc.)."⁸ But it is above all from the eighties onward that German and Anglo-Saxon historiography, fertile in methodological reflection, has provided us with guidelines. It has in particular set us on our guard against the form of moralistic judgmentalism that borrows its categories from a Manichaeian psychology, assuming the appearance of objective distancing but in truth only in order to excuse the poverty of its analyses. Thus Karl Ferdinand Werner, when examining the behavior of his former university teachers, issued the following warning: "The convictions that we shall discover [them to have held] themselves result from a historical process, not simply from their evident cleverness, blindness, foolishness, or malice."⁹ The historians of the Resistance for their part have become historians of many kinds of resistance, that is to say a whole spread of attitudes ranging between the two

extremes of submission and rebellion. Martin Broszat has suggested summarizing these using the term *Resistenz*, which might be translated as “passivity,” “immunity,” or better still “a refractory attitude,” while Ian Kershaw has suggested the English term “dissent” or “nonconformism.”¹⁰ This kind of classification has in its turn been criticized, in particular by the Canadian Michael Kater who regarded it as merely an artificial etiquette that was supposed to define subjective experiences but in truth made use of criteria that were anachronistic and moralistic; . . . yet he then went on to adopt it himself when he divided the doctors who were party members into fanatics and careerists on the one hand and, on the other those whose allegiance was coerced.¹¹ In the meantime M. Broszat had extended this somewhat Byzantine debate and, in an article that soon became famous, suggested a whole program for “the historization of National Socialism.” It involved avoiding anachronisms, not assuming that the end of the story was already known by the actors of its early days, nuancing the various types of support for the regime, and tracking back to before 1933 in order to illuminate the genesis of various patterns of behaviour.¹²

But that was not the end of the controversy. If one ruled out any kind of indictment even in the form of an indirect inventory of attitudes, was there not a risk of slipping into indulgence? Broszat himself was not suspected of promoting a whitewashing strategy, but others, encouraged by the conservative “swing” of public opinion in the late eighties, did seem to be tending in that direction however much they claimed the best of intentions. So the discussion started up again. What I have in mind here is *not* the all too well-known 1986 “quarrel of the historians” which was a spectacular and sterile kind of confrontation, but rather the slightly later dialogue between M. Broszat and Saul Friedländer which for its part truly was scholarly albeit sometimes somewhat strained.¹³ Simplifying slightly, it is fair to say that the two adversaries each in turn explored two fields, that of “history starting at the bottom” and that of the relations between history and memory. Broszat, the great initiator in the former

field, reckoned that purely political and ideological history “starting at the top” had certainly made a great contribution but had ended up with a “Manichaean construction” in which all one could make out were “goodies” and “baddies.” He thought it was now time to focus attention upon ordinary, more or less passive citizens and believed that this comprehensive approach, far from whitewashing them, would on the contrary reveal the full extent to which the criminal dimension of the regime infiltrated daily life. Friedländer in contrast reckoned that focusing on ordinary, everyday life in this way risked marginalizing the essential element, namely the violence and the crimes. Subsequently, when confronted with the memories of victims, in particular those of Jewish survivors, Broszat began by recognizing that the latter might “feel that they had been deprived of their own memories if scholarly research, with its typical academic arrogance, claimed a monopoly over the business of discovery and conceptualization.” But he nevertheless drew a contrast between the historians’ scholarly perception of the past and the victims’ myth (in the most noble sense of the word) of it. Whereas the latter reconstructed history moving backward from Auschwitz, the historians were bound to reject such teleology. At this point Friedländer more or less vehemently reintroduced the exigencies of morality: no, the historians could not claim to be more emancipated from their personal pasts than the survivors; and yes, Auschwitz did have to remain the focus of their reflections. This debate thus unfolded at a far higher level than the usual ritual accusations of left-wing moralism opposed by hypocritical absolutism that usually punctuate German university life. The lessons to be drawn from it are clear. The first stems from the line taken by Broszat: all the testimonies produced after 1945, both those recording great pain and those laying claim to clean consciences, ought to be treated quite differently or even reserved for separate studies; and the reason for this is that memory is quite a different matter from the history of the facts on which memory feeds.¹⁴ The other lesson is more difficult to follow for it endeavors to respect the warnings from

