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Spring 4-25-2012

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Volksgemeinschaft: The Rise of Nazi Ideology

Emily Teater

HONORS PROJECT

Submitted to the University Honors Program  
at Bowling Green State University in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with

UNIVERSITY HONORS

12/7/11

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Nazi ideology is perhaps one of the most difficult philosophies to study because of its complex makeup. The idea of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, or the “people’s community” was especially difficult to understand, even by the Nazis themselves. What constituted as Nazi ideology? How did the Nazis view politics and economics? The aspects of Nazi ideology must be explored. After all, even Hitler himself admits that a movement could only be successful if it had a strong ideology.<sup>1</sup> Many now ask how and why the Nazis rose to power and why the German people accepted their ideology. There are always many different views and explanations on the issue. However, most can agree today that it is a combination of the multiple explanations. One scholar, Theodore Abel, picked three factors, although each of those factors contain multiple reasons within themselves, and said that they worked together to bring Nazism, and later Hitler, to power. Abel argued that

no movement can succeed unless: first, it’s adherents are motivated by a persistent, prevalent, and wide-spread discontent with a state of affairs...; second, it set’s forth a goal that is novel in its aspirations but based on deeply-rooted sentiments as well; and third, it has a charismatic leader with a an efficiently organized group of dedicated followers.<sup>2</sup>

Most scholars agree that either dissatisfaction with the government, the Nazis having new, or at least what appears to be new, ideas, and strong leadership, or a combination of any of these factors helped encourage the people to join the Nazi cause. Each of these will be examined in turn, as well as other factors that lie within the reasons given by Abel. However, one factor seems to link all of the other reasons together: Leadership. Nazism rose to power through the efficiency of its leadership. Without strong leaders, who caused dissent among the people through their speeches and writings, the Nazi party could not have gotten the support it did.

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<sup>1</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943), 373.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore Abel, *The Nazi Movement: Why Hitler Came to Power* (New York: Therton Press, 1965), Atheling Introduction.

Nazism has an interesting history itself, rising in popularity with each passing year between the two world wars. It seemed as if the Nazi Party grew overnight. The idea of National Socialism, which the Nazis identified their ideology as, existed before World War I, through Fredreich Naumann's party in 1896 called *National-Sozial*. National Socialism started through Anton Drechsler, who founded the party that would become the Nazis. Drechsler believed in socialism, but was less than enamored by Social Democrats. Originally this group was called the German Workmen's Party. Hitler would later be invited to join in its early years of formation.<sup>3</sup> In his book, *Mein Kampf*, Hitler believed it was vital to be involved in these early stages of the party's formation. He thought "this was a time in which anyone who was not satisfied with ... the existing parties felt called upon to found a new party."<sup>4</sup> He would choose to work in propaganda after he had decided to join the party. However, there were other nationalist and anti-Semitic groups to choose from at this time. There was the *Thule Gesellschaft* (Thule Society), the *Schutz-und Trutzbund* (Defensive and Offensive Alliance), and the *Einwohnerwehr* (Inhabitant Defense). However the *German Worker's Party* was becoming the most popular. It would later change its name to the National Socialist Party in 1918. By the spring of 1921, Hitler, through his work in propaganda, had helped recruit thousands to the party. Some of this propaganda work included invading popular socialist locations and taking over and delivering speeches especially designed to evoke emotions of dissatisfaction with the government and opposing parties.<sup>5</sup> The *German Worker's Party* would grow to become the most popular of Nationalist parties in due time.

So who exactly made up this party that would come to power? One local National Socialist party called the *Ortsgruppen* surveyed the statistics of its members. According to its

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 54-144.

<sup>4</sup> Hitler, 218.

<sup>5</sup> Abel, 60-145.

lists, the majority of their group was primarily made up of lower middle-class workers between the ages of 17 and 32, who had only public school education, and had served in World War I.<sup>6</sup> Farming peasants also made up a large part of the NSDAP, or German National Socialist Workers Party. Despite many appeals to the lower-class industrial workers, these workers still turned to other means of representation, like unions.<sup>7</sup> This study was not necessarily the case for all members in Germany, but the study showed that the majority of the people following the NSDAP were young members of the middle-class.

The party really leaped up in membership after a speech Hitler made on February 21, 1920. Hitler laid out what Nazi doctrine was, in the form of the 25-Point Program of the Nazis, and 2,000 people attended. The result of this speech was the *German Worker's Party* becoming the leading counter-revolutionary group in Munich. It received most of their funding from the *Reichswehr* by this time as well. The party also began expanding their functions. In the year 1921 the fighting groups in the party that would later be called the *SS* and *SA* began. Hitler also establishes himself as Leader of the Party and claims to be the only leader, for he refused to work with other Nationalist groups to get their message across.<sup>8</sup> However, the party's popularity did not last long.

The situation of the NSDAP became more difficult as the effects of the Depression were felt. By 1923, the exchange rate for the Deutschmark was four million to one American dollar. Hyperinflation made funding for the party very difficult. In September of that same year, Hitler agrees to a coalition with a group planning on a political coup. In November, Hitler makes a coup attempt in what would become known as the Beer Hall Putsch. Unfortunately for Hitler,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>7</sup> Roderick Stackelberg, *Hitler's Germany: Origins, Interpretations, Legacies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 1999, 20-21.

<sup>8</sup> Abel, 62-64.

his coup was stopped by soldiers and he was arrested and later imprisoned in Landsberg Fortress. In prison, Hitler dictated *Mein Kampf*, which would later be used as an important piece of Nazi propaganda. However, during his sentence, the party broke up and its members sought power in other groups and parties.<sup>9</sup> The fracturing of the NSDAP made the recruiting of new members much more difficult. After this difficult spell though, Nazism would be on the rise once more.

