 Elections, Plebiscites,

and Festivals

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WHAT a festival, what a spectacle it was, when the Nazis organized the elections of

spring  as a spectacular occasion. On Sunday,  March the whole of Germany

seemed to be out and about, cheering, celebrating and yes—also voting. During the

day, two Zeppelins flew over the Reich dropping leaflets: ‘Vote for the Führer’.

At dawn, ‘coming from the East’, they arrived in the Rhineland, whose militarization

a few weeks earlier the nation was supposed to legitimize by means of these elections.

A radio reporter on board described the flight over the ‘old imperial city’ of Aachen

and over Cologne, where national flags attached to parachutes sailed to the ground.

Down below, at the ‘Deutsches Eck’monument in Koblenz, young people formed a cross

in a circle symbolizing the vote forHitler. Then came Frankfurt and onwent the journey

over ‘a stretch of Autobahn, which cuts through the landscape like a white ribbon’. On

board the airships the mood was relaxed and the crew voted: everything was done in

accordancewith the regulations and the law. Anelectoral commissionwas sworn inwith

a handshake; there was a voting booth and a ballot box to ensure secrecy: ‘For the first

time in the history of air travel voting has taken place between the earth and the sky.’

The towns blazed in a sea of flags in black, white, and red; on the following day, the

newspapers described torchlight processions, sing-songs, fireworks, anddemonstrations.

‘Every available band in the Reich kept Berlin and other centers in constant uproar’,

wrote an American journalist. In Berlin, cheering people gathered in front of the Reich

Chancellery throughout the day. ‘Thewhole ofGermany is united in joy’, notedGoebbels

and the newspapers reported: ‘The sun shone on a festive day for Germans.’ Although

everybody had reckoned on a  per cent turnout, the numbers of thosewho hadmarked

a cross on the ballot paper against ‘Reichstag for Freedom and Peace.National Socialist

German Workers Party’ still caused astonishment. With a turnout rate of  per cent,

according to official figures . per cent had placed their cross againstwhatwas the only

choice on the paper. Only half a million voters had not done so.

The Nazi bigwigs could hardly get over their good fortune: ‘The nation has risen

up’, noted Goebbels in his diary. ‘The Führer has united the nation. We didn’t expect

this in our wildest dreams. We are all dazed.’ The leading Nazis were all undoubtedly

exhausted. In the course of a frenetic election campaign they had bombarded the

country with propaganda for peace and praise for the German militarization of the

Rhineland. Foreign countries were also fascinated. The New York Times described

the election festivities in numerous articles and, in particular, drew attention to the

Zeppelins: ‘It would have been hard for the government to have found a more fitting

symbol of the pride of a sovereign and powerful people than the spectacle of those two

great airships.’

Why did the Nazis hold these elections? Did not elections fundamentally contradict

the dictatorial ‘leadership principle’ and the claim to total power? Why did they take

the risk inherent in elections, even when held under dictatorial conditions? A total of

four Reichstag elections and five plebiscites took place after Hitler’s seizure of power

in January . The reason seems obvious. The Nazis used elections for propaganda

purposes in a very similar way to their use of mass festivals: as pomp and spectacle for

the people, in order to mobilize them, but also as a performative message to foreign

observers. Like the Nazis’ mass festivities they were elaborate rituals and liturgies that

served to create an exalted atmosphere, lifting people out of their everyday existence.

Nevertheless, the fact that the Nazis specifically selected elections for their propaganda

still requires explanation. There are some grounds for thinking that the potency

of these events lay in their function of providing a comprehensive form of legitimation

that would be recognized worldwide. In the age of the masses and in the age of

democracy the participation and support of the ‘people’ represented not only an

indispensable but also an unbeatable form of legitimation. How could opponents

justify their opposition if—apparently—they had the overwhelming majority against

them? What arguments could Great Britain, France, or the League of Nations make

against Adolf Hitler if ‘his people’ were behind him and joining him in declaring their

peaceful intentions? The Nazis really did want the vote of every voter and the success

of the NSDAP cannot be understood without recognizing the effectiveness of the

party’s role in mobilizing voters. And it would be a mistake to attribute its victories

primarily to fraud and manipulation, though they certainly happened, or to the

propaganda machine. The electoral system of the Weimar Republic had remained

largely intact, so that the methods for ensuring secrecy (uniform ballot papers, voting

booths and ballot boxes), which worldwide had come to be regarded as prerequisites

for a legitimate election, remained officially in force.

The ‘Law concerning the Plebiscite’ of  July , which provided the Nazi regime

with a powerful political instrument, was also not simply a new invention of the Nazi

dictatorship. Article  of theWeimar Constitution had already envisaged an important

role for plebiscites. However, the ‘Leader state’ had largely eliminated the mechanisms

of ‘checks and balances’.Whereas underWeimar the people or parliament could initiate

a referendum, under the new law of July  only ‘the government’ had this right.

Moreover, in the Nazi state plebiscites could be used to suspend the constitution or

parliamentary decrees much more easily than under the Weimar Republic.

Opposite: The NSDAP presented itself as modern and it was particularly attractive to young people. Election

poster with the German autobahn and the motto ‘We follow the one who made the way for us

The plebiscites and elections in the ‘Third Reich’ are often overlooked because nowadays

the logic of ‘democratic legitimacy’ within a dictatorship no longer seems tomake

sense. We see the period after World War I against the background of precarious

democracies that were threatened, and in some cases destroyed, by fascism. However,

it was not only in Great Britain, France, or in the United States that democracy, in the

sense of a wide participation by the people, was recognized as an age-old tradition. The

Nazis did all they could to exploit the potential of this tradition for providing legitimacy.

Also the executive of the SocialDemocratic Party in exile noted in about democratic

traditions in Germany: ‘it is a great and intelligent nation, [ . . . ] which, after all, has

experienced extensive self-government for over  years [ . . . ] The newrulers are clever

enough to recognize that they must provide some sort of substitute for it.’

The Nazi regime was not the inventor of elections controlled from above; they had

existed in Italy and South America since the s. The decisive factor for these

‘Dictatorial Democracies’—to which from  onwards the Soviet Union also

belonged—was the performative support of the ‘people’. Thus it is clear that elections

are not only a formal procedure, but also always a symbolic act. They always serve

not only to elect a person to an office, but also to define the role of the electorate and to

underline the legitimacy of the social order. In every election the silent participation of

the electorate in this ritual demonstrates its consent to the existing political order.

In order to explore the specifically ‘democratic’ and ‘plebiscitary’ logic of the legitimation

of Nazi rule, the elections and the festivals will now be examined in more detail.

Participatory Traditions in the Dictatorship

The Nazis made no bones about the fact that they considered themselves to be the only

true democrats. In their hostility to parliamentary democracy they were part of the

international mainstream. This was true not only of the totalitarian states but also of

countries with long-standing parliamentary traditions, where criticism of parliaments

was also fashionable. Nevertheless, in the twentieth century, parliaments, just like

elections, could not simply be abolished. In fact, once they had come to power, the

Nazis were not aiming merely at getting rid of parliaments and elections in accordance

with their strident pre- demands. Rather, they eliminated democracy’s liberal

and competitive elements, removing from it all the ‘checks and balances’, the protections

for minorities, the dual chamber system, and its commitment to the constitution.