both sides. While avoiding the over-facile nature of an indictment, we must guard against the complicity that every author spontaneously feels with his subject. The endeavor to seek comprehension from a distance assuredly involves taking a chance, but dozens of works of social history at any rate prove that it is tenable and that, as Norbert Elias has observed apropos the Eichmann trial, “an attempt to explain is not necessarily an attempt to excuse.”¹⁵

Despite its objective appearance social history is thus, as much as if not more than rival disciplines, exposed to the triple temptation of moralism, cold aloofness, and empathy. It also needs to avoid certain methodological traps by which it in particular is beset.

When it describes the behavior of a group on the basis of the behavior of a handful of people assumed to be representative, there is a danger of it forgetting its specific task of studying collective societies. This happens above all in the cases of small minorities whose basic composition remains unclear: for example resistance groups, which the historian may tend to reduce to their leaders and martyrs; the university community, where an age-old respect leads to its consideration as a gallery of personalities, not a caste; or writers and artists who, having set themselves up as so many symbols, continue to be analyzed as such by their interpreters. . . . Strictly speaking, proper names ought to be eliminated. Although a few will appear in the present work, it is not on the grounds that they are representative but because their parallel biographies make it possible to include them together as a particular type: for instance an eminent philosopher, an eminent doctor, and an eminent composer whose involvement with National Socialism between 1933 and 1938 evolved following the same cycle of illusion, collusion, disillusion, and disgrace.

Next the historian is faced with the daunting problem of stratification. What frameworks of reference should be used? Social circles, orders (*Stände*), classes, professions, grass roots

communities? The first in that list is too vague. The second was, in the official literature of the period, no more than a rhetorical illusion designed to win over conservatives. Yet, among those conservatives, particularly in professions with pretensions toward autonomy which encompassed the various elites, the notion of the *Stände* remained rooted in the consciousness of individuals and at the very least served them as a defensive argument. Their history thus suggests that in their case at any rate this category is still usable. Third in the list, classes, is too polyvalent: even if one ignores the oversimplifications of the Third International and its heirs, the classes described by the Marxists and the Weberians can hardly be made to overlap with classes as conceived by Anglo-Saxon authors. One must therefore be resigned to adopting a double view. Of the classes described by the Marxists, let us ignore the "petite bourgeoisie," which is no more than a label designed to cover certain divergent interests, attitudes, and sentiments and is furthermore a deeply disparaging label. The "working class" did exist in 1933 or at least thought of itself as such; whether it subsequently became dislocated as a result of intimidation or flattery remains to be seen. This is even more true of the "ruling class," the economic, bureaucratic, and military elites whose internal rivalries and rivalry with the new party elite has been impressively studied by Franz Neumann.¹⁶ As for the threefold division into upper-middle, lower-middle, and lower classes, it has dominated Anglo-Saxon studies of electoral sociology and politics to such an extent that it is now impossible to ignore.

The professions for their part are easier to pick out, which no doubt accounts for the proliferation of monographs studying the journalists, officers, engineers, artisans, and so on in the Third Reich; that is to say the reciprocal relations between those professions and politics. For the years leading up to 1933 it is important to determine how much the various professions contributed to the battalions of electors and members of the party. The trouble is that each profession comprised its own aristocracy and its own masses, even its own plebs. Furthermore, an

exclusive use of this professional grid rests upon a number of assumptions. Thomas Childers, a relatively explicit author and a specialist on elections held in the twenties and thirties, thus declared that the professions are fundamental to determining social status and hence to a large extent voting patterns. In support of this assertion he points to the targeting of various economic sectors by the Nazi party's propaganda departments.¹⁷ However, another American specialist has questioned "the validity of the logic of the *cui bono*" and wonders whether the representation of interests really does determine a political movement.¹⁸ In other words, was it for exclusively economic reasons that a business proprietor, official, or artisan voted for the party, joined it, or became a militant supporter of it? It is dangerously tempting to fill the space separating a profession and the political domain by a circular argument, explaining the overrepresentation of a particular category amid the Nazi electors by its particular affinity with Nazism, and then explaining that this affinity is due to the image the party projected when targeting that category. . . .