In August of 1923, politician Gustav Stresemann became Prime Minister of Germany. During his premiership, Stresemann would call a political state of emergency and ask the *Reichswehr*, or the German military, to eliminate extremist parties. This action would only succeed in silencing Communist and other left-leaning parties, as the military broke up primarily these groups. A little over a year later, Hitler was released from prison. Since his imprisonment, he had learned that to get the National Socialists to power, he would have to work through government systems. His failed *putsch*, had shown him that he could not get power by force alone. He would need to get the party into the parliament. Also playing to their favor, the ban on the National Socialist party is revoked between 1924 and 1925.<sup>10</sup> The National Socialists now had the opportunity to grow.

Party membership and votes increased since then. In 1925, party membership had reached a total of over 27,000 and increased to well over 100,000 by 1928. With such a majority, the National Socialists were finally becoming members of the German Parliament. In the 1928 *Reichstag* elections the party received 2.6% of the total vote, or 810,000 votes. Just a year later in local elections, they increased to 11.3% and put their first minister into office. In 1930, the party had received over 6 million votes or over 18% of the vote for the Reichstag and became the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 67-74.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 74-77.

second largest party. Prior to 1930, no one had really paid much attention to this small party<sup>11</sup>. No one had really taken the Nazis too seriously until it was too late to stop them.<sup>12</sup> From this point, the NSDAP could not be ignored in the German government.

With the new attention came new fear. Many tried to stop the rise of the party in the years before Hitler came to power. From 1930 to 1932 an attempt was made to forbid all membership in National Socialists and Communist parties. In March of 1931, Chancellor Brüning tried to stop the party by banning all mass meetings and the wearing of uniforms. He would also start a program to monitor and censor all pamphlets and propaganda material. In October of that same year, the police were used to shut down meeting halls to prevent meetings of the NSDAP. In April of 1932 laws were made to disband military groups, such as the group that would later become the SA. These actions were to no avail though and on January 30, 1933, Hitler was made chancellor of Germany. The election results made the views of the people of Germany clear. Hitler received 13 million votes, or over 36% of the popular vote in the election. By 1932, the National Socialists was the party with the most seats in the Reichstag.<sup>13</sup> The combination of Hitler as leader and having his party on top in the government made the course of events to follow seem bright to the National Socialists.

After coming to power, the Nazi's first problem was to get those who were opposed to them out of the Reichstag and without political power. The Nazis wanted a one-party government so that no group could compromise their ideology with ideas that supposedly came from the Jews. By early 1933, the Communist party was banned in the German Parliament.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 91-93.

<sup>12</sup> Michaela Hönicke Moore, "American Interpretations of National Socialism, 1933-1945" in *The Impact of Nazism: New Perspectives on the Third Reich and its Legacy*, eds. Daniel E. Rogers and Alan E. Steinweis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press: 2003), 4-5.

<sup>13</sup> Abel, 78-111.

Around the same time, Hitler was officially given complete power under the Enabling Act.<sup>14</sup> The Enabling Act would be renewed one more time on January 30, 1937, so that Hitler continued to have his dictatorial power.<sup>15</sup> In the summer of 1933, the Socialist Party, the SPD, was also banned from political participation. On July 14, 1933, the Nazis became the only legal party allowed in the German government.<sup>16</sup> In May of that year, the Nazis began trying to implement some of their government plans by breaking up labor unions, which were considered a tool of the Communists and the Jews, and beginning their own labor representation group, the German Labor Front.<sup>17</sup> A little over a year later, President Hindenburg died and Hitler took his place now fulfilling the roles of both Chancellor and President of Germany.<sup>18</sup>

For the Nazis to be elected into Parliament, and to eventually have one of their own as Chancellor, they had to have a winning ideology that the people would want to vote for. At the top of Nazi ideology was the idea of *Volksgemeinschaft*. It was an idea of state “combin[ing] the meaning of ‘unity’, ‘devotion to community’, mutual aid, brotherly love, and kindred social values”<sup>19</sup>. In other words, it was supposed to be the ideal community where there was no such thing as class, or distinctions between workers and employers. Everyone would live in harmony because they were all of German blood. All Germans, no matter their age, class, gender, or country of birth, were to all come together as German people and live in this perfect society created by the National Socialists. Some would have argued however that the *Volksgemeinschaft* was not intended to change actual social statuses, but rather to change the mentality of the

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<sup>14</sup> The Enabling Act would allow Hitler to have both the powers of the President and Chancellor should the current President Hindenburg die.

<sup>15</sup> Roderick Stackelberg, *The Routledge Companion to Nazi Germany* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 13.

<sup>16</sup> Stackelberg, *Hitler*, xv-xvii.

<sup>17</sup> Stackelberg, *Routledge*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Stackelberg, *Hitler*, xv-xvii.

<sup>19</sup> Abel, 137.



citizens to feel as if they were equal.<sup>20</sup> However, this idea was to only apply to the German people and no one else.<sup>21</sup> An idea such as having non-Germans become Germans was impossible. Hitler described how “it [would be] a scarcely conceivable fallacy of thought to believe that a Negro or a Chinese, let us say, could turn into a German.”<sup>22</sup> If a person did not have German blood, which the Nazis would make up the specifications for what constituted as German blood, they were not a German. To be a citizen in this new community, one had to be born in Germany, of the German race, and physically healthy.<sup>23</sup> This community would revolve around the pillars of “protection of the people and race, social justice, realizing that all of this can only be carried out and preserved through one power, on the idea of national self-defense.”<sup>24</sup> The only job of the state was to protect the “purity” of the German race in this new community. Other aspects of Nazi ideology circulated around this idea.

However, this ideology was very confusing. *Völkish* thinkers often disagreed with each other in how they envisioned the “people’s community.” Sometimes, thinkers even contradicted their own beliefs. Scholars have accepted that “*Völkish* ideology was not a coherent set of ideas and ideals, but rather a cauldron of beliefs, fears, and hopes that found expression in various movements.”<sup>25</sup> An attempt will be made nonetheless to sort through and come up with a concise body of what made up the majority of the idea of *Volksgemeinschaft*.