Their vision was a form of ‘popular rule’ in a kind of radicalized version of Rousseau’s

theory of consensus. In doing so, the Nazi regime was exploiting the dark side of

democracy. For, alongside the enlightened rule of the free and the equal, democracy

also always contains its obverse, namely the possibility of demagogy, populism, and a

tyranny of the majority. ‘I have not abolished democracy’ announced Hitler in a 

election speech, ‘but instead I have simplified it, in that I have declared that I am

responsible not to  parties but to the German people.’

Opposite: Election poster in Berlin on the ‘Adolf-Hitler-House’ : ‘One Nation—one leader—one “Yes

Typically, Nazism did not produce a coherent theory of the importance of elections

and plebiscites. The assessment of voting changed not only in the course of Nazi rule

but also varied depending on the individuals and agencies concerned. Thus, at least

a section of the power elite assumed that the elections of March  would be the

last—an indication that there was no plan but that the regime improvised from

election to election. The leading ‘Third Reich’ legal theorists produced philosophical

justifications for the participatory legitimation of the ‘leader state’: Carl Schmitt, who

had considered the Weimar elections ‘decadent’ and had advocated the total abolition

of ‘all remnants of the previous voting nonsense’, denied that any elections after the

take-over of power had the character of parliamentary elections. Even the Reichstag

election of  March  had been ‘in reality, in jurisprudential terms’, a referendum,

a ‘plebiscite through which the German people [had recognized] Adolf Hitler as

political leader’. In , the legal expert, Ernst Rudolf Huber, declared: ‘Asking

people to vote is intended to strengthen the Führer’s position vis-à-vis the outside

world and to be a clear demonstration of national unity. However, it is the Führer

who continues to incorporate the true will of the nation.’ Hitler was not, therefore,

bound by the results of the votes. The official weekly legal journal stated: ‘The appeal

to the people demonstrates that the German leader state is the true form of democracy,

which now contrasts with the multi-party parliamentary state which dominates the

rest of the world.’ A statement from a government source underlined the importance

of elections, declaring that the nation should ‘not be simply providing a comment’ but

rather the people’s decision represented a ‘legal act’.

In all circumstances, however, the state had to be based on the ‘will of the people’.

Carl Schmitt even stated as one of the ‘accepted and fundamental national socialist

principles’: ‘The Reich government recognizes the will of the people, which it has

consulted, as authoritative.’ According to Ernst Rudolf Huber, only in national

socialism could the will of the people—through the Führer—be ‘revealed in a pure

and unadulterated form’. However, he also emphasized that the ‘leader state’ was not

a democracy in the conventional sense: ‘The German state [ . . . ] is an ethnic nationalist

[völkisch] Führer state in which political unity is embodied in the people, while

the will of the nation is formulated by the Führer.’

The Nazis kept speaking of ‘true democracy’, ‘improved democracy’ (Goebbels),

‘better’ and ‘simpler democracy’ (Hitler), or of ‘genuine democracy’. During the 

plebiscite, the Interior Minister, Wilhelm Frick, asked: ‘Where in the world is there a

country that is ruled so democratically as Germany?’ Hitler liked boasting, above all

in the presence of foreigners, of the ‘ million Germans’, who stood ‘united behind

him’; he was not prepared ‘to take any action without having reassured himself of the

people’s trust’. In August  he told foreign correspondents: ‘Every year I take the

opportunity to submit my authority to the approval of the German people. [ . . . ] We

barbaric Germans are better democrats than other nations.’ The official justification

for the ‘Plebiscite Law’ of  July , which was designed to facilitate the ‘consultation

of the people’, stated that this was simply a procedure based ‘on old Teutonic

legal forms’.

The fact that this was all about demonstrating the masses’ consent to the Nazi

leadership was further shown by the changes to the elections that occurred during the

years of Nazi rule and not least the extensive manipulation of the voting procedure.

All the parties were permitted to take part in the Reichstag election of  March .

Although the opposition parties and in particular the Communist Party and the SPD

were subjected to brutal pressure, with many of their candidates having already been

arrested and suffered torture, the Nazis still only secured  per cent of the vote. The

following Reichstag election of  November  was designed to be an acclamation.

Since the other parties had been banned, the only alternative open to voters was

either to vote for the NSDAP or to spoil their ballot paper. The nation was expected to

show the whole world that it was saying ‘yes’ to the Führer’s policies. In  the

Germans gave their retrospective approval to the Führer’s take-over of the office of

president. The Saar plebiscite of  January , ordained by the Versailles treaty,

was a plebiscite for the Saar population to choose whether they wished to join

France or Germany or to retain the status quo. On  March , the vote for the

second one-party parliament was linked to a plebiscite on the remilitarization of the

Rhineland, for only one cross was allowed on the ballot paper to cover both issues.

The result was that the Reichstag election effectively became a plebiscite. Thus,

according to the writer, Werner Beumelburg, ‘our trip to the ballot box [ . . . ] is not

an election or a ballot, but rather a serious, solemn, and indissoluble commitment to the

destiny that we serve and to the man to whom this destiny has been entrusted’. The

Nazis regarded the election of  April  in the same light, with the voters having to

vote on the ‘reintegration of Austria with the German Reich’ and also for the ‘list of our

Führer, Adolf Hitler’, although on this occasion there was the option of ‘no’ on the

ballot paper.

Reichstag elections, then, were not abolished but transformed into acclamations

and, by the same token, parliament was retained. Evidently Hitler recognized how

useful the legitimation provided by this institution could be. When, at the end of

February , the Reichstag building was set on fire and destroyed, probably by a

single individual, Hitler insisted not only that the building should be retained (against

the advice of his star architect, Albert Speer), but that it should even be extended. For a

number of reasons the renovation work only began in ; the war, however, soon

put an end to it. In an interview before the November  election Goebbels noted

two factors that explain the Reichstag’s ‘continuing importance’: first, the government

needed an authoritative body representing the whole nation, which could support it in

issuing legislation; and second, the ‘Führer’ needed an institution with which to

demonstrate ‘to the world the unity of people and state’. Significantly, the traditions

of the Reichstag were utilized in order to increase this propaganda effect. The symbolic

importance of its continuing existence, should, therefore, not be underestimated, even if

effectively it functioned primarily as a stage for Hitler’s appearances or for the unanimous

approval of particularly symbolic laws. After the passing of the ‘Enabling Law’ of

 March  the Reichstag met only nineteen times and passed only seven laws prior

to its final session on  April .

