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# Backing Hitler. Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany

**Review Number:**
293
**Publish date:**
Thursday, 31 October, 2002
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**ISBN:**
9780198205609
**Date of Publication:**
2001
**Price:**
£19.99
**Pages:**
359pp.
**Publisher:**
Oxford University Press
**Publisher url:**
http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780192802910.do
**Place of Publication:**
Oxford
**Reviewer:**
Conan Fischer

In 1990 Robert Gellately completed a major study which investigated the role of the secret police in Nazi Germany. His book, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy 1933-1945* (Oxford University Press; Oxford, 1995) demonstrated conclusively that the much feared and allegedly omnipresent Gestapo in fact relied on widespread public support to function effectively. Denunciations of fellow citizens and relatives by members of the public initiated many Gestapo investigations, even though the whistleblowers understood that those denounced could suffer torture, be consigned to an uncertain fate in a concentration camp, or be executed without due legal process. In this way the National Socialist state succeeded remarkably in policing even the most intimate aspects of personal behaviour. It stifled social or sexual relations between Jews and Christians or Germans and foreign forced labourers, rooted out male homosexuality, and punished unguarded criticism of the regime, even when uttered in the apparent privacy of the home. The motives behind these public denunciations varied widely, sometimes reflecting positive support for Nazism, but more frequently revealing an apolitical sense of public duty or a range of more personal motives such as material gain, sexual jealousy, or revenge.

Gellately?s current work includes a full discussion of these same issues, leaving parts of the book feeling

very familiar indeed. However, the author promises much more than this at the outset and to a degree delivers. The National Socialist regime, he asserts, was a plebiscitary dictatorship that set out to build a social consensus around its programme, and by and large succeeded in this aim. The prospects for Hitler?s project, the author argues, were greatly improved by the failure of the Weimar Republic to achieve its declared aims, either at home or with regard to foreign policy. Diplomatic humiliation, domestic poverty, an alleged crisis of morality, the perception that criminality was rife, and a fractured political landscape prior to 1933 allowed the Nazis to present themselves as a restorative, stabilising force. The conquest of unemployment and success in raising living standards combined with a series of dynamic but often coercive initiatives, which were directed at alleged enemies of the German people, such as the Communists, and especially the Jews. These outsiders, the Nazis asserted, had gnawed away at the moral substance of the German ethnic community, and their removal from society would redeem and safeguard this community.

Gellately has combed through local, regional and national newspapers to establish how, precisely, the authorities presented both their populist initiatives and the campaign of terror that swept away any actual or potential dissent. It emerges that even the terroristic side of the new regime was reported in great detail, to the point where photographs and discussion of the early concentration camps were everyday fare in the press. However these camps were presented as corrective institutions in which political renegades, habitual criminals and wayward Jews, among others, were given a taste of firm discipline and hard work out of doors, in the hope that they would come around and serve as useful members of society. Killings, if reported at all, were reportedly in self-defence, or to prevent dangerous criminals from escaping the camps and once again terrorising society. In other words, repression was painted in an essentially positive light. If Weimar had been soft on crime, then the decent German populace would be now be spared any further criminality and licentiousness.

The author employs oral testimony from survivors of that age to telling effect. Many claim not to have been Nazis as such, but admit nonetheless that at the time they regarded the new regime as a turn for the better. However, there is a tendency in *Backing Hitler* to accept at face value this depiction of Weimar as a failed society, without pausing to reflect that many millions of German voters supported republican or Christian parties to the end, right through an unprecedented economic crisis. These voters saw their personal lives savaged by the Great Depression as much as the virulently anti-republican majority that emerged during 1932, but presumably the republicans remained attracted by the founding values of Weimar, values the Republic had struggled to put into effect until the eve of the Great Depression.

That said, even these die-hard moderates (to mix metaphors somewhat) often came to support, or at least tolerate, the Third Reich. Some, it is claimed, traded off their erstwhile freedom for greater material security, but there were also elements of ideological continuity from Weimar into the Third Reich, which eased such conversions from patriotic republican to Nazi. Much has been written on such continuities, for example by Gunther Mai, or more darkly by Detlev Peukert, but ideology and material security became interrelated, not least within the parameters of the welfare state, and as a consequence these linkages helped to shape popular opinion. Thus the ability of the Nazi state to deliver on certain material commitments, which had been enshrined in the Weimar constitution as moral imperatives (such as the right to a job or to satisfactory levels of social security), arguably did as much to engender consent in Nazi society as did the popularisation of repressive police measures.

The importance of such positive achievements is acknowledged in passing by the author, but he focuses primarily on the repressive dimensions of Nazi Germany. Policing was integral to this repression, and Gellately begins with an account of peacetime initiatives against political, social and racial outsiders, before turning to the more sombre and deadly tale of coercion and consent in wartime. He describes the progressive marginalisation, persecution and, finally, murder of Germany?s Jews, but also accords due attention to other outsider groups. Whether they were political rebels, the chronically disabled, social misfits, or minorities perceived as racially inferior, these outsiders often suffered gruesome fates. Political opponents were, by and large, dealt with in the early years of the Third Reich, after which ?asocials? and the ?workshy? replaced them in the concentration camps. However, the media was encouraged to assume during the mid-1930s that the camps had already served their primary function and would largely disappear as the Third Reich

matured. With its political enemies either eliminated, or ?reclaimed? for the national ethnic community ( *Volksgemeinschaft*), and with social outsiders perceived, by definition, to constitute a relatively small minority, the number of detainees in the camps was, indeed, declining. The persecution of the Jews continued, but apart from sporadic violence, the so-called Jewish question was, by and large, being resolved by a programme of more or less forced emigration.