Among the earliest thinkers on the idea of “community” was the writer Johann Gottfried Herder. He wrote his own philosophy on what a community was and who could fit in the

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<sup>20</sup> David Schoenbaum, *Hitler’s Social Revolution: Class and Status in Nazi Germany 1933-1939* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1966), 59.

<sup>21</sup> Abel, 130-138.

<sup>22</sup> Hitler, 388-389.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 438-439.

<sup>24</sup> Gregor Strasser, Joseph Goebbels, et al., “Draft of a Comprehensive Program of National Socialism” in Lane and Rupp, 63.

<sup>25</sup> Petteri Pietikainen, “The *Volk* and its Unconscious: Jung, Hauer and the ‘German Revolution,’” *Journal of Contemporary History* 35 (2000): 524.

community. To Herder, “language, art, literature, common history, [and] kinship” defined a community.<sup>26</sup> These were all aspects which could make people feel connected to each other if they shared them. He was also one of the first few to start using the language of the *Volk* and seeing the community as an organism, both of which would be large parts of the plan of *Volksgemeinschaft*. Despite all these similarities though, Herder, was not one to use race as a factor of who could and could not be a part of the community. To him, no one race was better than the other, but must be viewed within its own historical and cultural context.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, the Nazis were using some of his thinking, such as a community semi-based on shared culture and the importance of the average people, the *Volk*, to design their “people’s community.”

The anti-Semitic agenda of the Nazis was just one part of Nazi ideology that tied into *Volksgemeinschaft*. The idea of a community could only work if someone or some group could be excluded. Racism would determine who would be excluded from the community.<sup>28</sup> To unite the German people politically, the Nazis needed to unite them culturally. Thus, they said that Germans, German blood, and German culture were better than that of the rest of the world in that they were the “chosen” race and that everything they created was “pure.” Blood was especially important. If one did not have “German blood”, they were not part of the nation. Hitler and other Nazi thinkers were associating nationality with race, which would set up the qualifications for who was in and out of the “people’s community.” Hitler believed that “nationality or rather race [did] not happen to live in the language, but in the blood.”<sup>29</sup> Naturally, if the Germans were the perfect race, than others were inferior. Therefore, to keep foreigners out, the German open-

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<sup>26</sup>Howard M. Bahr, Matthew T. Evans and Suzanne L. Maughan, “On Diversity, Empathy, and Community: The Relevance of Johann Gottfried Herder,” *Rural Sociology* 73 (2008): 507.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 509-516.

<sup>28</sup> John Connelly, “The Uses of Volksgemeinschaft: Letters to the NSDAP Kreisleitung Eisenach 1939-1940,” *The Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996), 905-923.

<sup>29</sup> Hitler, 389.

borders policy for people of other nationalities to enter had to go.<sup>30</sup> However they targeted Jews as the worst of all races.<sup>31</sup> They used these ideas to promote an even bigger idea: that to improve the survival of the country, German blood should be preserved, or kept “pure,” and that of weaker races should be eliminated.<sup>32</sup> The Jews were not useful to the *Volksgemeinschaft* and were, therefore, easily disposable.

The Nazis also believed that the Jews were in charge of the entire Socialist movement and behind the Bolshevik Revolution. On one hand, the Germans did believe it was necessary to dismantle the Czarist state, but on the other hand, the Bolsheviks were not a better replacement. These Socialists were going to lose all their power to the Jews who were running it, the Nazis figured. At the same time, the Nazis feared they too would suffer the same fate if they let the Jews roam freely and have positions in high places. After all, the socialists were run by Trosky, a Jew. The Kronstadt Sailors, a Bolshevik military group, were run by Roschal, another Jew. If this kept up, the Soviet Union and perhaps later on, Germany would have their government overrun by Jews.<sup>33</sup> This fear of Communism spreading, as tool of the Jews, would be used by the Nazis to attract more people to their cause.<sup>34</sup> Something had to be done. *Volksgemeinschaft* could only be created by taking away this supposed power from the Jews.<sup>35</sup>

*Volksgemeinschaft* also had an idea as to how to form the government. Nazism believed in a government structure where only Germans were to represent the German people. All other nationalities were excluded from government.<sup>36</sup> Some like Gottfried Feder imagined two government bodies in the new German state. One would be the House of the People, which

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 396.

<sup>31</sup> Judaism is a religion and an ethnicity, but the Nazis put it under the category of “race.”

<sup>32</sup> Abel, 154-155.

<sup>33</sup> Rosenberg, “The Russian Jewish Revolution” in Lane and Rupp, 13-15.

<sup>34</sup> Stackelberg, *Hitler*, 23.

<sup>35</sup> Hitler, 453.

<sup>36</sup> “Guidelines for the German Worker’s Party” in Lane and Rupp, 10-11.

worked specifically for the politics of the people. It would be made of a pyramid-like hierarchy, where the people would directly elect representatives, who would elect representatives to represent them, to ensure that every representative would stand for the people. The other would be a Central Council which would look after the economic interests of the people. Every business would be represented with one representative from both the bosses and the workers who would regulate the control and development of companies and solve wage problems.<sup>37</sup> Although this structure was supposed to represent the people, the Nazis had a mentality that the nation must suit the needs of only the best and hardest working people, as would be determined by the highest authority. And therefore, the state needed to be lead by only the best people. The *Volksgemeinschaft* did not need parliament or rule by majority.<sup>38</sup> What it needed was an absolute ruler at the top. To get away from the materialist world of capitalism and Communism, there needed to be a strong authoritarian state to force the people to follow orders.<sup>39</sup> One leader did not have to consult a mass of various parties with differing agendas and where nothing would be accomplished. One ruler would allow for the Nazis to get the actions they wanted accomplished done. The Nazi regime needed absolute power over the German people.