Parliament played a central role when, on ‘Potsdam Day’,  March , the

Nazis staked a claim to all the Reich’s sources of legitimacy. For this occasion involved

more than a solemn handshake between the ‘Third Reich’ and the Kaiser’s Reich,

embodied by Hindenburg wearing the uniform of a field-marshal of the old Reich, or

the symbolic gesture of holding the ceremony in the town of Potsdam; there was also

the ceremonial opening of the Reichstag elected on  March. For  March was the

date in  on which the first ever Reichstag had opened. It had been elected under

one of the most modern electoral laws of its time, including universal male suffrage for

those aged over twenty-four, and, despite all their criticism of parliaments and parties,

had acquired a traditional status that Germans held dear. Not surprisingly, therefore,

Nazis also appreciated the prestige attached to a seat in parliament. The most important

officials in the party, the SA or the SS, acquired a seat more or less automatically;

other Nazi bigwigs such as Albert Speer or Fritz Todt tried in vain to get one.

The Nazi regime exploited the participatory tradition in other areas as well. In

, for example, the anniversary of the ‘seizure of power’ was celebrated with a

speech by Hitler to the Reichstag. According to Goebbels the ‘main theme’ was ‘that

Germany would forever remain a Führer republic. No more monarchies!’ In his

speech Hitler spoke a great deal about famous figures of the past, praised Germany’s

peaceful intentions, and attacked the Jewish population. He considered the most

important source of legitimacy to be the ‘German people’. He repeatedly talked

about the ‘national community’ and he reminded his audience of President Wilson’s

-point programme with its ‘fundamental sentence about national self-determination’.

The other states, Hitler stated, had denied this right to ‘the highly cultivated

German people’, a right which he, Hitler, had now won back. The ‘Führer’ reminded

the deputies of their ‘sacred and eternal duty’: ‘You are not the representatives of a

specific area or of a particular regional group; you are not the representatives of

particular interests; first and foremost, you are the elected representatives of the whole

German nation.’

At the same time, in his speech to the Reichstag Hitler made clear his rejection of

‘alien democracy’ such as had existed in Germany before . The ‘so-called great

democracies’ (elsewhere in his speech he called them ‘capitalist democracies’) ought to

ask themselves the question: ‘In the final analysis is a regime that has  per cent of its

population behind it not a completely different democracy from those states which

can often only maintain themselves in power by using the most dubious methods of

electoral fraud?’ ‘How do they have the nerve to try and force something on us, which,

as far as popular rule is concerned, we already possess in a far more transparent and

superior form?’ What that form of ‘popular rule’ by the Reichstag actually meant

could be seen in the responses of the deputies whose parliamentary activity was

Opposite: The writer Werner Beumelburg (at the right in the picture) wrote about National Socialist elections

that they were supposedly a ‘serious, solemn, and indissoluble commitment to the destiny that we serve and to

the man to whom this destiny has been entrusted’. At the left a citizen stops at the image of the election ballot,

with its directions for how to vote. limited to greeting every sarcastic remark of the Führer’s with ‘hilarity’ and every

threatening gesture with ‘a storm of applause’.

Electoral Techniques

A mere act of acclamation was insufficient to sustain the fiction of democracy. This

was shown among other things by the electoral system that the Nazis adopted. They

wanted a form of legitimacy that was internationally recognized and for that they

needed an electoral system that appeared to meet international standards.

Thus, according to the law, Nazi elections were ‘universal’; in  and  even

Jewish citizens were allowed to vote. In  Interior Minister Frick reprimanded a

local party leader to the effect that the exclusion of Jews from the electoral lists was

‘against the law’ and strictly forbidden. However, the fact that the Central Association

for Jews recommended to its members that they vote ‘yes’ in the November 

election indicates the degree of pressure that was already being applied. It was not

until the Reich Citizenship Law of , one of the Nuremberg laws, that Jews were

deprived of the vote, although ‘Jewish Mischlinge’ [‘half’ and ‘quarter’ Jews] were

allowed to retain it. Significantly, the rights of ‘Reich citizens’ were defined above all

in terms of their right to vote: ‘The right to exercise the vote in political matters is

restricted to Reich citizens as the possessors of full “political rights”’ and ‘a Jew

cannot be a Reich citizen. He does not have the right to vote in political matters.’

Concentration camp prisoners were allowed to vote, at least in the first elections,

and, thanks to the secrecy imposed, were able to express their opposition. After the

election of November  a concentration camp commandant complained: ‘The

result shows that around a third of all prisoners in protective custody have not

understood or will not understand what it’s now all about. Unfortunately, we can’t

find out the names of the incorrigible ones.’ In Heuberg concentration camp in the

Swabian Alps around half the prisoners who voted in November  refused to

support the Nazi regime.

To the great annoyance of the Nazi rank and file and, despite all their demands that

the ‘traitors to the fatherland’ should be publicly stigmatized, the government stuck to

electoral secrecy and in  declared that ‘the harassment’ of voters should be

prevented by ‘all means’, a statement that was widely circulated through the press.

In another statement Interior Minister Frick ordered that ‘electoral freedom and

voting secrecy [were to be] maintained at all costs’. There was one case in which the

electoral commission actually declared that the results in a polling centre were invalid

because secrecy had not been maintained.

Nevertheless, there were repeated cases of manipulation and fraud and non- and

no-voters were repeatedly subjected to political terror by the Nazis. There were

individual reports that, inside the polling stations, which were covered in swastikas

Opposite: The personification of peace rises out of the election urn, to warn Germans that with their vote they

could avoid the war.‘German people, I advise you: Elect Hitler—You elect me.’

and portraits of Hitler, party members marked the ballots of those considered ‘unreliable’,

or more or less blatantly kept the voting booths under observation. The

demonstrative avoidance of the use of the polling booths by fanatical Hitler supporters

also contributed towards undermining electoral secrecy. And, when counting

the votes, many election committees ignored ‘no’ votes so that they could report the

result expected by the regime. However, there is much to be said for the view that, if

one excludes the  election, fraud and manipulation were not so prevalent as to

fundamentally distort the results. This has been repeatedly confirmed by regional

studies of the procedure of actual elections and by the records of private individuals.

‘Voting itself was undoubtedly secret’, reported the British ambassador of the autumn

 elections, and the New York Times reported after the elections in April :

‘As noted by neutral observers watching the ballots being taken out of the envelopes,

the vote did in truth run better than  per cent or  per cent for Hitler and the

Anschluss.’ The, for the Nazis, relatively disappointing, results of the plebiscite on the

presidency of August  also point to the relative freedom of the election: Despite

their total domination of the election and the political pressure they imposed, the

Nazis ‘only’ received  per cent of the votes. That means that substantially more than

seven million of those entitled to vote did not choose to do so or voted ‘no’. On the day

after the plebiscite, the political leadership was in a sombre mood as they joined Hitler

and tried to work out ‘what had gone wrong’. For the next election in  the regime

had learned its lesson, ordering that all ballot papers that were not marked with a

cross against the only choice of ‘yes’ should, nevertheless, be counted as ‘yes’ votes.

This was probably the most glaring example of the Nazis’ electoral fraud—if one

ignores the fact that none of these elections offered people a choice.