Besides, once past the threshold represented by 1933, that kind of professional sociography applied to the supporters of the authorities and those in power does not really account for the nature of that power; it only explains "the conditions that rendered the autonomy of the political party possible."¹⁹ Was it not precisely in order to safeguard its own liberty against the appetites of the professions that the party's political leaders set up a no more than pseudocorporative structure and tried (with uneven success) to channel the professional lobbies into a wide range of "attached organizations"? Research accordingly needs to focus on the reverse relationship, namely the nazification of the professional bodies. And from their concrete activities rather than from the overall behavior of each social class, facts have been rediscovered that are both compromising and embarrassing to their collective honor (and to that of their successors, as can be seen from the hesitancy with which many present-day federations and trade unions confront their image in the

historians' mirror). It is not the denunciation of some leading figure's errors that provokes the greatest scandal (for the relevant corporation finds it easy enough to dissociate itself from those), but the revelation of evidence of the "continuum that stretched from 'normality' all the way to barbarity,"²⁰ from satisfaction in work well done and in one's own projected career, legitimate in itself, to first tolerance of and then cooperation in crime.

But that kind of study still did not reach down to life as it was concretely lived. What was needed was the microscope of "the history of daily life" in order to get down to the level of small communities: individual town quarters, workshops, parishes, and so on. This new discipline made its appearance in the eighties, not by chance but as a result of the rise of new generations. During this decade the age groups active in the Reich reached retirement and began to answer questions put to them by their grandchildren, who were less inhibited by respect and taboos than their parents had been. With the help of tape recorders oral history took off. Then came the exploration of local archives. For the first time (setting aside a handful of precursors) historians took an interest in "the ways in which individuals and groups had been touched by the effects of the system and how those effects, either as brakes or propellers, influenced the processes unfolding in society and in the State." The university researchers who collaborated with amateurs in these "history workshops" found themselves faced with a twofold task as historians: first they had to pick out "aspects of macrosociological structures such as a nation, or a class . . . that only became visible when refracted from below in the primary units of a particular sociocultural circle"; secondly, they had to discover in preceding decades the origins of "life experiences" that subsequently led to greater or lesser degrees of acceptance or rejection of the regime.²¹

Distinguished university professors, even left-wing ones, claimed that pretentious terms such as "system" or "structures" made up for elements of weakness in their thought. In response,

M. Broszat on one hand and proponents of the new historical method on the other set out their theory in a series of programmatic texts. What had to be done was test out the validity of general theories (such as fascism, etc.) at the level of micro-societies: find out how overarching political and social structures affected the grassroots level through day to day events; study the pressures exerted by the Nazi apparatus upon modest and apparently apolitical people; and investigate how fascism pervaded colloquial discourse as the latter digested propaganda and transformed it into an ongoing disposition toward, for instance, a permanent competitiveness (at which point Pierre Bourdieu would be cited).²² This was a very political program and one which on that very account rebuffed criticisms of the partisans of “grand history.” But at the same time it aroused the suspicions of right-minded people alarmed at the possibility of a parallel being drawn between the Nazi slogan of “performance” and praise that continued to be showered upon productivity! It was certainly an ambitious program for the researchers, but one that succeeded in registering attitudes relating in particular to life at work and the private lives of working people in a manner at last unencumbered by moral judgments.