The Nazis also had a plan for improving and solving all economic problems as well. The overall economic view of the Nazis was an anti-capitalist/anti-Marxist economy where working meant more than owning.<sup>40</sup> They would tax everyone to help pay for the war, but they would put a heavier tax burden on those who owned land.<sup>41</sup> There was also a strong dislike of loan interest by the Nazis, claiming it was a tool of the Jews. Usury, or the collecting of interest on loans, was considered a lazy way to make money since no one worked for that money. This idea had gone

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<sup>37</sup> Gottfried Feder, "The Social State", in Lane and Rupp, 34-39.

<sup>38</sup> Hitler, 449.

<sup>39</sup> Stackelberg, *Hitler*, 47-48.

<sup>40</sup> Gregor Strasser, "Thoughts about the Tasks of the Future" in Lane and Rupp, 89-90.

<sup>41</sup> Lane and Rupp, 10-11.

back to the Middle Ages, and usury had been banned by the Catholic Church. Jews, however, were not subject to Catholic law, and their religion had no such restriction. Ever since then, usury and loan interest had been associated with the Jews. The Nazi ideal to solve the interest problem was to eliminate it, have only one bank running German money, and the state taking lands all to curb inflation.<sup>42</sup> The Nazis also believed that their economy would pay off all their war debts better than the Weimar Republic. All Germans would be working for the greater good of the German people. Those who profited from the war would have their wealth stripped of them and companies would be in the hands of the state so that all profits could be divided evenly.<sup>43</sup> They also envisioned a new foreign economy that included a European Union that would have one system of currency.<sup>44</sup> The economic problem then could be solved with a combination of authoritative leadership, peace among peoples and nations, and the running of businesses efficiently.<sup>45</sup> Big businesses did like this ideology, and thought that even if all of the ideas did not appeal to them, they could hopefully have control over the Nazis. The businesses had the money to be pulling the reigns they thought. Instead, businesses would find that they were being controlled by the Nazis.<sup>46</sup>

The Nazis also needed a plan to help industrial workers as part of their new economic plans. Because the Nazis tried to appeal to the working class, they appeared to the low to middle-class citizens that they were not a party for the rich and won over more voters from those statuses.<sup>47</sup> They could use unions to their advantage they believed. If they created Nazi-sponsored unions, then they would be promoting the classless ideology among workers, by

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<sup>42</sup> Gottfried Feder, "Manifesto for Breaking the Bondage of Interest" in Lane and Rupp, 27-29.

<sup>43</sup> "The Program of the NSDAP" in Lane and Rupp, 41-43.

<sup>44</sup> Gregor Strasser, Joseph Goebbels, et al., 84.

<sup>45</sup> Hitler's Speech to the Reichstag on March 23, 1933 in "The Speeches of Adolf Hitler: April 1922-August 1939," Vol II, ed and trans Norman H. Baynes (London: Oxford UP, 1942), 1017.

<sup>46</sup> Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1985), 59.

<sup>47</sup> Stackelberg, *Routledge*, 112.

having these unions' primary function be to teach Nazi ideology, and employers they wanted and countering Marxism by replacing their unions. Existing unions, as part of the Marxist groups, would not be useful.<sup>48</sup> Organizations like the German Labor Front would be created, but it would mostly serve the purpose of teaching Nazi ideology, not actually helping workers.<sup>49</sup> The Nazis also needed to increase the efficiency of workers. If workers increased how much they worked, then there would be an increase in purchasing, which would benefit the wealthy and the workers.<sup>50</sup> So long as Germans only bought from Germans, and not from Jews, the plan could work perfectly.<sup>51</sup> However, once the Nazis came to power, they did not offer much to help the workers. Yet the workers coped with it because they felt that it was at least better than the depression, because some jobs were offered through Nazi programs like the *Autobahn*, or highway system, and they no longer had any effective ways of organizing against the Nazis.<sup>52</sup> The Nazis had only succeeded in their plans in eliminating existing unions, which would be all they needed to do to keep hold their power over the workers.

Also along economic lines, for the Germans to expand as a people and an industrial power, the Germans needed territorial room to grow. The Nazis believed that meant the Germans needed more land.<sup>53</sup> Where would this new land come from? The *Volksgemeinschaft* was supposed to be beneficial to "all" Germans, even those in other countries. Those of German blood in Austria, Hungary, and Poland all needed to come together under the German nation. If Germany is made up of all Germans, then life will be perfect, in that the *Volksgemeinschaft*

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<sup>48</sup> Hitler, 598-605.

<sup>49</sup> Agreement between Dr. Robert Ley, Reich Ministries, and Representatives for Hitler in Economic Affairs in *Nazism 1919-1945: A Documentary Reader*, J. Noakes and G. Pridham, eds., Vol. 2 (Exeter: A. Wheaton & Co. Ltd.), 1984, 338.

<sup>50</sup> Hitler to Siemensstadt in Berlin on Nov 10, 1933 in Baynes, 1141.

<sup>51</sup> Dormond Local NSDAP Department Store Boycott in Noakes and Pridham, 304.

<sup>52</sup> Hartmut Berghoff "Did Hitler Create a New Society? Continuity and Change in German Social History Before and After 1933" in *Weimar and Nazi Germany: Continuities and Discontinuities*, ed. Panikos Panayi (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 89-90.

<sup>53</sup> "The Program of the NSDAP", 41-43.

would be created through these measures, the Nazis thought.<sup>54</sup> The Germans needed new land that would be controlled by the state that farm corporations could use to grow more food.<sup>55</sup> If getting more land meant having to fight other nations for it, then the Germans would stop at no cost to get it.<sup>56</sup> The people they took the land from did not matter. The writer, Otto Strasser, explained that the Germans did not wish to rule over the foreign people they took over. The land would be used for the benefit of the German people.<sup>57</sup> The land would be run only by Germans for Germans. With all the new land they hoped to acquire, the Germans planned to not have to import as much food as they normally would, and would as a result not be dependant on other countries for survival and they would save money, which would result in improving the economy. Those of German stock would also be allowed to take land away from the non-Germans inhabiting it.<sup>58</sup> Once again, the most important part about the *Volksgemeinschaft* was that the people in the community were “pure” Germans.