The reason for the Nazis’ inhibitions about indulging in electoral fraud was the fear

that this would delegitimize the elections. They had no illusions about that. The

transformation of the ‘no’ votes into ‘yes’ votes during the  election was in fact

severely criticized by the foreign press, as was the fact that it was impossible to give a

‘no’ vote. The Nazis corrected this in : the ballot papers once more offered the

option of a ‘no’ vote and ballot papers that were blank or marked incorrectly were no

longer counted as ‘yes’ votes.

Thus, all in all, elections could make a remarkable impact. The Jewish Romance

scholar, Viktor Klemperer, for example, considered the plebiscite of November 

a definite triumph for Hitler: ‘I too’, he wrote, ‘am beginning to believe in Hitler’s

power and that he’s here to stay.’ Following these elections the Social Democrats too

had ‘to overcome a deep depression’, according to their committee in exile. The Nazis

regarded it as crucial that the election results should have the desired effect abroad.

After the election of March , for example, in its election analysis The Times in

London joined in the jubilation: ‘There has never been any public feeling in England

against the union of Austria and Germany, nor is it in itself the slightest bar to an

understanding between Grossbritannien and Grossdeutschland.’ After the Reichstag

election of  the New York Times commented: ‘Adolf Hitler’s Germanic empire

received its baptism of ballots yesterday when nearly ,, voters in the new

Reich gave silent affirmation to the annexation of Austria.’ Even after the vote on the

presidency in , in which the Nazis had been disappointed by the numerous ‘no’

votes and abstentions, the New York Times spelled out the reality of the situation:

‘Adolf Hitler is the Führer of the Reich with absolute power by the vote of almost

 per cent of the Germans in it.’ And even when, in , there was criticism from

abroad about the invalid ballots being counted as ‘yes’ votes, a correspondent from

the New York Times played it down: ‘That Hitler won an overwhelming election

victory despite this confusion is beyond doubt.’ In the case of the plebiscite on the

Anschluss in  the reporter of the New York Times was unimpressed by doubts

and criticism. Whatever was being said by foreigners about an allegedly pointless

plebiscite on an issue that had already been decided (the Anschluss with Austria) the

vote was ‘a tribute to Hitler no less than a fervid profession of national and racial

solidarity’. With the exception of the March  elections the foreign correspondents

barely mentioned the terror used against the opposition.

Mobilization and Modernity

The propaganda machine was relentless in its ruthless drive to dominate the public

mind. Members of the Hitler Youth, students, ordinary Party members—all were

mobilized. The preparations for elections went on for weeks beforehand and in the

final hours before the vote feverish attempts were made to engage the population: flags

were hung out on public buildings and churches; meetings of the Nazi factory cell

organization were held at people’s places of work; final arrangements were made to

enable German expatriates to vote on ships; there were torchlight processions by male

voters, mass choirs, and church bells were rung on the evening before the vote. The

regime used every technical means to demonstrate its modernity and euphoric belief in

progress, from Zeppelins in the sky to loudspeakers in underground stations broadcasting

Hitler’s speeches. In Berlin, on election day itself, masses of people surged

around, shouting themselves hoarse, calling for Hitler; and, throughout the country,

Germans got together to hear the election results being broadcast on the radio, booing

news of ‘no’ votes. In Vienna in  thousands of euphoric citizens marched along

the Ring singing patriotic songs such as: the Horst-Wessel Song and the Deutschland

Song, and shouting: ‘We want to see our Führer!’ In rural areas brass bands serenaded

the countryside. During the  elections, people flocked to church services. In some

rural areas SA men were considered especially pious and their brown uniforms stood

out among the churchgoers. When the election results were declared, all over the

country the announcement read: ‘Record victory: the number of votes as follows.’

The Nazis’ anti-elitist, anti-patriarchal, and modern propaganda, their rhetorical

appeal to the workers, and their tough behaviour appealed to sections of the population

who had felt marginalized under the Weimar Republic and were happy to

participate in this mood of protest. Above all, youth was attracted—the SA was a

young man’s scene. Through their comprehensive social mobilization the Nazis

enabled many people to rise in the world, humiliating old notables in the process.

They had Socialist ministers and Jewish millionaires hounded through the streets or

subjected to mockery in their socks and underwear. The Germans profited from the

regime’s lust for plunder, enriching themselves at the expense of fellow citizens who

had been murdered. In some respects the much trumpeted unity of people and regime

proved to be true and found remarkable symbolic expression in the elections. On the

 ballot paper the state used the familiar you [du] form and, with echoes of the

marriage vow, the question on the paper asked: ‘Do you German man and you

German woman approve the policies of your Reich government, and are you willing

to declare that they express your own views and your own wishes and to solemnly

commit yourself to them?’

Despite the Nazis’ penchant for male forms of spectacle and male bonding activities

and rituals, there is much evidence to show that they specifically intended to appeal to

both genders: ‘German women and men!’ The Nazis definitely did not want women to

be confined to the kitchen. On the contrary, in the course of the s the NSDAP had

come to recognize how important it was for a mass party to win the support of women

and to keep it. Many electoral appeals were, therefore, specifically directed at women.

During the elections of November , ‘in order to avoid misconceptions’ the Nazis

even felt obliged to issue a clarification ‘that, in the Reichstag election and plebiscite

of  November, as with all previous elections, women have the same right to vote

as men’.

In order to demonstrate the unity of people and leader the mobilization had to be

total. In the early hours of election day, often when it was still dark, boys from the

Hitler Youth and BDM girls marched noisily through the streets, blowing trumpets

and banging drums to remind Germans of their ‘duty’. In Berlin’s working-class

districts long queues built up even before the polling stations had opened. During

the  election, almost every second person qualified to vote had already voted by

 o’clock. Since the aim was to make a bigger and bigger impression, this Sunday

morning electoral sport became ever more elaborate. During the elections for the

Anschluss in , SA men, Nazi motor and air units, fire brigades, and whoever else

could be organized and was capable of making a loud noise went around waking

people up. In some places,  per cent had already voted by midday. Party members

used cars to ferry the old and the frail to the polling stations; special polling stations

were set up in hospitals. Those citizens who had failed to vote were subjected to

repeated visits and reminded of their ‘duty’.

The function of elections to mobilize support was aimed particularly at the party

members. They were kept on the go for weeks before election day, cycling through the

countryside to propaganda events, riding around on motorcycles or in fleets of cars

getting the message across and, on election day itself, tirelessly ferrying their fellow

citizens to the polling stations. Just like Stalin, Hitler used elections to control his

agents and to spot flaws in the organization.

There was no law requiring people to vote, but everywhere people were reminded

by party members, newspapers, radio, and keen fellow citizens of the absolute

necessity of voting and of their ‘duty of loyalty and gratitude towards the Führer’.

On the day before the  plebiscite, Göring told Germans: ‘Nobody can be

permitted to stay away, thereby proving that they are unworthy of their Führer’s

trust.’ We must ‘confront the whole world with a powerful demonstration that will

sweep away all the lies and distortions about the new Germany. We must show that in

all their thoughts, actions and sentiments Adolf Hitler and the German people have

become one.’