The author exploits the diaries of Victor Klemperer to gauge public attitudes to Nazi anti-semitism. Although Jewish, Klemperer remained married to his Christian wife throughout the Third Reich and thus was precariously immune from forced labour, or deportation to the concentration camps once the Nazis? thoughts turned to mass murder. On the whole, Klemperer records, people looked the other way as the authorities did their worst. However, he was still able to appear in public, wearing the mandatory star of David, in a society stripped of its Jewish minority by a government that made no bones about the alleged perfidy of the former. This might suggest that a climate of indifference prevailed towards Germany?s Jews, rather than any particularly widespread or strongly articulated annihilationist sentiment.

Once the war began, the camps quickly assumed a new lease of life. Domestic legislation designed to stamp out any signs of defeatism, such as listening to foreign radio or doubting aloud the prospect of victory, saw a scattering of arrests, again through popular denunciation rather than through active police surveillance. However, the demands of the war economy and the imperatives of a programme of genocide soon enough saw the camp empire expand quite extraordinarily, and come into intimate contact with civil society. Deliberate mass extermination of Europe?s Jews and certain other unfortunate minorities, such as gypsies, took place on occupied Polish territory, and were thus removed from the direct gaze of the German public.

However, the operation of the Third Reich?s slave labour empire could not be quarantined so easily from Germans? everyday experiences. Major companies did, indeed, establish new centres of production near the notorious major camps, but as often as not the prisoners had to be brought to the work, rather than the work going to them. Of the millions of prisoners of war and foreign forced labourers? many were quartered outside concentration camps proper, in satellite camps which might constitute a warehouse or similar building in the centre of an industrial city. The German public saw bedraggled columns of slave workers shuffle through the streets on their way to and from work, or saw them engaged in clearing up the debris left by Allied bombing raids. Those who collapsed from exhaustion could be shot on the spot; those who transcended the Third Reich?s race laws - and the most innocent of social intercourse with Germans could suffice - might be hanged in public. Sexual relations between east Europeans and Germans, of course, frequently resulted in death for a male non-German partner and imprisonment for female non-Germans. East European women, therefore, were frequently punished for being raped, or near as raped, by male Germans.

Parts of this grim tale will have a familiar ring for readers of Gellately?s earlier work, or of the vast literature that deals with Nazi Germany?s police state and its concentration camp system, but *Backing Hitler* remains a highly knowledgeable and thorough account nonetheless. The author pays greater attention when writing of the war years to the operation of the system of oppression and exploitation, and rather less to the involvement in, or attitudes of the German public to this same oppression. Among other things, the role of Germans in the workplace, where skilled blue-collar workers organised and watched over slave labourers on the spot, might have been considered.

That said it is plain enough, given the intimate links between the slave labour empire and German civil society, that most Germans could hardly have failed to be aware of these nightmarish developments. Foreign labourers were, after all, quartered on farms and in villages as well as in industrial centres. And in more general terms, it seems that the public continued to denounce fellow citizens to the Gestapo, even though the consequences of such denunciations became ever more deadly as the war went from bad to worse. Their initial motives often remained ?apolitical?, but they must have been perfectly aware, Gellately argues, that these same denunciations served to reinforce the moral and social norms of the Third Reich and also to allow Nazi domestic policy to function effectively.

In his final chapter, the author details the Third Reich?s headlong descent into oblivion. The police and

military were prepared to act with particular savagery against foreigners and fellow Germans where commitment to the increasingly futile struggle came into doubt. Gallows took lives literally within earshot of the Allied guns, as the executioners did their work and then fled hastily as Allied soldiers advanced through the streets of the very same towns. Gellately acknowledges that much remains to be discovered with regard to these final, apocalyptic weeks, but he succeeds admirably in conveying a powerful sense of the surreal horror that engulfed central Europe during the spring of 1945. There is an immediacy and a sense of emotional engagement in his final chapter, which most readers should find very compelling indeed.

All in all, then, this is a slightly less original book than the author (or publisher) claims at the outset. Parts of the text could have been better drafted, for the narrative occasionally repeats itself, even on successive pages, but *Backing Hitler* remains a valuable work nonetheless. It might not cover all of the angles, but readers will find this a well-referenced, highly informative work by an author whose depth of knowledge can only impress. Robert Gellately provides many explanations for the durability and effectiveness of a regime that test one?s faith in human nature sorely, but beyond this he has rendered equally valuable service through his ability to formulate new questions. In their answering, we may be left with an even darker vision of German and European civilisation some two generations ago.

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