With the addition of land, the Nazi party wrote statements on how to protect the rights of the farmer. Before the Nazis came to power, farmers suffered heavily from the depression. The Nazis were able to gain more votes from the peasantry because farmers had “higher taxes and limited credit, foreign competition, and falling commodity prices.”<sup>59</sup> The Nazis wanted to provide the farmers with economic protection and education since they were important to feeding the German population, which could mean the new Aryan race would survive for

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<sup>54</sup> Reichstag Speech in Baynes, 1019.

<sup>55</sup> Gregor Strasser, Joseph Goebbels, et al., 84-87.

<sup>56</sup> Hitler, 426.

<sup>57</sup> Otto Strasser, “The Fourteen Theses on the German Revolution” in Lane and Rupp, 107.

<sup>58</sup> “Official Party Statement on Its Attitude toward the Farmers and Agriculture” in Lane and Rupp, 118-122.

<sup>59</sup> Stephen G. Fritz, “The NSDAP as *Volkspartei*? A Look at the Social Bias of the Nazi Voter,” *The History Teacher* 20 (1987): 381-382.

generations to come.<sup>60</sup> The state would control the food market prices to insure proper wages for farmers. These proper wages would result in more tax revenue for the Nazi state.<sup>61</sup>

Nazi military policy was certainly created in response to the disarmament provision of the Treaty of Versailles. The Nazis would rearm, against the articles of the treaty and would show that their idea of peace would only come at the end of a barrel of a gun. Gregor Strasser believed that everyone else should have to disarm if the Germans had to disarm. However, if the rest of the world was not going to disarm, then the Germans had a right to rearm themselves for the defense of their nation.<sup>62</sup> It was also believed by historians like Ian Kershaw that “moulding of a people in the image of an army-disciplined, resilient, fanatically single-minded, obedient to death for the cause- was [the Nazis’] intention.”<sup>63</sup> These appeals for rearmament would help get the German armies and the weapons industry on the side of the Nazis.<sup>64</sup> These ideas though, contradicted the idea of a “people’s community” where the Germans supposedly went back to the “good old days” of rural life. The Nazis reasoned that while it was nice to go back to a time before industrialization, to keep up as a military power with the world around them, they needed to arm themselves with the most modern and technologically advanced weapons.<sup>65</sup>

The Nazis also had unique views on the value of people, women especially. The Nazis quickly realized that they could benefit more in votes and loyal citizens if they could appeal to women.<sup>66</sup> Women were going to preserve the “Aryan” race. One of the changes the Nazis believed in was making the institution of marriage more vital to the preservation of the race than

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<sup>60</sup> R.W. Darré, “The Farmer and the State”, in Lane and Rupp, 132.

<sup>61</sup> Gregor Strasser, “Work and Bread!”, in Miller Lane and Rupp, 141-143.

<sup>62</sup> Gregor Strasser, “The Nature and Aim of the National Socialist Idea” in Lane and Rupp, 129-130.

<sup>63</sup> Kershaw, 141.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>65</sup> Pietikainen, 527.

<sup>66</sup> Gregor Strasser, Draft, 90-92.



as a means to boost social status.<sup>67</sup> It was also important to believe that women should not try to be equal to men. Each had their own little niche in the *Volksgemeinschaft*. The woman's niche was to have, raise, and care for the future Aryan race.<sup>68</sup> Her place was *Kinder, Küche, and Kirche*, or children, kitchen, and church.<sup>69</sup> Women were considered vital to the *Volksgemeinschaft* since they would produce the next generation of National Socialists.

Caring and educating the future National Socialist youth was to become vital to promoting the Nazi agenda. The perfect "Aryan" race, after being created, needed to be properly educated. Instilling self-confidence, or rather the idea of superiority of the German race, would become all-important in the education programs of the Nazis.<sup>70</sup> The idea of *Volksgemeinschaft* would be instilled into the minds of the children. They would be taught to forget such things as class and status so they could be capable of living in the classless *Volksgemeinschaft*. If children were going to be resistant to such a plan, then they would be placed in the training for the SA and the SS and would not release them until they were firm believers in the perfection of the *Volksgemeinschaft*.<sup>71</sup> Children would be taught what the Nazis deemed important such as being the perfect race physically as well as mentally. Frequent exercise, especially geared towards military training, would be added to the curriculum of schools.<sup>72</sup>

On one hand, all of the aforementioned plans seemed beneficial to the lower and middle classes. The *Volksgemeinschaft* would "offer mobility and advancement through merit and achievement, not through inherited social rank and birthright."<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, if one looked closely into the ideology, one could see that to achieve these goals, many of the people's rights

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<sup>67</sup> Hitler, 402.

<sup>68</sup> Hitler's speech to National Socialist Women in September, 1934 in Noakes and Pridam, 449.

<sup>69</sup> Stackelberg, *Hitler*, 147.

<sup>70</sup> Hitler, 404-411.

<sup>71</sup> Hitler's Speech at Reichenberg on Dec 4, 1938 in Noakes and Pridam, 417.

<sup>72</sup> Hitler, 407-418.

<sup>73</sup> Kershaw, 140.

of opinion and voting would be taken away. So just how did this party and its ideology become so popular? The German people had to support the ideology to support the party somehow.

Scholars for the many years after the war would offer multiple explanations.

One reason for the popularity of *Volksgemeinschaft* is that people were just tired of the government they already had. The Germans had been hit with losing the war, having to pay reparations, and suffering from the depression. With the fall of the Weimar Republic, the Nazis quickly had come to power, indicating the people's opinion of their old government. Weimar had attempted to help the people, but had failed. They tried to create unions for the working classes, but the workers still felt they had no voice. Weimar's acceptance of the Versailles Treaty also did not work in their favor. The acceptance of so called "Guilt Clause" saying Germany had started and was solely responsible for the war, united the people in hatred of the Weimar Republic.<sup>74</sup> People had a tendency to blame the government as the problem. The Weimar Republic was disorganized, had too many parties, which led to too many political scandals and disagreements, and never could seem to solve the problems of the German people.<sup>75</sup> Most Germans believed that all the people in the multiple parties did was try to promote themselves and hold their position in government.<sup>76</sup> Many Nazi writers did not believe that the government was concerned with the needs of the people and focused on their own personal problems with other members of parliament.<sup>77</sup> Other party members believed that other officials in other parties would make concessions in their policies, at the expense of the needs of the people, to get more votes in the next election.<sup>78</sup> National Socialism fed off that dislike of the

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<sup>74</sup> Stackelberg, *Hitler*, 68-76.

<sup>75</sup> Kershaw, 121-127.

<sup>76</sup> Dietrich Eckart, "Men!" in Lane and Rupp, 3.

<sup>77</sup> Feder, "The Social State", 34.

<sup>78</sup> Albert Krebs, *The Infancy of Nazism: The Memoirs of Ex-Gauleiter Albert Krebs*, ed. and trans. William Sheridan Allen, (New York: New Viewpoints, 1976), 15-16.

government, and their movement gained success from it. As the scholar Theodore Abel had put it:

No matter how skillfully an orator plays upon the emotions of his audience, he cannot long maintain his hold unless he evokes convictions and deep-felt needs which the listeners...harbored long before coming face to face with the spell binder.<sup>79</sup>

The National Socialists not only pointed out these flaws in the government. They stated that they knew how to fix all these problems, which may have made the people more willing to accept the ideas of the Nazis.

The Weimar Republic was not only ineffective at solving the problems of the people; it had also failed in trying to cut off the Nazi power before it became too strong. Chancellor Brüning had attempted to suppress the party by banning its existence. That worked only in keeping the NSDAP out of the Parliament temporarily. Chancellor von Papen tried to allow the party small positions in the government without giving them too much power. He had hoped to control the Nazis by keeping them from having too much power, but at the same time using their votes in Parliament to get his policies enacted. Instead, he found the Nazis had enough power to use him to get even more power. President Hindenburg was perhaps the politician who failed the most at trying to stop the Nazis, perhaps because he himself agreed with some of their views. He too thought he could use the Nazis to his advantage by placing Hitler in a place of power, so long as he had control over Hitler.<sup>80</sup> Hindenburg, like von Papen, would find the Nazis were not willing to be controlled. The republic was overall failing to prevent the Nazis from coming to power.

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<sup>79</sup> Abel, 120.

<sup>80</sup> Stackelberg, *Routledge*, 114.

The Nazis not only blamed the government. They blamed the Jews as responsible for starting World War I. The Jews and the Communists seemed to be the perfect scapegoat the Nazis could use also to arouse dissatisfaction in the government especially if they believed the Jews were pulling the government strings. The Jews were also thought to all be part of the Communists and were responsible for Germany's loss in the war.<sup>81</sup> Dietrich Eckart, a prominent writer on Nazi ideals, believed it was usury, of which Jews were commonly accused of doing, which cost Germany the war. Because the Jews were only trying to make money, they led the Germans into the war for more money and bought peace at the cost of the reparations the "pure" Germans had to pay. Many like him believed it was "not by the presumption of the military were [they] betrayed, but above all by usury, again, by usury, and a third time through usury did [they] lose [their] power!"<sup>82</sup> Capitalism was the enemy of the Nazis along with Communism. Citizens associated Communism and Marxism with the SPD, the leading party in the Reichstag before the Nazis came to power. The Nazis, advertising themselves as an anti-Marxist party, were seen as the saviors from the "Communist threat."<sup>83</sup> The Jews were considered the ones who were the biggest Capitalists and Communists in their eyes.<sup>84</sup> Many historians believed this racism, along with nationalist pride, helped attract others to the Nazi ideology.<sup>85</sup>

With the German economy in bad shape, the German people also wanted a new government that would fix Germany's financial woes. The hyperinflation had been hard on the not-so-wealthy public and led to even more dissatisfaction with the republic. Some scholars even argued that the Great Depression had even sped up the fall of the Weimar Republic. The

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<sup>81</sup> Stackelberg, *Hitler*, 77.

<sup>82</sup> Dietrich Eckart, "The Twister" in Lane and Rupp, 7.

<sup>83</sup> William Sheridan Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a Single German Town, 1930-1935*, (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), 26-27.

<sup>84</sup> Eckart, "Twister", 7.

<sup>85</sup> Stackelberg, *Hitler*, 21.

Versailles Treaty made the German economic situation worse. At the end of the war, Germany had lost 13% of its land, three-fourths of iron ore deposits, 26% coal and 38% of its steel.<sup>86</sup> Not only did the Germans have to pay such high reparations, they also had lost much of their natural resources that could have helped them pay the reparations. Because the Weimar Republic had accepted those terms, they were unable to pull Germany out of the depression. The Nazis made the claim that they could do better and fix the economy, and some of their projects did make the German economy better. After the “loss of savings and financial security, as well as utter desperation, and the host of other problems associated with the depression, [the Nazis] attracted many [people] to vote for [the Nazis].”<sup>87</sup> The public works projects created by the Nazis like the *Autobahn*, or highway system, did provide more jobs for people. From 1941 to 1942, the Nazis made improvements to the German health insurance and pension plans, leading to an increase in worker’s morale.<sup>88</sup> Actually, the depression most affected workers, but it was mostly the middle class who supported the Nazis. Even though the middle classes were not suffering nearly as much as the workers, they feared the depression lasting and affecting them next.<sup>89</sup> Even if the Nazis did not solve all economic problems, they were at least solving some, and the people thought the Nazis actually cared about their plight.

Also, it seemed as if the German government before the Nazis came was accepting or validating Nazi economic policies. During the depression, German political parties began to turn more “rightward” to solve the problem, according to scholars. This action showed the German people that the NSDAP was an acceptable political party, making them feel more comfortable

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<sup>86</sup> Richard Overy, “The German Economy, 1919-1945 in Panayi, 36.

<sup>87</sup> Lisa Pine, “Women and the Family” in Panayi, 200.

<sup>88</sup> Stackelberg, *Hitler*, 80-141.

<sup>89</sup> Allen, 23-24.

with voting for them.<sup>90</sup> If even the government made the Nazis appear like a legitimate political party, in that their policies were in agreement with other political parties at the time, then the citizens would vote for them. However, it would take a leader to voice all grievances against the government and the economy to the people to make the people realize they did not like the current government.

Propaganda is also believed to have played a strong part in bringing Nazi ideology to the masses. If propaganda could be used effectively, the Nazis believed it would spread their ideology better.<sup>91</sup> The media would become the property of the Nazis and be used only for the purpose of spreading Nazi Ideology.<sup>92</sup> New means of media that had the capabilities of spreading ideology further and to more people had come into existence at this time. The Nazis were willing to use the new technologies of the day, such as film and radio, helping to allow their rise.<sup>93</sup> The Nazi propaganda showed what the ideal Germany was, making National Socialism and *Volksgemeinschaft* more appealing. With so many new tools of propaganda for the Nazis to use, the citizens “had been convinced that a vote for Nazism meant a vote for new times.”<sup>94</sup> People believed that the Nazis would solve Germany’s problems and that these “new times” were for the benefit of the German citizenry. Even if creating the *Volksgemeinschaft* was a failure, propaganda would at least make the citizens believe it was a success.<sup>95</sup> Propaganda also did the job of covering up or hiding some of the more negative aspects of Nazism such as killing millions and taking away freedoms from its citizens.<sup>96</sup> This propaganda would especially appeal to the young and easily malleable youth because they were already believing that the old parties

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<sup>90</sup> Fritz, 383.

<sup>91</sup> Hitler, 579-586.

<sup>92</sup> Joseph Goebbels to German Radio on March 25, 1933 in Noakes and Pridam, 385.

<sup>93</sup> Panikos Panayi, “Continuities in German History, 1919-1945”, in Panayi, 15.

<sup>94</sup> Allen, 192.

<sup>95</sup> Schoenbaum, 66-67.

<sup>96</sup> Allen, 193.

and parliament were only parts of a failed system.<sup>97</sup> Actually, the propaganda of the Nazis was able to appeal to a multitude of groups. The Nazis could speak the language of

“‘worker’, ‘farmer’, ‘soldier’, [and] ‘socialism.’ Each of [those languages were] undefined in varying degrees but all of them were positive in their associations and as such beyond criticism.”<sup>98</sup>

They had promises for youth, farmers, industry, and many other people. Some people, like students, were not offered much from the Nazis since they were considered part of the intellectuals and the old bourgeois who believed they were better than everyone else, which resulted in a decline of scientific research.<sup>99</sup> Nonetheless, the mass media and propaganda the Nazis used may have contributed greatly to the people’s acceptance of their policies. The leaders of the Nazi party knew that to reach the amount of people they wanted, they would need the most advanced media technology. Nonetheless, the success of the propaganda was due to strong leaders deciding to use it, whereas other political parties did not use effective propaganda to have the nation supporting it.

Nationalism, or the idea of uniting all Germans together, has also been considered a strong reason the people turned to Nazism. Historian Lawrence Birken argued that the seeds of Nazism’s idea of nationalism came from the ideas established by the Enlightenment. When people believed they should rule for themselves instead of kings in the Enlightenment, the Germans would later take that to mean they should rule over all Germans.<sup>100</sup> This idea of leading over all Germans would be a big part of the ideas of taking land in Nazi ideology. It was believed that the Weimar Republic could do nothing to help the Germans who were separated

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<sup>97</sup> Krebs, 142.

<sup>98</sup> Schoenbaum, 51-52.

<sup>99</sup> Berghoff, 75-78.

<sup>100</sup> Lawrence Birken, *Hitler as Philosopher: Remnants of the Enlightenment in National Socialism* (Westport: Praeger, 1995), 24-25.

from the rest of Germany. That government could not solve internal problems within Germany, let alone help the ethnic Germans outside Germany. The Nazis on the other hand claimed they could provide help and bring all Germans under them. But nationalism also created a sense of unity among the people. The nationalist aspect of *Volksgemeinschaft* made the people feel that they were important because most of the ideology preached that the German people were essential to making the community work and to maintain it for generations to come, that their voices should be heard, and that their needs should be met. *Volksgemeinschaft* was something that was not so easily defined by the Nazis and could be interpreted many ways by many different types of people to suit the image of a perfect community they wanted.<sup>101</sup> Because the idea could be defined differently by different people, it would mean that different people would expect different outcomes from the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Scholars argue that these nationalist tendencies existed in the German people for a long time, but it would take leaders like Hitler to awaken these nationalist views through effective speeches.

It is also possible that some people did see *Volksgemeinschaft* as ideal because it could be useful for the people. If average people used the principle of “people’s community,” then they could see their personal needs, such as good housing and proper health care, met. Social stratification could be reversed if low and middle-class people were using Nazi ideology to get ahead.<sup>102</sup> Because the poor could be included in the *Volk*, or people, the poor saw *Volksgemeinschaft* as more appealing.<sup>103</sup> For example, because motherhood was so vital for the *Volksgemeinschaft*’s future population, nurses could claim new favorable conditions needed to exist in hospitals to insure that future mothers and their Aryan offspring would be safe and

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<sup>101</sup>Moritz Föllmer, “The Problem of National Solidarity in Interwar Germany,” *German History* 23 (2005), 203-217.

<sup>102</sup> Connelly, 901-903.

<sup>103</sup> Stackelberg, 54.



healthy.<sup>104</sup> Small-scale workers like small manufacturers, postal workers, and transportation workers, may have also molded *Volksgemeinschaft* to their definition. Workers in these areas had no, or very little, “sense of class, ideological, or political identity.”<sup>105</sup> They could easily accept the classless society concept of the Nazi ideology. People may have truly believed that whether the Nazi idea of *Volksgemeinschaft* would work or not, people could still use the idea to gain a better life. They still invoked the names of leaders in these pleas for better housing and health care saying that these leaders would want these situations changed. Not only then did the Nazis use their leadership to bring the people under their rule, the lower and middle-class citizens used leadership as a means of getting a better standard of living.

Perhaps most importantly though in getting support was that the party needed a strong leader to move the people into supporting them. Hitler would prove to be that charismatic leader. Leadership was so important because “submission to a leader acting for the common good would weld the nation into a unit, eliminate injustices, and internal strife.”<sup>106</sup> To have dissatisfaction in the government, one needed a strong leader who could eloquently bring out those grievances. Hitler himself before he became powerful believed that a movement could only succeed if its leadership was strong.<sup>107</sup> A strong leader would be able to spread their ideas to the people by using the most modern media and propaganda to get the people to their side.<sup>108</sup> Hitler did not have to be the only leader who would accomplish this task, although some scholars seemed to think so. They considered Hitler as the one who brought the German people together

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<sup>104</sup> Connelly, 910.

<sup>105</sup> Fritz, 390.

<sup>106</sup> Abel, 147.

<sup>107</sup> Hitler, 580.

<sup>108</sup> Fritz, 393.

as one nation and one race.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, some scholars believed that “without question, Hitler played a personally vital part both in the rise of Nazism and in the character of Nazi rule.”<sup>110</sup>

What really mattered was the concept of a strong leader, the idea of the *Führer*. Some Nazi thinkers saw no state, but the *Führer*, as what would make the *Volksgemeinschaft* work.<sup>111</sup> The *Führer* would not work for the party; the party would work for him. The job of the party after the rise of the Nazis was to do the *Führer's* bidding and to get more people to support him.<sup>112</sup> The *Führer* would be the absolute leader the Nazis called for. The Nazi “law...authorized the *Führer*... as the effective agent not only of the state but of society to limit or expropriate property at will.”<sup>113</sup> The leader of the Nazis would have not just the power over government and the laws that were passed, he would even have the power to tell who could and could not own land and how much they received. It was also important to portray the *Führer* as the perfect German. Hitler, as leader of Germany, was made to appear as the epitome of the *Volksgemeinschaft*.<sup>114</sup> However, that was not the only use for the concept of the *Führer*. He would also be used to arouse the enthusiasm of the people to join the Nazi cause. His authority, whether it was true or not, could be invoked by party members to get certain actions and laws to be approved. In the German government, “it [proved] difficult to find any political figure who attracted quite the same amount of adulation as the *Führer*.”<sup>115</sup> Just the authority of a leader proved to be important to the German people, and the Nazi party.

As the Nazis stated in their ideology, the party thought it needed one ruler at the top to determine how the *Volksgemeinschaft* would be created and who would be allowed in and out of

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<sup>109</sup> Moore, 7.

<sup>110</sup> Kershaw, 41.

<sup>111</sup> Ernst Rudolph Huber in Noakes and Pridham, 199.

<sup>112</sup> Hitler in the Conference of Gaueiters in Noakes and Pridham, 235.

<sup>113</sup> Schoenbaum, 154.

<sup>114</sup> Stackelberg, *Hitler*, 154-155.

<sup>115</sup> Pnayi, 15.

the community. Their leadership policies also involved having only one party in Parliament: the Nazis. With one party, the Nazis would be able to make sure all of their policies were enacted. The Nazis would also not have to worry about trying to negotiate with other parties, whose only concern was getting re-elected. In other words, the Nazi leadership would be having the Nazis in complete control of all functions of German government and having one leader to administer all of these functions.

The strong leader that was going to oversee every aspect of German government would have to have certain qualities. He would have to be capable of getting to the top of German government if he intended to be leader. That meant that the leader would have to be effective at winning the German citizenry over to the Nazi party. They would have to be an effective speaker and could be used as an example for the perfect German racially. He would also have to be able to manage the government and see that all its functions worked towards establishing the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Hitler would prove to have those capabilities. He was a strong speaker and effectively used his speeches to win over more votes for his party. Hitler was also a leader who could appeal to many different types of people. Party officials would describe Hitler as capable of putting on many different faces to address workers, farmers, women, and children.<sup>116</sup> As mentioned earlier, he was frequently used as an example of the perfect German throughout Nazi propaganda. He was then a preferable choice for the position of the *Führer*.

In conclusion, the Nazi ideology of the “people’s community,” or *Volksgemeinschaft*, was accepted by the German people through many reasons, but most importantly by a leader, or at least the concept of a leader. Nazi ideology was very contradictory and confusing and it needed a leader who could speak the many languages of the various farmers, businesses, and workers to at least fool people into believing their ideas were simple. The *Volksgemeinschaft*

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<sup>116</sup> Krebs, 160-161.

tried to appeal and work for all groups and societies, making a strong leader vital to its survival.

While the failure of the Weimar Republic, the depression, nationalism, or even propaganda may have helped the Nazis rise to power, a powerful leader who could bring all these reasons together would prove to be the most important to bringing the Nazis to the very top of the German government.

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