As the Weimar electoral law, including secret voting, remained in force, there were

no cases of people being taken to court for not voting at all or for not voting in the

right way. However, there were cases of civil servants, who had not voted, being

subjected to disciplinary action, although the Interior Minister did not allow the

matter to be pursued with much energy. Since the Interior Minister had expressly

forbidden the harassment of non-voters, in order to apply more pressure the Nazis

had the idea of marking people who had already voted. Thus, throughout the Reich

canvassers distributed badges to show who had voted. The newspapers reported:

‘Everybody wore the “yes” badge” with pride.’ In some places the canvassers distributed

‘certificates for fulfilment of election duty’.

Disciplinary Action, Complicity, Resistance

According to an American correspondent who analysed the plebiscite of , the

quite violent annexation of Austria had not been seen as enough of a victory in

itself. ‘The National Socialist code prescribes a plebiscite’, he explained, ‘so that the

eligible voter may be impressed with his share of responsibility in determining

the destiny of the nation.’ That was a shrewd observation. A few days before the

elections in November  the venerable liberal newspaper, the Vossische Zeitung,

printed an interview with Goebbels in which the editor kept asking what was the

point of parliamentary elections if there was only one party and no longer any

opposition. Finally, the journalist hit the nail on the head by summing up: ‘In that

case the Reichstag election must be a test of the right thinking and the inner

discipline of the German voter.’ Whereupon the propaganda minister replied:

‘That’s right.’

By voting, every citizen was giving the regime his or her approval. The trip to the

polling station became a public performance of subordination, indeed of complicity.

The free vote had to remain in order to increase the significance of the ritual of

subordination. This involved not only the absence of a legal requirement to vote but

also an early vote on election day, which in every dictatorship counts as proof of

particular loyalty. The celebratory mood also made a decisive contribution towards

giving the election the character of a demonstration of loyalty. The Nationalzeitung, a

Nazi party newspaper, wrote about the elections of March : ‘It was not an

election, it was a solemn act of celebration in which every man and every woman

was glad through their vote to thank the Führer for all his wonderful deeds and

achievements.’

How difficult was it to resist this propaganda and not to vote, to vote ‘no’ or to

spoil the ballot paper? Even if, in principle, voting was secret, people had to reckon

with disapproval. The milder form of pressure was exercised by the canvassers: After

midday, members of the Hitler Youth and numerous party members would ring the

doorbells of voters who had not yet voted in order to get them to vote. In more

extreme cases SA men would hound non-voters through the streets shouting at them,

accompanied by a mob crying: ‘String them up!’

The pressure at election time could be even more brutal: on  March , in a

village in the Saarland, a curate and his housekeeper had used the polling booth.

As a result, a Nazi had become suspicious and had unobtrusively marked the two

ballot papers with an ink spot. When the votes were being counted, and it was

revealed that both ballot papers contained ‘no’ votes, the inhabitants of the village

gathered in front of the vicarage, dragged the two Catholics outside, hounded

them through the streets and mocked them. The same thing happened to a factory

owner from Lower Saxony, who was forced to vote and was then locked up,

mistreated and only released the following day. Moreover, there were cases of

people who were hounded through the streets with a sign around their necks

saying: ‘I didn’t vote because I’m not interested in Germany’s honour and peace.’

Although these were probably isolated cases, they do throw light on the general

atmosphere of repression and fear that was sufficient to persuade the majority of

voters to conform.

The relatively large number of people who, before the elections, received permission

to vote outside their home districts suggests that some voters tried to escape this

pressure. Presumably, many opted for this in order not to be harassed on election

day and then, either not to vote at all, or to vote ‘no’ in a more anonymous

environment. The government responded to this development by instructing that

the polling stations should remain open until  o’clock so that every voter had the

chance to vote.

The fact that hundreds of thousands of people either refused to vote or voted ‘no’

shows that elections and plebiscites under Nazism were not simply rituals of approval

and subordination, but simultaneously perhaps the most important opportunity for

people to distance themselves from, or to oppose, the regime. That does not apply

only to the March  elections, in which, despite massive pressure by the Nazis,

over  per cent of the electorate voted against Hitler becoming a dictator. Even more

significant were the results in the following elections of November , by which

time the dictatorship had become fully established. In the elections of November 

there were . million ‘no’ votes and in the  plebiscite as many as . million.

Against that, however, one could argue that the large number of opposition votes

shows that terror used against opponents during the elections was the exception and

that it was quite possible to express opposition.

Political Festivals in the ‘Third Reich’

Looked at from today’s perspective, it is easy to underestimate the great significance

of political festivals for Nazi rule during the peacetime years of  to .

Our view of Nazi Germany is powerfully shaped by its destruction of democracy

and the ruthless force which the regime used against all those it deemed ‘enemies’

of the nation and of the ‘Aryan race’, culminating in the ‘Holocaust’. The image

of jolly festivals and enthusiastic people cheering Hitler does not square with

this history of oppression, violence, and terror. Nevertheless, festivals and terror,

inclusion in the self-celebratory ‘national community’ and the violent exclusion of

‘community aliens’ were not contradictory but rather were closely related. The fact

that a number of particularly vicious repressive measures were closely linked to

spectacular celebrations is evidence for this. Following the brilliant staging of the

alleged continuity between Prussian history and the ‘Third Reich’ on the  March

, which came to be known as Potsdam Day, two days later democracy was

destroyed by the passage of the ‘Enabling Act’. Only a day after more than a million

people in Berlin had celebrated  May as National Labour Day, the regime destroyed

the free trade unions. In  the notorious ‘Nuremberg Laws’, designed to

remove Jewish rights, were drafted in back rooms during the NSDAP’s Reich Party

Congress, the most elaborate event in the Party’s list of ‘annual political ceremonies’.

And the wave of terror, which caused the death of hundreds of Jews on  November

, was launched by Hitler and Goebbels during the annual commemoration of

the failed Munich putsch by the Nazi party in . Sometimes violence and

oppression were even dressed up in the form of a solemn ritual, as with the ‘book

burnings’ of May .

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to see the numerous festivals that took place in

the ‘Third Reich’ simply as platforms for the preparation of violence or as a tactic to

divert attention from oppressive measures. Political festivals also served the regime’s

image management vis-à-vis its own population and foreign countries. Participants

in the great mass meetings could feel that they were part of an emotional community

and were apparently experiencing the vision of the classless ‘national community’ as

a lived reality. Political festivals with their heightened emotion and elaborate scenarios

provided a venue where the aestheticization of politics, so typical of Nazism

and Fascism, could have a direct and effective impact. At the same time, the rituals

and symbols of the festivals contributed towards the political sphere acquiring a

sacred aura. If Nazism is to be described as a form of political religion then public

ceremonies represented a central part of its liturgy. The direct encounter between

the ‘Führer’ and ‘the people’ at political festivals was both an instrument and an

expression of charismatic rule and represented an important basis for the ‘Hitler

myth’ (Ian Kershaw, ) on which the loyalty of a large number of Germans

depended. It was not only at election time that mass events served both to demonstrate

the ‘new Germany’s’ power and modernity and to intimidate domestic and

foreign opponents. March-pasts, demonstrations, and military parades, organized

with exceptional logistical and technical sophistication, presented the German Reich

as a modern, efficient state, one that was looking towards the future and, not least,

was capable of offering its citizens a good show: bands and good-looking young

men in uniform, torchlight processions, fireworks and ‘cathedrals of light’, the

experience of travelling to events together in special trains, the overnight stays

under canvas, and the binge drinking sessions after the event—all of that provided

great entertainment.

Like elections and plebiscites, political festivals were a means of integrating the

German population into the Nazi regime without giving it the opportunity to influence

policy. Such festivals involve elaborate scenarios, presupposing the presence of

all participants in one place, and can last for hours or days at a time. As in the case of

elections, their ritualistic, liturgical programmes set them apart from the everyday

world. Although the speakers, the politicians who are present, the participants in a

march-past, and the ‘public’ that is watching have different roles, they all, as members

of the festival community, form a unity in which the ‘public’ themself becomes an

actor. The simultaneous presence of all the participants, their interaction, and their

inclusion in symbolic acts are capable of producing powerful emotional resonances,

which in turn can influence political attitudes and behaviour. Political festivals are loci

of feelings, of moods, and of the amalgamation of real and symbolic worlds.

The Nazis exploited all this in a variety of ways in order to integrate the population

in their regime.

The Nazis’ ‘Festival Calendar’

Right from the start, political festivals played a key role in the self-projection of

Nazi rule and for the representation of the unity of ‘people’ and Führer. This can be

shown by a brief account of the first year of the ‘Third Reich’. When, after 

January , Hitler and the NSDAP began to demolish Weimar democracy, to

persecute their political opponents, to ban the other parties, and to ‘coordinate’ all

independent organizations, the path to dictatorship was accompanied by a veritable

‘firework of festivals’. A series of public events on a large scale, and elaborately

choreographed, were accompanied by numerous smaller-scale parades, meetings,

and ceremonies taking place in the Reich’s towns and villages, in which traditional

elements of the local culture were married with the symbols and rituals of the Nazi

movement. These numerous smaller-scale festive occasions taking place during

 provide a particularly illuminating insight into the redemptive expectations

which, through a mixture of opportunism, hope, and enthusiasm, many Germans

projected onto Hitler. They also show the determination with which the party, SA,

and Hitler Youth functionaries set about conquering the public sphere and occupying

it with their signs and rituals. The main festivals and their multifaceted echo

in the provinces not only served to project an attractive image and, as external

decoration, to cover up the brutal conquest of the state. They were also a kind of

‘social rite of passage’ and as such an important step in the process of establishing

the dictatorship.

The first big event was Potsdam Day on  March . As already mentioned,

the parliament, which had been elected on  March, was opened not in Berlin but

in neighbouring Potsdam, the town which, with its barracks, its palaces and the

tomb of ‘Frederick the Great’, was the most important memorial site of the Prussian

state myth.

Although much had to be improvised at short notice, the organizers, led by

Goebbels, succeeded in creating an impressive show. It was intended to demonstrate

the reconciliation between the ‘revolutionary’ Nazi movement and ‘Prussian traditions’.

The regime hoped that the magic of the place would bestow upon it the

legitimacy of history. However, it was in fact only later that the photograph of

the handshake between Hitler and the aged Reich President von Hindenburg became

the most famous symbol of this transfer of authority from the representative of

one historical epoch to the next. The immediate emotional effect derived rather

from the ‘Prussian’ atmosphere of the Potsdam ceremony and from the inclusion of

the whole nation in the great transfer ritual. It was not only in Potsdam that thousands

lined the streets. Germans throughout the land were called upon to put up on their

houses either the black, white, and red flag of the old Reich or the Nazi swastika and,

that evening, the ‘rebirth of the nation’ was celebrated with numerous torchlight

processions and ‘freedom ceremonies’.

Only a few weeks later, the nomination of  May  as ‘National Labour Day’

served symbolically to integrate the working class into the ‘national community’. For

the first time in German history the labour movement’s traditional day of protest was

made a public holiday. This was a clever move, a symbolic recognition of the workers,

who, even before the world economic crisis with its mass unemployment, considered

themselves the losers from modern capitalism. However, this symbolic recognition

came at a high price. On ‘National Labour Day’ in  there were no mass meetings

and marches in which members of trade unions and left-wing parties could demonstrate

in support of the interests of the working class. Instead, at the heart of the

May Day celebrations, was a mass meeting, organized by the state, of over a million

people on the ‘Tempelhofer Feld’ in Berlin. Here the young Albert Speer won his spurs

as the man responsible for creating a stage on which the Hitler cult could flourish.

Speer’s staging of the event contained many of the elements typical of later mass

occasions: Huge swastika flags provided the backdrop for the rostrum from which

Hitler spoke to the crowd; modern loudspeakers carried the speech to the million

people gathered in front of him; a radio reporter broadcast live from an airship that

floated over the city. Torchlight processions and fireworks provided an impressive

end to the day. The festivities were followed by brute force. On  May, the free trade

unions were banned and their property was confiscated. The  May of the working

class and class struggle had been transformed into the  May of the ‘national

community’. In certain respects, like Potsdam Day, this mass festival was a transitional

ritual from the free public sphere of the Weimar Republic to the performative

public space of the dictatorship, in which every participant was allocated a fixed role.

During the following years, the Nazi  May departed further and further from its

roots in the labour movement. From the middle of the s onwards, the day was

celebrated as an unpolitical spring festival with new traditions such as the ‘May tree’

and with entertainment provided in the ‘workplace community’, i.e. the factory or

office. ‘Enjoy life’ was the unpolitical motto given out by Dr Robert Ley, the head of

the German Labour Front, for the May celebrations in .

The next event in the ceremonial year of  was the ‘Reich Party Congress of the

NSDAP’. This took place in Nuremberg and lasted from  August until  September.

In fact, it was a Party congress in name only. Above all it was a ritual demonstration

of the charismatic relationship between Hitler, the ‘movement’, and ‘the German

people’. Every year, several hundred thousand functionaries, members and supporters

of the Nazi party and its numerous ancillary organizations gathered in Nuremberg to

participate in a variety of events lasting several days. Its impact depended less on the

content of the political speeches and more on the experience of being part of a

community. The NSDAP had started the Nuremberg rallies in the s, but it was

only from  onwards that they were planned as major occasions, becoming

increasingly elaborate as the years went by. Commissioned by Hitler himself, the

film of the  party congress, directed by Leni Riefenstahl and titled ‘Triumph of

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rather extremely suggestive propaganda clearly indicates the message the party

all to staging an encounter between the ‘Führer’ and his ‘people’. In the middle of the

festival arena was the so-called ‘Führer Way’ leading up the mountain. This was used

by Hitler and his entourage who, with the applause of a crowd of hundreds of

thousands ringing in their ears, ‘walked through’ the people. In  this walk

‘through the people’ is estimated to have taken a full  minutes and this charismatic

moment of proximity between Hitler and the ‘people’ was repeatedly reproduced in

photographs of the ‘Harvest Festival’. The political ‘Harvest Festival’, which was held

annually and ever more elaborately until , was not, however, limited to the major

event held on the Bückeberg. Just as ‘ May’ was celebrated as a day to reaffirm the

‘national community’ not simply in Berlin but in numerous other places and factories,

the ‘Reich Harvest Festival’ was marked in villages and small towns up and down the

country. There the focus was not the charismatic encounter with the Führer; instead,

these local celebrations were a combination of traditional elements of rural festival

culture and expressions of local identity with new political symbols, and aggressive

assertions of their presence by the local Nazi organizations and functionaries.

Whether these small-scale events were able to establish themselves and win the

affection of local communities or degenerated into political routine depended very

much on whether or not they succeeded in integrating the ideological messages into

local popular festival culture.

Finally, the last great celebration of  took place on  November in Munich.

Since  the NSDAP had marked this day in commemoration of the failed Hitler

putsch of . This amateurish attempt at a coup, which was crushed without much

difficulty by loyal Bavarian policemen, was transformed by the party into a core

foundation myth of the Nazi movement. In particular, after , there was an

increasing emphasis on the cult of martyrdom associated with those putschists who

had been shot. Here, even more than with the ‘Reich Party Congress’, it was the Nazi

party that was the main focus of attention. The NSDAP used Hitler’s annual memorial

address in the ‘Bürgerbr.ukeller’, the re-enactment of the putschists’ march through

the city, and an increasingly pompous death cult, to create a myth of heroism and

sacrifice, thereby helping to form the party’s identity. Thus, the  November celebration

was not primarily about the link between the charismatic ‘Führer’ and the

‘national community’. What was being celebrated and given a legendary status

was rather the purported ‘community of struggle’ associated with the party’s early

so-called ‘years of struggle’. In Munich every year on  November an invented

tradition was being staged in which the movement’s ‘old fighters’ were continually

confirming in their own minds that they were a sworn community of the Führer and

represented the elite of the ‘Third Reich’. Not least for this reason, of all the regime’s

rituals this festival contained the most elements of a political-religious liturgy: Year

after year, the  ‘blood flag’ that had been turned into a party relic, was carried

ceremonially through the city. The sixteen dead of  acquired the status of

political martyrs and, in , in a grandiose ceremony were buried in two newly

constructed ‘temples of honour’ in the Königsplatz. Every year their names were read

out in the emotionally potent form of a ‘roll call’ in which, after each name, the huge

crowd shouted in chorus: ‘here’, thereby invoking the mystical unity of the ‘fallen

heroes’ and the living supporters of the movement.

While Potsdam remained a unique event, up until the other festivals established

themselves as fixed points in the Nazi calendar, following the same annual

rhythm. In  other less spectacular occasions were added to it. The ‘National Day

of Mourning’, during which the dead of the First World War were remembered, was

transformed into a ‘Heroes’ Memorial Day’ integrating remembrance of the war into

an aggressively heroic narrative. Also, the hitherto purely commercial ‘Mothers’ Day’

was given an enhanced status as the ‘Day for Remembering and Honouring German

Mothers’. In addition to these annual festivals, which remained part of the political

liturgy of Nazism until the outbreak of the Second World War, there were also largescale

ceremonies to mark particular events. They included ‘Potsdam Day’, but also the

ritual book burning in , the Olympic Games in , German Art Day, which

was held irregularly in Munich, and the celebrations to mark Hitler’s birthday on 

April .

During the s, Nazi festival practice developed four different trends: first, there

was a move towards developing a canon. Thus, although the programmes, symbols

and rituals were continually being changed, in general there was a move towards

standardization. While, for example, in  the local festive processions organized

on  May and on the occasion of the Harvest Festivals contained many elements

deriving from regional traditions, later on the tendency was to imitate the events being

organized centrally. Second, there was a tendency to make the big political celebrations

ever more elaborate and grandiose: the number of participants continued to

increase, the programmes became more ambitious, and the sites and buildings that

were constructed for the Party congresses and Harvest festivals acquired gigantic

proportions. Third, rearmament and the preparations for war meant that military

aspects became increasingly important. At the Nuremberg Party Congresses, military

parades and the display of modern weapons became part of the programme and

during the ‘Reich Harvest Festival’ in  a million participants watched an hourlong

mock battle involving , soldiers as well as tanks and bombers. When

Hitler celebrated his fiftieth birthday in  he took a parade lasting four and a half

hours in which more than , soldiers, , motor vehicles, and  tanks

participated. Fourth, the modern mass media acquired increasing importance.

To succeed and make an impact, festivals depend on the physical presence of

all participants and on the interaction and communication between them. This limits

their impact to those who attend and participate. Thus, early on, Goebbels tried to

communicate the atmosphere of the political festivals by using the most modern

forms of media technology in order to reach as much of the population as possible.

From the very beginning, radio broadcasts formed part of the propaganda repertoire

as well as the use of original and innovative techniques of live reporting. By

providing short film reports, cinema newsreels could give at least a superficial

impression of the ‘total work of art’ (Gesamtkunstwerk) to which the festivals

aspired. However, Leni Riefenstahl’s extremely elaborate and technically revolutionary

films of the Party Congress of  and the  Olympic Games in Berlin

were far more impressive. From  onwards, there were also experiments with

television broadcasts, although because of the primitive technology they reached

only a few viewers.

Führer Myth and ‘National Community’: the Function of Political Festivals

The Nazis maintained and developed their festival programme right up until the

outbreak of the Second World War. This involved a vast amount of effort and

resources. Millions of people were mobilized; many thousands of party functionaries

and civil servants were engaged in the organization; large amounts ofmoney were spent

in performing the ceremonies and on the gigantic buildings in Berlin, Nuremberg, and

on the Bückeberg. Why was there so much pomp and spectacle? What functions did

these political festivals performfor theNazi dictatorship?What do they tell us about the

nature of this regime and about the reasons for its popularity among the German

people? In a famous essay published in  the philosopher,Walter Benjamin, referred

Opposite: The Nazi Regime attempted to polish its international image with the Olympic Games in the summer

of . It did so also that year with the Winter Olympics.

to the ‘aestheticization of political life’ under fascism. The transformation of politics

into a brilliant show served, he said, to organize and fascinate the people, in order to

bind it to the regime, while at the same time disregarding their real interests. This

analysis is undoubtedly plausible, but it stops short of explaining the importance of

Nazi festival culture, for the festivals were not simply a method of diversion and

manipulation. Above all, the major ceremonies— May, the Nuremberg party congress,

the ‘Reich Harvest Festival’, and theMunich death cult of  November—acted as

a stage on which ‘people’ and ‘Führer’ could encounter one another face to face. The

physical presence of Hitler, the possibility of this face-to-face communication, the

proximity of the idol to his worshippers, as well as the strict regulation and ritualization

of this encounter within the ceremony were important preconditions for the creation

and maintenance of the charismatic constellation and the ‘Führer’ myth.

Furthermore, both the big festivals of state and party and the small-scale events in

the provinces, with their processions, mass meetings, and demonstrations, were

occasions at which the participants could see themselves as members of a homogenous

‘national community’. Festivals, as exceptional social situations, are by their very

nature designed to generate feelings and moods. Nazi festivals sought to overwhelm

the participants visually, acoustically, and performatively. The standardized symbols

and the political rhetoric that was geared towards the inclusion of the participants and

the exclusion of alleged ‘enemies of the people’ formed the basis for the creation of an

emotionally charged community. Participation in the festival simultaneously implied

participation in important political events. This collective sense of being part of a

consensus and the feeling of participating were much more important than the actual

political propaganda being put out by the speakers.

Finally, the Nazi festivals between  and  were an important instrument by

which, through rituals, show, and symbols, the regime could bring under control and

neutralize the dynamic that had developed in the course of the party’s ‘struggle’ for

power under Weimar. During the crisis years of German democracy, the SA and

NSDAP had acquired and maintained their momentum by developing a style of

permanent action and mobilization. Street demonstrations, electoral battles, and

fights in beer halls were routine. Many Nazi activists had anticipated that this

revolutionary dynamic would continue after the take-over of power. With the establishment

of the dictatorship, the ‘coordination’ of the bureaucracy, and a new

emphasis on the military, the party leadership moved towards exercising power

through agencies of the state and the organized terror of the SS and Gestapo rather

than by mobilizing the SA or through pressure from below.

Political festivals also served to strengthen the charismatic relationship between

‘people’ and ‘Führer’, to ensure that the ‘national community’ could be experienced

on an emotional level, and to maintain the sense that this was a dynamic regime. Its

success depended on efficient image management, which could satisfy the needs of the

Germans for a sense of identity and orientation. To achieve it, on the one hand, it fell

back on familiar motifs, on the other, it came up with innovative ideas derived from

modern mass culture and the entertainment industry.

One mechanism used to ensure credibility and to focus collective expectations was

the invention of traditions (E. J. Hobsbawm), through which the NSDAP provided

itself and its festivals with historical legitimacy. These invented traditions can be

clearly seen in the choice of justifications for the particular festivals. The  May

referred back to the traditions of the labour movement, the Harvest Festival was

borrowed from Christian tradition, ‘Mothers’ Day’ was also already established, and

in the case of the martyrs cult associated with the  November, the Nazi movement

was in effect creating its own tradition. This strategy of creating traditions was

demonstrated by the way in which the festivals were made to follow an elaborate

rhythm. Year after year, the festivals’ programme followed the same order of events,

just like the Christian calendar. The reference to history, the rhythm and the repetition

all gave the festival programme an aura of continuity and authenticity.

Second, for the major events the directors of the Nazi festivals selected venues of

symbolic and historic significance. The specific aura attached to them provided

backing for the invention of the traditions and was intended to give them greater

credibility. With its picturesque old town and important medieval history, the party

congress city of Nuremberg illustrated the Nazis’ claim to embody ‘true’ German

history. A similar invention of tradition was associated with the Bückeberg in Lower

Saxony, which was sold as symbolic of the German peasantry.

Third, Goebbels and the other Nazi festival managers had no compunction about

utilizing an assortment of completely disparate festival traditions. Christian customs

and rituals, such as processions and the cult of martyrs and relics, were exploited in

exactly the same way as festival traditions of the nineteenth century with their

penchant for parades and patriotic decoration. The youth movement with its romanticization

of nature and cult of authenticity made a contribution, as did the Socialist

labour movement, viz.  May. This eclectic appropriation of different forms and

practices enabled the Nazis to appeal to many people from conflicting milieus while

removing from these practices the original meanings attaching to them. This mobilization

or invention of traditions was combined with elements that were blatantly

modern. These include—the fourth point—the design of the public spaces in which the

festivals took place. It is true that at the local level they used many elements of

traditional culture: for example, processions through festively decorated towns or

richly decorated farm wagons for the Harvest Festival. On the other hand, however,

the festival buildings in Nuremberg or on the Bückeberg were quite new, as was the

design of the Tempelhofer Feld in Berlin. The gigantic architecture in the grounds of

the Reich Party Congress and the transformation of the slope of the Bückeberg to

accommodate a million people facilitated a qualitatively new form of mass choreography

and of collective experience. It aimed, above all, at identifying the individual

with the imagined community. The architecture of domination associated with these

new spaces provided the big festivals with an appropriate stage; without the context of

totalitarian mass choreography it was completely pointless.

Fifth, the Nazi festivals were examples of modern event management in which all

the possibilities provided by up-to-date technology were brilliantly utilized. To be able

to bring hundreds of thousands or even a million people to a remote spot in Lower

Saxony or to the provincial city of Nuremberg and provide for them for a short

time was in itself a remarkable logistical achievement. The use of the most modern

loud speakers, highly effective lighting arrangements, the deployment of airships

and aircraft, military parades with thousands of soldiers and the most up-to-date

weapons—all these combined to make the political festivals between  and 

popular demonstrations of technical and military modernity.

Sixth, the mass media: Nazi festivals were intended to integrate the participants as

‘totally’ as possible into the events and to make ‘politics’ as comprehensive an

emotional experience as possible. Rational arguments and political debates were

irrelevant. In order to ensure that this experience did not remain confined to the

participants, the transmission of the ceremony to a broad national public was

intended right from the start. Newspaper reports and photographs, radio and cinema

were designed to turn a big local event into an experience of the whole nation.

Although the attempt was made to use radio reporting to facilitate a synchronized

national experience, and although the Riefenstahl film of the Party Congress of 

was seen by many Germans, the success of this media strategy is doubtful. For the

special character of a festival community lay and lies precisely in the fact that all

participants are present. The more it was a matter of emotions, experiences, and

community, the more difficult it was, given the state of technology at the time, to

communicate this quality of the experience through the media. This undoubtedly

limited the effectiveness of Nazi festival culture.

The continuing need for the relationship between ‘the Führer’ and ‘the movement’ to

be actively experienced was of decisive importance for the legitimation of this charismatic

regime. Like the elections, the ceremonies served to demonstrate the apparently ‘democratic’

nature of the regime. Elections and festivals maintained the fiction of a mass

movement, even if this had become frozen in rigid rituals. At the same time, they

contained the movement’s latent dynamic. Hitler’s and Goebbels’s success in

launching an unprecedented wave of terror against German Jews with such ease

on  November  had, among other things, to do with the fact that it took place

on the day the party had devoted to the memory of the ‘time of struggle’ and ‘the fallen

heroes’. And the growing self-confidence of the regime vis-à-vis foreign countries and

its own population during the s was, not least, a consequence of the elections and

plebiscites, those demonstrative rituals of assent and exclusion that appeared to clarify

the views of the masses—and the powerlessness of the opposition.

Opposite: The elections and the great festivals were supposed to be a demonstration of the unity of ‘People and

Leader’, what Goebbels called the image of ‘true democracy’.