The translation policy of French publishers—tardy and parsimonious, but frequently perspicacious in its choices—has made it possible for French readers to be correctly informed about the important debates taking place in German and Anglo-Saxon seats of learning. But the same has not applied to the immense literature of monographs: studies of different regions, towns, businesses, professions, resistance groups, and lobbies more or less close to the source of power.²³ Despite their seemingly narrow horizons, the best of those monographs now make it possible to answer the following question: how did people live, survive, or disappear under the Third Reich? It is a question every bit as fundamental as the one that first captured the public imagination: namely, *why* did it happen? Without dismissing the various theoretical positions that separate the authors of those works, it is perfectly possible to fasten upon the

points on which they converge.²⁴ The plan and content of the present summary of "the state of our knowledge to date" require no particular commentary except on two points: periodization, and how the works selected were chosen.

Should the Third Reich be presented as a single block or as an evolving process? As twelve real years, not the prophesied thousands? With hindsight, this would appear to be history in the short term insofar as the seeds of the decomposition and recomposition of social units, which constitute its principal subject, were already detectable in the preceding decade and were to continue to exist beyond 1945, which is taken to be the year zero. But from another point of view the surgical interventions of the political authorities persistently accelerated those developments, and that fact suggests that we should adopt a more subtle division of time. Accordingly, rejecting the alternative between a static picture and a description of an evolution in several stages, the present work will distinguish only between the years of peace and the years of war or, more precisely, between 1933-38, the transitional period of 1938-39 (for it was then, not in September 1939, that the regime entered what Pierre Milza calls the stiffening phase),²⁵ and finally 1939-45. The caesura represented by 30 June 1934 (see Chronology), which is virtually obligatory in political history, does not seem fundamental in the present context. Nor does the separation of the war years into two periods, the "lightning war" and "total war," since recent studies prove that as early as 1940-41 civil society was turned upside down by the demands of modern warfare combined with the regime's totalitarian objectives.

The method used for selecting documentation also needs to be explained. An initial, relatively easy trawl revealed the major works, those works reviewed the most, and the most sustained debates that have served as landmarks for the methodology of "history starting at the bottom."²⁶ However, research work is constantly moving forward (however disconcerting this is for those with a preference for certainties). When a theory long since "accepted" by the community of historians eventually proves to be out-of-date—in some cases even in the eyes of its

author—it has to be pushed aside to make room for more recent ones. As we shall see, examples are readily provided by electoral sociology and histories of the German working class. Next, in plumbing specialized studies to illustrate some general thesis, be aware that the choices made were inevitably arbitrary and, furthermore, affected by a lacuna in local history, namely an underrepresentation of the eastern provinces, because the archives of East Germany and Poland were virtually inaccessible. The upheavals of recent years have opened these up to research workers on all sides, but it is too early to assess all these new explorations.

Another consequence of the “turning-point” of 1989–90 is the proliferation of comparisons drawn between the National Socialist regime and the “socialism actually existing” in East Germany. The best of these, those that take into account the differences in context, duration, and ideologies, have made interesting contributions to the theory of totalitarianism, which until now has remained extremely abstract. But they presuppose a historical culture equally developed in the two domains, and since that is an illusion it is hard to see how they can be pertinent. The present work will therefore not be taking those studies into account. Nor will it be mentioning the ultra right-wing groups that have arisen since 1945 in various European countries. Over and above any ideological resemblances, any comparison between an apparatus holding power and movements still at the stage of aspiring to it would be vitiated from the outset. It is certainly tempting to draw civic lessons from history, but we do need to be circumspect.

—P. A., August 1997

NOTES

1. Klemperer V., *passim*, for example p. 84, 192, 272, 323–24. See also the commentaries of linguists: Sauer W. W., and Vodoz I.

*In the endnotes, the complete reference is given for only a few books and articles that are marginal to the subject and for that reason do not appear in the bibliography. In all other cases endnote references are abbreviated as follows: