

Nazifying Christmas: Political Culture and Popular Celebration in the Third Reich

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RADICAL regimes revolutionize their holidays. Like the French Jacobins and the Russian Bolsheviks, who designed festival cultures intended to create revolutionary subjects, National Socialists manipulated popular celebration to build a “racially pure” fascist society. Christmas, long considered the “most German” of German holidays, was a compelling if challenging vehicle for the constitution of National Socialist identity. The remade “people’s Christmas” (*Völkeweihnachten*) celebrated the arrival of a savior, embodied in the twinned forms of the Führer and the Son of God, who promised national resurrection rooted in the primeval Germanic forest and the “blood and soil” of the authentic *Völk*. Reinvented domestic rituals, brought to life by the “German mother” in the family home, embedded this revamped Christmas myth in intimate moments of domestic celebration. An examination of “people’s Christmas” across this spectrum of public and private celebration offers a revealing case study of National Socialist political culture in action. It illuminates the ways Germans became Nazis through participation both in official festivities and the practices of everyday life and underscores the complexity of the relationship between popular celebration, political culture, and identity production in the “Third Reich.”¹

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¹ On Nazi holidays, see William John Wilson, “Festivals in the Third Reich” (Ph.D. diss., McMaster University, 1994); Klaus Vondung, *Magie und Manipulation. Ideologischer Kult und politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971); Karin Friedrich, ed., *Festive Culture in Germany and Europe from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Leviston, UK: Edwin Mellon, 2000); George Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975). On celebrations in the French Revolution, see Mona Ozuof, *Festivals and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); for Stalinist Russia, James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917–1929* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and

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Nazified celebrations of Christmas, like the workers' vacations sponsored by "Strength through Joy" (*Kraft durch Freude*, or KdF) or the annual party rallies, exemplify quite clearly the totalitarian orchestration of power. It is thus tempting to read Christmas in the Third Reich as an obvious exercise in the excesses of National Socialist propaganda. Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann's path-breaking social history of German Christmas (1978)—part social history, part nostalgic ethnography—adopts this approach.² Weber-Kellermann, a well-known scholar of German family history, argued that public Christmas celebrations organized by the Nazis lacked popular appeal and that private festivities remained impervious to political manipulation.³ Her conclusions have had lasting appeal. As one historian recently concludes, Nazi Christmas "was a time for private authenticity over public conformity."⁴ These interpretations dovetail with more general arguments that Nazi cultural policies and programs offered Germans a "beautiful illusion" (*schöner Schein*) that masked the crimes of the racial state.⁵ Yet viewing the products of the Nazi culture industry as part of an "illusionary world" (*Scheinwelt*) that somehow lacked "authenticity" erases the ways Nazi culture opened spaces in which everyday activities fashioned the sociopolitical boundaries of the racial state.⁶ A variety of Nazi policies and programs—from

Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2000). For two studies that frame the question of popular support for Nazism, see Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) and Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

² Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann, *Das Weihnachtsfest. Eine Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte der Weihnachtszeit* (Luzern and Frankfurt: C. J. Bucher, 1987).

³ For more recent work that tends to reduce Nazi Christmas to propaganda, see Judith Breuer and Rita Breuer, *Von wegen Heilige Nacht! Das Weihnachtsfest in der politischen Propaganda* (Mülheim an der Ruhr: Verlag an der Ruhr, 2000); Doris Foitzik, *Rote Sterne, braune Runen. Politische Weihnachten zwischen 1870 und 1970* (Münster: Waxmann, 1997); Richard Faber and Esther Gajek, eds., *Politische Weihnacht in Antike und Moderne. Zur ideologischen Durchdringung des Fests der Feste* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1997); for an alternate view, see my dissertation "The Private Life of the Nation: Christmas and the Invention of Modern Germany" (Ph. D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2001).

⁴ Corey Ross, "Celebrating Christmas in the Third Reich and the GDR: Political Instrumentalization and Cultural Continuity under the German Dictatorships" in *Festive Culture in Germany*, ed. Friedrich, 342.

⁵ See Peter Reichel's influential statement of this argument in *Der schöne Schein des Dritten Reiches. Faszination und Gewalt des Faschismus* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1996); also see *Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst*, ed., *Inszenierung der Macht. Ästhetische Faszination im Faschismus* (Berlin: Dirk Nishen, 1987). Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann provide a more critical analysis of the contribution of Nazi social and cultural policy to mass acceptance of racial ideology in *The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁶ On the importance of ritual practice for the politics of identity construction, see Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). See also the classic statement on the "strategies and tactics" of everyday life by Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

tourism to industrial design and anti-cancer campaigns—offered “racially acceptable” Germans positive experiences that engendered support for the regime, even as they segregated “Aryans” from others and normalized racism, terror, and, ultimately, mass murder.⁷ Existing sources on popular opinion and everyday life in the Nazi state suggest that celebration in the Third Reich, like other aspects of cultural policy, was not a simple matter of top-down control that evoked passive submission or private resistance.⁸ Instead, state orchestration met with an active and enthusiastic popular response because participation in Nazi political rituals like Christmas offered Germans attractive material and symbolic rewards and a privileged place in an exclusionary social system.

By taking seriously popular participation in Nazi ritual, this article questions the assumption that “people’s Christmas” was unpopular or unproductive for the regime. To be sure, new forms of festivity traversed the boundaries of public and private life in processes of revision, revitalization, and contestation. Nazi holidays did not invariably produce the meanings the regime desired. Party leaders had the power to shape and control celebrations, but they had to respond to popular expectations in ways that limited the potential for political manipulation. Unlike Hitler’s birthday, German Mother’s Day, German Harvest Day, and the “Day of Remembrance for the Fallen of the Movement,” Christmas was a familiar and popular holiday. Well-developed festive forms turned on the vision of a “small wholesome world” with pretensions to middle-class domesticity, social harmony, and Christian “good will to all men on earth” that could contradict the exclusionary politics of the racial state even as it served as a sentimental model for the “national community.” The “people’s Christmas” colonized this rich field of symbolic and ritual practice, but Germans could also use the appeal of “tradition” to resist Nazi appropriation.

The state and its citizens contested the meanings of Christmas, but in sum, the holiday effectively naturalized National Socialist ideology and enlisted popular participation in regime agendas. Other twentieth-century authoritarian

⁷ On the benefits Nazi cultural policy offered to German “Aryans,” see Shelly Baranowski, *Strength through Joy: Consumerism and Mass Tourism in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Rudy Koshar, *German Travel Cultures* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Paul Betts, *The Authority of Everyday Objects: A Cultural History of West German Industrial Design* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and Robert N. Proctor, *The Nazi War on Cancer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁸ This study draws on public documents and propaganda produced by Nazi writers and bureaucrats, reports on popular opinion compiled by agents of the Social Democratic Party in exile and the Security Service (SD) of the SS, and personal accounts. For SD reports, see Heinz Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich. Die geheimen Lageberichte des Sicherheitsdienstes der SS, 1934–1945*, 17 vols. (Herrsching: Pawak, 1984), hereafter *MadR*; for Sopade reports, see Klaus Behnken, ed., *Deutschland-Berichte der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands (Sopade) 1939–1940*, 7 vols., (Frankfurt a. M.: Petra Nettlebeck, 1980), hereafter *Sopade*. The SD and Sopade reports are limited but valuable sources for the reconstruction of popular opinion in the Third Reich. For a discussion of the bias in these documents, see Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria 1933–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), esp. 8–9.

states shaped political culture with similar success. As Mabel Berezin shows in her analysis of identity production in fascist Italy, "making a fascist self" through ritual and performance allowed Italians to make claims on collective resources by presenting themselves as active supporters of the state.⁹ "Speaking Bolshevik" opened communist institutional structures to Russian peasants during forced industrialization in the 1930s and began to construct the "new communist man" desired by the state.¹⁰ Celebrating Nazi Christmas also meant engaging authoritarian political culture in potentially transformative ways. Participation in public rituals could be overtly opportunistic: Correct performance demonstrated political allegiance or brought handouts from Winter Relief charity drives. The observance of more "normal" and private forms of nazified celebration—baking "winter solstice" cookies, for example, or singing National Socialist Christmas carols—potentially informed deeper and more enduring constructs of identity and selfhood appropriate to the Nazi state.

This article explores the history of "people's Christmas" to elucidate what might be called the construction of a "National Socialist self." It opens with an examination of the late nineteenth-century roots of the invented traditions of Nazi Christmas and then shows how official public festivities in the 1930s exposed a large audience to nazified celebratory forms. From mass media spectacles to the annual Christmas campaigns of the Winter Relief, the regime appropriated conventional forms of celebration to redefine the terms of national belonging with some success. At the same time, overt political manipulation generated challenges to regime goals, particularly among religious Germans, and the essay next examines conflicts between church and state over the meaning and content of celebration. It then turns to the ambiguities of private celebrations of "people's Christmas" and concludes with an analysis of "war Christmas" during World War II, when the disintegration of the Third Reich after 1942 made the contradictions between family needs and the goals of Nazi Christmas celebrations painfully apparent.

Inventing Traditions in Nazi Germany

One of the most striking features of the nazification of Christmas was its redefinition as a neo-pagan, "Nordic" celebration that drew on winter solstice rituals allegedly practiced by ancient Germanic tribes. Current scholarship has underscored the speciousness and manipulative function of these "invented traditions."¹¹ But Germans had already embraced "*völkisch*" ideas about the

⁹ Mabel Berezin, *Making the Fascist Self: The Political Culture of Interwar Italy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism and a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

¹¹ Esther Gajek, "Weihnachten im Dritten Reich. Der Beitrag der Volkskundler zu den Veränderungen des Weihnachtsfestes," *Ethnologia Europea* 20 (1990), 121–140; Esther Gajek,

Germanic roots of Christmas long before the Nazis adopted them, and this popular appreciation for “ancient roots” probably contributed to the popularity of “people’s Christmas.” The central holiday themes promoted by National Socialists, including chauvinist historicism, “German-pagan” customs, and idealized visions of national community—intertwined with notions of a Christian, middle-class, domestic celebration—were not foreign inventions imposed by radical propagandists, but rather familiar aspects of “German Christmas” with clear nineteenth-century precedents that Nazis selectively harnessed to fascist ideology.

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, academic and popular writers had called attention to the unique “German-ness” of Christmas, a classic example of the “nationalization of the masses” through the redefinition of religious and popular tradition.¹² Though German scholars recognized that “all the peoples of Christianity” shared the holiday, Christmas reputedly had a special meaning in German-speaking territories, the supposed homeland of “*Innerlichkeit*,” or inwardness.¹³ In the climate of historicism that pervaded late nineteenth-century scholarship, historians, ethnographers, linguists, and theologians explained that holiday observances were holdovers from pre-Christian tribal rituals and popular folk superstitions. Early book-length studies published around 1860 argued that contemporary celebratory forms preserved the ancient ethnic and cultural past of the German Volk and concluded that German Christmas fused pagan and Christian belief.¹⁴ The hybrid connections between the pre-Christian “*deutsche Weihnachten*” (German Holy Nights) and the religious “*deutsche Christfest*” (German Celebration of Christ) were widely understood as the defining characteristics of a uniquely German holiday. By 1900, studies on German Christmas songs, holiday games, and the “tree cults of the ancient Germans” gave “Germanic” cultural legacies a lengthy and noble history and inspired pride in an invented German past, even as the Kaiserreich struggled to define a coherent national identity.¹⁵

“Nationalsozialistische Weihnacht. Die Ideologisierung eines Familienfestes durch Volkskundler,” in *Politische Weihnacht*, ed. Faber and Gajek, 183–216; Foitzik, *Rote Sterne*, esp. 104–140; Ross, “Celebrating Christmas,” 329; and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹² Mosse, *Nationalization of the Masses*.

¹³ “Weihnachten,” *Leipziger Illustrierte Zeitung* (hereafter *LIZ*), December 21, 1844, 391–2.

¹⁴ Paulus Cassel, *Weihnachten, Ursprünge, Bräuche und Aberglauben. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der christlichen Kirche und des deutschen Volkes* (Berlin: Ludwig Ruah, 1861); Johannes Marbach, *Die heilige Weihnachtszeit nach Bedeutung, Geschichte, Sitten und Symbolen* (Frankfurt a. M.: J. D. Sauerländer, 1865, 1st ed. 1858), 123.

¹⁵ For a selection, see Arnold Meyer, *Das Weihnachtsfest. Seine Entstehung und Entwicklung* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1913); W. Mannhardt, *Der Baumkultus der Germanen und ihrer Nachbarstämme. Mythologische Untersuchungen* (Berlin: Gebrüder Borntraeger, 1875); Paul Reitschel, *Weihnachten in Kirche, Kunst und Volksleben* (Bielefeld and Leipzig: Velhagen & Klasing, 1902); Eduard Kück and Heinrich Sohnren, *Feste und Spiele des deutschen Landvolks* (Berlin: Deutsche

Family literature spread the nationalist myths propounded in more erudite studies to a broad readership. In 1875, Hugo Elm informed the readers of his *Golden Christmas Book*—a beautiful and finely-wrought example of the generic “Christmas Book” popular in middle-class circles—that the holiday was not simply Christian but fundamentally tied to the cycles of nature, Nordic myth, and the Roman Saturnalia. Citing earlier studies, Elm proudly maintained that the Christmas tree was of “pure Germanic origins” and that pine trees had been used in the religious celebrations of “our primeval ancestors.” Such customs survived in contemporary observances. “Even as the light of Christendom destroyed the pagan gods,” Elm explained, “the first preachers of Christendom silently adopted the customs of the Volk in their new teachings.”¹⁶ The middle-class press continually propagated historicist fantasies during the holiday season; even the toys found in the graves of ancient German tribes suggested links between the “Germanic past” and contemporary celebrations.¹⁷

Interest in the connections between Germanic tradition, celebration, and folk studies grew exponentially after World War I, when a marked increase in popular and scholarly articles on the ethnographic heritage of German Christmas reached an apparently eager readership. By the 1930s, intellectuals interested in studying Christmas as an example of Nazi ideologies of “blood and soil” found institutional support in institutes like the “Teaching and Research Post for the History of Indo-Germanic Faith” (*Lehr- und Forschungsstätte für indogermanische Glaubensgeschichte*), the SS-sponsored “Office of Ancestral Research” (*Das Ahnenerbe*), and the “Working Collective for German Folklore” (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft für deutsche Volkskunde*). Hans Strobel, a leading member of the Working Collective, specialized in the study of folk customs and celebration; his articles on the “Germanic legacy” in popular Christmas customs appeared regularly throughout the Nazi years.¹⁸ Strobel and his colleagues recovered or invented any number of “Nordic” Christmas customs and clarified the links between pagan solstice festivities and the “return to light” rituals favored by the Nazis. Continuing a process of popularization already evident by

Landbuchhandlung, 1911, first ed. 1908); and Karl Weinhold, *Weihnacht-Spiele und Lieder aus Süddeutschland und Schlesien* (Vienna: Braumüller, 1875, 3rd ed.).

¹⁶ Hugo Elm, *Das Goldene Weihnachtsbuch. Beschreibung und Darstellung des Ursprungs, der Feier, der Sitten, der Gebräuche, Sagen und des Aberglaubens der Weihnachtszeit und gleichzeitig Anleitung zur sinnigen Schmücken des Christbaumes, der Pyramide, sowie zur Anlegung der Krippen und Weihnachtsgärten* (Halle: G. Schwetschke'scher, 1875), 17; 19–20.

¹⁷ “Altdeutsches Spielzeug,” *LIZ*, December 25, 1880, 560.

¹⁸ E.g., Hans Strobel, “Weihnachtsbrauchtum,” *Nationalsozialistische Monatshefte* 7, 81 (1936), 1078–88; Hasso Volker (pseud. H. Strobel), “Germanisches Erbe im deutschen Weihnachtsbrauchtum,” *Wille und Macht*, 4 (1936): 33–38; on Strobel as Nazi ethnographer, see Wolfgang Freund, “Volk, Reich und Westgrenze. Wissenschaften und Politik in der Pfalz, im Saarland und im annektierten Lothringen 1925–1945” (Ph.D. diss., University of Saarbrücken, 2002); Hannjost Lixfeld, *Folklore and Fascism: The Reich Institute for German Volkskunde* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994).

the 1880s, their ideas percolated down to a mass audience in articles, books, and even documentary films in the 1920s and 1930s. Celebrations of Christmas as a gloss on winter solstice festivals were also popular in working-class circles. Socialists consistently called attention to the social inequalities masked by the holidays and argued that "Peace on Earth" could only be realized under the "red star" of revolution, not the star of Bethlehem.¹⁹

Nazified descriptions of pagan rituals—with appropriate "guidelines for celebration in the home"—helped reenchant Germany's political discourse. According to one Nazi enthusiast, writing in the "dark days" of the Weimar Republic, neo-paganism promised to revive the ancient spiritual connections that could still unite the fractured German nation, if only Germans could return to a time "when the feeling of unity with native soil and nature was still alive, the desire for light and strength had strong roots, and Yule festivities remained a sacred manifestation of God."²⁰ Christmas candles, typically associated with the star of Bethlehem or the winter solstice, now referenced the rise of National Socialism and symbolized the "the new German ascension . . . that will conquer the powers of darkness."²¹ And while the radical fringe of the Nazi movement promoted an entirely secularized Christmas, the fascination with pagan rites did not rule out appeals to Christian aspects of the holiday. Mimicking the conclusions of their late nineteenth-century predecessors, Nazi writers asserted that the "merging of national characteristics and Christianity" exemplified in Christmas revealed the origin of "the German character."²²

These reworked, pseudo-scholarly origin myths were inseparable from a more "original" Nazi invention: Party-sponsored celebrations could become hate-filled invocations of the politics of resentment. In 1921, police spies in Munich noted the "festive mood" that greeted Adolf Hitler's holiday speech at the "German Christmas Celebration," held in the Hofbräuhaus banquet hall. The four thousand guests applauded loudly when Hitler condemned the "mammonistic materialism" that degraded the holiday, the fault of "the cowardly Jews, who nailed the world's liberator to the cross."²³ In the 1920s and early 1930s, similar attacks on communists, socialists, Jews, and liberals were a core feature of Nazi Christmas propaganda and celebrations, which blamed "internal enemies" for eroding the sanctity of a "real" Christmas, typically pitched as a symbol of an "authentic" German community. Ugly caricatures of

¹⁹ Foitzik, *Rote Sterne*, esp. 83–86.

²⁰ Friedrich Schulze-Langendorff, "Weihnachtsfeier, Weihnachtsfreude," *Völkischer Beobachter* (hereafter *VB*), December 24, 1927, 5.

²¹ "Julnacht," *Der SA-Mann. Wochen Beilage zum VB*, December 21, 1929.

²² Herbert A. E. Müller, "Tanne und Gral: Deutsche Weihnachts- u. Lichtgedanken," *VB*, December 22, 1928, 3.

²³ "Weihnachtsfeier der Nationalsozialistischen Deutschen Arbeitspartei im 'Hofbräuhausfestsaal,'" in Staatsarchiv-München (hereafter StA-M) Polizeidirektion 6700.

Jewish-owned department stores in the Nazi press and physical assaults on the stores themselves exemplified Nazi willingness to use Christmas—long associated with Christian social harmony and “good will to all”—to evoke and legitimize social and racial divisions. By the mid-1920s, Nazi supporters and their families celebrated these (re)invented traditions in a variety of festivities sponsored by party district offices and mass organizations. In a hybrid process typical of a wide variety of Nazi festivities, organizers integrated conventional Christmas “inwardness” and sociability with neo-pagan symbols and Nazi politics.²⁴ This new Christmas was hardly a radical invention imposed on obedient Germans by party propagandists. It was, in fact, relatively easy for National Socialists to cast the holiday as an exclusionary celebration of pagan, Volk nationalism, since these ideas had a lengthy popular and scholarly pedigree—and the “seizure of power” in 1933 would give the regime the opportunity to promote its version of “people’s Christmas” on a national scale.

The Orchestration of Public Celebration

In December 1934, Nazi Germany celebrated “People’s Christmas in the Street.” State-orchestrated festivities across the nation used fire and light to symbolize the revival of ancient “Nordic” rituals and the “national rebirth” of the German community. In Cologne, Hitler Youth brigades held a night rally on the “Adolf Hitler Field,” modeled on the solstice rituals of pagan Germanic tribes. In Hamburg, on Christmas Eve, storm troopers gathered around a large bonfire, recited “oaths of fire,” and sang Christmas carols and Nazi marching songs. In Berlin, after leading a torch-lit parade to the top of the Kreuzberg, propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels told a crowd of Berlin workers that the new Christmas spirit proved that “the socialism of the deed has become reality” in a nationally broadcast radio address. “People’s Christmas trees,” set up in city squares throughout Germany, transformed this conventional symbol of domesticity into a public sign of the new body politic. According to a glowing report in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the main Nazi party newspaper, “unity was everywhere!”²⁵

As this brief description of Christmas celebrations held during the second year of Nazi rule suggests, Christmas in the Third Reich was not a particularly private holiday. While the high point of the holiday still occurred at home

²⁴ See, for example, descriptions of SA Christmas celebrations from 1931–1932 in the press clipping file on the SA in StA-M Pol. dir. 6808. Descriptions of various Nazi Christmas parties are also preserved in posters advertising the events, e.g., “Weihnachtsfeier der NSDAP” in Munich, December 1928, Bayerische Hauptstaatsarchiv (hereafter BayHSA) Plakatte Sammlung 10052; for similar posters from the 1920s and 1930s, see BayHSA Plakatte Sammlung 09745, 09709, 10121, 12461.

²⁵ “Volksweihnachten auf der Straße,” *VB*, December 25–26, 1934, 11.

when children opened presents around the tree on Christmas Eve, festivities included a number of public aspects. An "authentic" German Christmas included special entertainment, public decorations, Christmas markets, shopping for presents, parties with colleagues, holiday charity drives, Advent services, and special programs in schools. These ritualized activities were an indispensable part of German Christmas, and nazification made inroads into all of them. Evidence of the popularity of such events, drawn primarily from SD and Social Democratic Party (Sopade) reports and memoirs, suggests that most Germans accepted and probably enjoyed regime efforts to revitalize "traditional" celebrations.

The "national unity" promoted during the holiday season was reserved for "racially pure" Germans. Once in power, the party backed away from Christmas propaganda that openly attacked German Jews or working-class leftists. Instead, the leadership championed the new unity of Germans of all classes and the transformation of former socialists into Nazi supporters. Nonetheless, Nazi celebrations worked in overt and covert ways to exclude those deemed "unfit" by the regime. Though official holiday discourse rarely mentioned Jews, the countless images of the invariably blond-haired, blue-eyed German families gathered around the Christmas tree popularized in the Nazi media implicitly promoted ideologies of racial purity. Open anti-Semitism also surfaced at Christmas time, particularly evident in attacks on Jewish-owned department stores and criticism about displays of the "German" Christmas tree in Jewish store windows. In 1933, citing the need for quiet streets and economic progress during the holiday season, the Nazi government cynically banned store boycotts and public demonstrations against Jewish department stores.²⁶ This particular effort at "Christmas peace," however, was short-lived. In 1934, SA and SS men again staged holiday protests in front of Jewish businesses.²⁷ By 1935, the mail-order Christmas catalog (titled "Fulfill your Heart's Desire") of a large department store could feature a sticker, pasted on top of the cover drawing of a fair-haired mother preparing Christmas presents, which assured customers that "the *Kaufhof* has been taken over by an Aryan!"²⁸ Private, individualized acts of holiday shopping now helped naturalize the exclusions of the racial state and reinforced the social death of German Jews.²⁹

²⁶ "Störungen des Weihnachtsgeschäfts untersagt," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, December 17, 1933.

²⁷ *Sopade*, 35.

²⁸ The cover of the catalog *Herzenswünsche Erfüllen* (1935) reprinted in Breuer and Breuer, ed., *Von wegen Heilige Nacht*, 70.

²⁹ Marion A. Kaplan convincingly shows that "the most basic and quotidian" aspects of everyday life contributed to the social death of the German Jewish community in Nazi Germany in *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

For "racially acceptable" Germans, however, the nazification of Christmas brought a number of positive rewards. The party championed the "German" values supposedly inherent in the holiday and gave familiar forms of celebration new prominence and value. Seasonal entertainment in the mass media is an important case in point.³⁰ By the late 1920s, radio and newsreel reports on Christmas (portrayals of decorated city streets, famous German churches, Christmas markets, geese ready for table, choirs singing holiday carols, etc.) were becoming an indispensable part of the holiday.³¹ Even before the establishment of the National Socialist "media dictatorship," Christmas entertainment helped a growing audience envision Germany as a "national audiovisual space."³² A rich and familiar imagery—decorated trees, happy families, snowy landscapes, Father Christmas—and a wealth of instantly recognizable carols and texts made the holiday an exceptionally powerful vehicle for constructing a shared national culture rooted in sight and sound. On the radio, Nazi Christmas specials began in late November. Broadcasts seamlessly blended conventional carols, classical music, children's shows, and radio plays with propaganda. Christmas Eve marked the high point of the holiday season, when all major German radio stations carried the official program. "Father Christmas's Radio Program," broadcast in 1937, was typical of this new modern ritual, which comfortably coexisted with more "traditional" observances. Those who tuned in at 8:00 p.m. that night heard a "Christmas message" from Rudolph Hess (the "Führer's Deputy"); carols sung by a children's choir; a show on Christmas in the army, navy, and air force; and the ringing bells of Germany's main cathedrals.³³

Cinema was also well-suited for nationalizing and nazifying the holiday. Annual Christmas newsreels featured glowing reports on Christmas markets, special concerts, holiday speeches by political leaders, Winter Relief collections, and other party-sponsored activities. The audiovisualization of the national community was dramatically realized, for example, in newsreel shots of bells ringing in famous churches throughout Germany. Unlike Russian Bolsheviks, who saw church bells as symbols of the "Old Way of Life" they wished to

³⁰ For introductions to radio and film in the Nazi period, see, respectively, Kate Lacey, *Feminine Frequencies: Gender, German Radio, and the Public Sphere, 1923–1945* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), and Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); also Andrew Bergerson, "Listening to Radio in Hildesheim, 1923–1953" in *German Studies Review* 24 (2001): 83–113.

³¹ See, for example, Weimar-era newsreel segments on "Weihnachts-Vorbereitungen" from 1926, 1929, and 1932, respectively in Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv (hereafter BA-FA) Wochenschauen 1364; Wochenschauen 503; Wochenschauen DTW50/1932.

³² On the media dictatorship, see Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion*, esp. 16; on audiovisual space, see Michael Geyer, "Germany, or The Twentieth Century as History," in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 96, 4 (Fall 1997): 679.

³³ For Weimar-era radio shows, see the November and December issues of *Die Sendung Rundfunk Woche*; for the Nazi period, see *Sieben Tage. Funkblätter mit Program*; on the 1937 broadcast, see *Sieben Tage. Funkblätter mit Program* 7, 51 (December 19, 1937).

destroy during the "Great Turn" (1928 to 1932),³⁴ Nazi propagandists used modern media to colonize and exalt traditional sacred practices. Rapid news-reel cuts between familiar snow-covered church towers in Munich, Danzig, Cologne, and Berlin, and the chime of Christmas bells evoked the regionalism that lay at the heart of German national identity and nazified familiar Christian symbolism.³⁵ The messages promoted in the modern media encouraged audiences to construct a sense of national belonging in an age of mass consumption. A strikingly similar process was at work in the United States: In the 1930s, the mass media became increasingly important for the definition of nationalism refracted through leisure and holiday time. For Germans as well as Americans, this "most dramatic era of sound and sight" created novel sources of common experience for a huge audience.³⁶

The mass media "people's Christmas" underlined the terms of inclusion in the Nazi state and used normative ideals of social harmony to envision a resurrected national community that would heal the political fractures and social dislocations of Weimar. The supposed "sacred and *völkisch*" qualities of Christmas merged easily with ideologies of blood and soil, as in director Luis Trenker's feature film *The Prodigal Son*, which premiered in 1934 in time for the holiday season.³⁷ In this "enactment of . . . national homecoming,"³⁸ the film's protagonist leaves his village in the Tyrol for the United States and is dismayed by the impoverishment and despair of depression-era New York City. Properly chastened, he returns home to lead the village winter solstice celebration, a twenty-minute filmic spectacle replete with glittering masks, pagan rites, bonfires and fireworks, and Dionysian frenzy—tamed, in the final scene, in a Catholic mass. The contrast between the scenes shot in decadent New York and the pristine Tyrolean village implied that traditions out of time, linked to blood and soil, were the foundation of an authentic "Volk" community that, unlike modern New York, could provide material and spiritual comfort for its members.

Germans saw and heard accounts of more local festivities in media reports on the Christmas celebrations staged by Joseph Goebbels in working-class suburbs

³⁴ Compare Richard L. Hernandez, "Sacred Sound and Sacred Substance: Church Bells and the Auditory Culture of Russian Villages during the Bolshevik *Velikii Perelom*," *American Historical Review* 109 (2004): 1475–1504.

³⁵ An example in BA-FA, Wochenschaueu DTW 209/1935; on regionalism and national identity, see Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), and Alon Confino, *The Nation as Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

³⁶ Warren Susman, "The Culture of the Thirties," in idem, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 150–183; on the nazification of the mass media, see Reichel, *Der schöne Schein*. Mass media also nationalized Christmas in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s; see Karal Ann Marling, *Merry Christmas! Celebrating America's Greatest Holiday* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

³⁷ *Der Verlorene Sohn*, 1934. Dir. Luis Trenker, produced by Deutsche Universal-Film AG. Available from Facets Video in Chicago.

³⁸ Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion*, 76.

in Berlin's northern "red ring," former centers of socialist agitation in the Weimar years (see Figure 1). At one carefully choreographed street party in Friedrichshain, featured in holiday newsreels in 1934, Goebbels delivered a holiday speech on a makeshift stage decorated with Christmas trees. Behind him, a huge poster advertised the holiday Winter Relief drive, with a picture of an SA man giving a basket of goods and a small Christmas tree to a poor mother holding hands with her child. Pontificating on the class unity supposedly engendered by nazified Christmas, Goebbels claimed that "all hearts are full of joy and happiness, and the socialism of the deed has become reality. Peace on Earth to mankind." The audience held lit candles as the propaganda minister, accompanied by SA and SS men, played Father Christmas, digging through Winter Relief bags for presents to pass out to the gathered street urchins. The camera zoomed in on one young girl who smiled happily as she unpacked her gift to find a simple doll.³⁹



Figure 1: Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels speaks at a public Christmas celebration in the working-class district of Moabit, Berlin, with a torch-lit SA parade in the background, no date but probably 1934 or 1935 (courtesy of the Preussischer Kulturbesitz-Bildarchiv, Berlin).

³⁹ BA-FA Wochenschaun UTW 225/1934; the *VB* also published a report on this event, Schroeder, "Deutschland für dich, du für Deutschland: Berliner S.A.- Standarte beschert 6000 arme Kinder-Weihnachtsansprache Dr. Goebbels," *VB*, December 25–26, 1934, 3.

This single example of a newsreel Christmas spectacle brings together the diverse strands of official Nazi celebration: the ideal of class unity based on acceptance of National Socialism, the paternal appropriation of holiday charity by the state, the celebrity charisma of leadership, the appealing sentimentalism of mother and child, and the carefully translated Christmas discourse that lacked any overt reference to God or Christ—all packaged in a mass media presentation that could reach an audience of millions in movie theaters filled with seasonal crowds, in radio broadcasts of Goebbels's speech, and in press reports. Of course, real people participated in such events as well. Hand-picked or not, the shadowy workers in the background who received Winter Relief "gifts" took part in what must have been a memorable occasion. The Nazi press made sure to explain the political conversion supposedly inspired by such events: Such holiday performances showed that Germans of all political persuasions (former Social Democrats and perhaps even Communists) had come together in the national community. "Two or three years ago, the commune still exercised its terror [in Friedrichshain]," noted one reporter, but during the celebration with the propaganda minister, "former agitators looked bashfully at the ground when they witnessed the joy and happiness brought here by the once so-hated Nazis."⁴⁰ While some Germans no doubt saw this as a cynical attempt to sanitize the public image of the SA and the Party, and indeed to bastardize socialism, others were drawn to the appeal of Nazi celebrities and their largesse. When one young girl's parents were invited to a Christmas celebration with Hermann Göring in a villa in Hannover, they returned home laden with "wonderful presents." The mother was thrilled by the party and "entirely taken by Hermann Göring, because he cut such a charming, fine figure of a man" (*ein charmanter und stattlicher Mann*).⁴¹

The orchestration of public celebration extended far beyond celebrity display and media spectacle. Sociability and politics, tradition and innovation, merged in factory lunchrooms, regional meeting halls, town squares, and school classrooms, where Germans participated in a dense matrix of holiday festivities organized by National Socialist mass organizations. The Nazi Party *Ortsgruppen* (District Offices), the Hitler Youth, the League of German Women (NSF), and the German Workers Front (DAF) all sponsored Christmas celebrations tailored to the needs of their members (see Figure 2). Each December, teenagers gathered for the "Home Evenings" of the Hitler Youth and handcrafted small presents to raise money for the Winter Relief campaign. Groups of workers joined the "pre-Christmas celebrations" sponsored by KdF, where they sang carols and

⁴⁰ Schroeder, "Deutschland für dich," 3.

⁴¹ Ruth Loah, "Kinderszenen im Kriege," in *Kindheit und Jugend unter Hitler*, ed. Helmut Schmidt (Berlin: Siedler, 1992), 175.

participated in performances of music and theater that expressed “faith in the victory of light in the time of greatest darkness.”⁴² Teachers received a nazified Christmas curriculum for schoolchildren of all ages in the journals of the National Socialist Teachers’ Union, which taught that school celebrations should embody “the experience of the community of life, struggle, and fate of the German people.”⁴³ Texts for advanced students again emphasized “Aryan-Germanic” culture as the source of Christmas traditions.⁴⁴ An extreme version of “blood and soil” ideology found expression in the highly ritualized celebrations of the SS, who swore “light oaths” to Hitler, the German family, and the National community, while lighting candles on the “Yule Tree.”⁴⁵



Figure 2: Christmas celebration for relatives of workers at the Berlin Mercedes-Benz plant, December 1938 (courtesy of the Preussischer Kulturbesitz-Bildarchiv, Berlin).

⁴² “Heimabend des BDM: Weihnachtsarbeiten für das Winterhilfswerk,” *Illustrierter Beobachter*, December 24, 1936; *Vorweihnachtliche Feier*, ed. Amt “Feierabend” der NS.-Gemeinschaft “Kraft durch Freude,” Abteilung Volkstum/Brauchtum, no date, ca. 1937.

⁴³ Karl Siebold, “Die deutsche Schulfest als Forderung und Aufgabe,” *Die Deutsche Schulfest*, 1 (1936): 7.

⁴⁴ Hermann Gerstner, “Weihnachtliches Lichtfest,” *Die Deutsche Schulfest*, 2 (1937): 303–310; Bruno Manger, *Mittwinter. Deutsche Weihnacht in Geschichte, Glauben und Brauch* (Halle: Hermann Schroedel, 1936).

⁴⁵ “Lichtsprüche der SS,” 1936 to 1944, in Bundesarchiv-Berlin (hereafter BA-Berlin) NS 19/2240.

From outdoor decoration to annual Christmas markets and "brown" holiday trade fairs, nazification transformed conventional uses of public holiday space and display into unavoidable celebrations of the national community. Official messages of national harmony dominated public decorations in the holiday season. Swastikas adorned the "people's Christmas trees" and electric light displays set up across Germany. In larger cities, the Nazi obsession with public decoration reached spectacular proportions. In Dresden in 1933, a thirty-foot-high "Christmas nativity scene" was installed on the street outside the main train station. Christian and Nazi iconography merged in three tiers of electric lights. At the bottom, a domestic family scene represented the German people, the foundation of the state. The middle tier featured the holy family around the baby Jesus, and a choir of angels in the top tier recycled a generic holiday motif. A giant swastika and eagle capped the entire display. The conflicted combination of Christian and Nazi motifs was typical of early holiday propaganda and revealed some confusion among party leaders over the correct relationship between church and state; at the same time, the display limned official conceptions of social hierarchy that placed the German folk as well as the Holy Family under the protection—or subordination—of the regime.⁴⁶

Nazi officials eagerly capitalized on the popular appeal of annual Christmas markets, where Germans gather in December to drink, eat, socialize, and shop for small gifts.⁴⁷ In 1933, the mayor of Nuremberg returned the *Christkindlmarkt*, one of Germany's most famous Christmas markets, to the Main Market Square, and instituted a dramatic opening ceremony with a prologue by a *Rauschgoldenengel* (golden Christmas tree fairy) on December 4, St. Barbara's Day (the market had languished in outlying locations since 1898).⁴⁸ A similar process occurred in Berlin. In 1934, the city government moved the Christmas market back to the Lustgarten in the city center. Since 1893, when downtown commercial interests forced the Berlin senate to move the main market to protect holiday profits and ensure "pubic peace," the main market had been held in suburban Akronaplatz. By returning urban markets to public prominence, the party positioned itself as the champion of the "earth-bound folk festivities" (*bodengebundene Volkfesten*) of popular tradition. In Berlin, the response was remarkable: Record-breaking numbers of visitors visited the market in 1934 and again in 1936, when official totals recorded 1.5 million and 2 million visitors, respectively.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ "Hauptbahnhof in Dresden," *Berlin Lokal-Anzeiger*, December 17, 1933.

⁴⁷ E.g., "Reichsinnenminister Dr. Frick eröffnet den Weihnachtsmarkt in Berlin," *VB*, December 5, 1933.

⁴⁸ See Egon Helmhagen, *Nürnberg im Zauber des Christkindlesmarktes* (Nuremberg: Hofmann 1994), 13.

⁴⁹ Christine Lorenz, *Berliner Weihnachtsmarkt. Bilder und Geschichten aus 5 Jahrhunderten* (Berlin-East: Berlin Information, 1986), 134, 136.

At reorganized holiday trade and craft fairs, familiar features of the Weimar holiday landscape, the official meanings behind the deployment of so-called "authentic" (*artgerechten*) Christmas traditions became obvious. Nazified craft fairs around the nation promoted "German" handicrafts, such as hand-made ornaments, nativity scenes, and baked goods; homemade holiday trivia had popular appeal and displayed the innate talents of a racialized national community. The message of the party's first large-scale Christmas exhibition, held in Breslau in 1932, encouraged "citizens who felt themselves German" to shop at German-owned businesses, not "Jewish department stores."⁵⁰ In the right stores, holiday shopping offered economic support for the "little man," the small shopkeeper or hand worker victimized by Germany's flagging economy. In 1933 and 1934, the Ministry of Propaganda sponsored "Brown Christmas Trade Fairs" across Germany. At the fair in Lübeck in 1933, local shop owners and artisans rented stands to promote their holiday wares in an atmosphere that mixed festivity, commercialization, and redemptive nationalism. Long lists of participating vendors, from iron smiths to electronic appliance stores, show that such attempts to boost the economy—to sell "German goods to create a strong and healthy German Folk in an independent German state!" as one Party bureaucrat put it—met with broad participation.⁵¹ This direct appeal to economic as well as ideological interests was typical of the new Christmas spirit championed by the party. Full faith in Nazi ideology was hardly necessary to take advantage of either the festive mood at the Christmas market or the economic opportunities offered at "brown" Christmas trade fairs. But participation nonetheless subjected individual Germans to the messages codified in Nazi celebrations.

The nazification of conventional festive forms underscores the importance of public celebrations during the Christmas season, which, beyond private family rituals, lent the holiday its "German" character. When they participated in what were almost unavoidable Nazi Christmas celebrations, Germans entered a realm of mediation where official appropriations and vernacular traditions came together in what appears to be a surprisingly comfortable synthesis, in which "the capacity for submission as well as the pleasure of being involved were stimulated simultaneously."⁵² Viewing a holiday newsreel, drinking with workmates at a KdF holiday party, or buying an electric toaster at a "brown" Christmas market were realms of practice and participation where popular sociability and

⁵⁰ Kaija Voss, *Berliner Weihnacht* (Berlin: be-bra-Verlag, 2003), 70.

⁵¹ Berthold Jakob, "Wirtschaftpropaganda!" *Braune Weihnachts-Verkaufsmesse für Industrie, Handwerk, Handel und Gewerbe in den Ausstellungshallen am Holstenitor* (Lübeck: Wullenwever-Druck, 1933), 5.

⁵² Alf Lüdtke, "The 'Honor of Labor': Industrial Workers and the Power of Symbols under National Socialism," in *Nazism and German Society 1933-1945*, ed. David Crew (New York: Routledge, 1994), 98.

custom were inseparable from officially sanctioned notions of community. The new terms of belonging could be as overt as public attacks on Jewish-owned department stores. Yet subtle representations and enactments of the boundaries of the new national community at Christmas time were the norm, which made the exclusion of “non-desirables” from participation in this central celebration of German identity more insidious and perhaps more effective. The varied effects produced by this interplay between official and vernacular interests was nowhere more evident than in one of the most recognizable features of the holiday season, the annual Winter Relief campaign.

Winter Relief

Touted by Nazi Reich Bishop Ludwig Müller as “living proof of the new spirit of a new era,” the Winter Relief campaign (*Winterhilfswerk*, or WHW) kicked into high gear in the holiday season, underscoring the inescapable, quotidian aspects of the nazification of Christmas for most Germans.⁵³ By the mid-1930s, Winter Relief was the only officially sanctioned charity agency (with the exception of the German Red Cross) and is a central example of the Nazi policy of “*Gleichschaltung*,” or coordination—the restructuring of pre-existing organizations and institutions to conform to the dictates of National Socialism. “Coordination” transformed social policy as well as institutional structures. National Socialist welfare policy explicitly challenged Christian, liberal, or socialist philosophies of charity, which held that a common sense of humanity should inspire offers of aid to the needy. In contrast, Nazi welfare promoted the strong at the expense of the weak. The state granted assistance only to those deemed capable of making a positive contribution to the “biological legacy” of the German “Volk” and, in 1935, administrators stopped giving benefits to German Jews, a transformation of state welfare policy that was open and obvious.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, the public face of the Winter Relief campaign focused on the “joys” of volunteerism and inclusion in ways that implicitly evoked but simultaneously avoided open expressions of racial ideology (see Figure 3). The campaign offered an attractive set of symbolic and material rewards to broad strata of the population, as long as they were “Aryan,” and linked the sentimental appeal of conventional Christmas charity to radicalized Nazi welfare policy.

⁵³ Ludwig Müller, “‘Friede auf Erden’: Eine Weihnachts-Botschaft des Reichsbischofs Müller,” *Vösische Zeitung*, December 24, 1933.

⁵⁴ Hermann Althaus, *Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt. Wesen, Aufgaben und Aufbau* (1936), excerpt in Herbert Vorländer, *Die NSV: Darstellung und Dokumentation einer nationalsozialistischen Organisation* (Boppard am Rhein: Boldt, 1988), 382; Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair*, 49.

WEIHNACHTEN IM WINTERHILFswerk



Die Geschenke des Weihnachtsmannes werden den hochverehrtesten Kindern von 500 Kindern während der Weihnachtserleuchtung übergeben. (Foto: Kinnert)



Die Weihnachtspäckchen des Winterhilfswerkes werden gefüllt und zum Versand an die Empfänger vorbereitet. (Foto: Kinnert)



Auch die traditionellen Christstollen gehören zu den Weihnachtsgütern des Winterhilfswerkes. (Foto: Kinnert)



Aber das ist eine Überraschung! Ein Winterhilfswerkes Geschenk wird den Kindern übergeben. (Foto: Kinnert)



Die kleinen Kinder mit ihren Geschenkbeutchen. Sie sind bei der Weihnachtserleuchtung meist 33 Stunden unterwegs gewesen. (Foto: Kinnert)



Die unbekannteren Helfer, die die Winterhilfswerkes Geschenke für die Waisenkinder vorbereiten. (Foto: Kinnert)

Denke an die weniger bemittelten Volksgenossen. Gib, damit auch sie ein frohes Weihnachtsfest feiern können!

Figure 3: Publicity for "Christmas and the Winter Relief" from a popular illustrated magazine. From top left clockwise, captions read "The Gifts of Father Christmas"; "The Christmas Packages of the Winter Aid"; "But that's a surprise!"; "The Anonymous Helpers"; "Happy Children with their Gift Bags"; "Traditional Christmas Stollen Included" (Leipziger Illustrierte Zeitung, December 10, 1936, courtesy of the Rare Book Collection, University of Illinois Library).

A nationwide network of district branches controlled by the National Socialist People's Welfare Office (NSV) in Berlin made Winter Relief an unavoidable part of public life during the holiday season. Local NSV and WHW block captains and voluntary assistants organized aggressive publicity campaigns and collected and distributed donations in cash and kind. Official figures put the number of volunteer staff at 1.1 to 1.4 million, while scores more donated and received gifts, which might include food, heating supplies, clothes, cash, and Christmas trees. Members of the Nazi women's organizations, the Hitler Youth, and the League of German Girls staffed outdoor festivals and street-corner collecting sites. Hitler Youth *Pimpfe* stood at busy intersections holding WHW collection cans, which themselves became icons of the Christmas season. They waved banners, sang songs, and acted out short skits that praised contributors and ridiculed the "petit-bourgeois *Spießer*" who hid their pocketbooks as they walked past.⁵⁵ According to internal NSV documents, street collections raised anywhere from nine to nineteen percent of the agency's annual budget, but the symbolic value of the public drives, especially the Christmas collection, was far greater.⁵⁶ Christmas was the most important and highly publicized "action" in the annual Winter Relief schedule, when the vision of mutual responsibility included all members of the national community, from party leaders to the most anonymous "people's comrade" (*Volksgenossen*). Newsreels showed Hitler Youth and uniformed SA men delivering Christmas trees and Winter Relief packages to grateful recipients, while Party leaders like Hess, Goebbels, and Göring collected donations in front of the Brandenburg Gate.⁵⁷ Press reports claimed that the WHW ensured that "no German will freeze or go hungry" (the central slogan of the 1933 campaign) and showed that "the entire German people have become one great family."⁵⁸

The party could claim with some justification that it had "improved" on the Weimar-era welfare state by energizing the collective spirit of the masses. Official statistics suggested that Winter Relief succeeded in effecting an impressive redistribution of goods and personal resources and demonstrated high levels of participation in the national campaign. The WHW of 1933–34, for example, collected more than 358 million Reichmarks, about three times the totals collected by emergency drives in the final years of Weimar (also called

⁵⁵ See, for example, "Sonderdruck. Einsatz der Hitler-Jugend für das Winterhilfswerk des Deutschen Volkes 1936/37," in *Reichsbefehl der Reichsjugendführung der NSDAP*, November 27, 1936, in BA-Berlin, NS37/1017. Cf. material on the WHW in Evangelischen Zentralarchiv Berlin (hereafter EZA) 7/2771.

⁵⁶ Figures from Erich Wolf, *Das Winterhilfswerk des Deutschen Volkes* (1941), reprinted in Vorländer, *Die NSV*, 235.

⁵⁷ BA-FA, NS-Herrschaft 620, "Echo der Heimat, Folge 5," 1937; and see BA-FA Wochenschauen UTW 275/1935 Ufa-Tonwoche Nr. 275; 11.12.1935.

⁵⁸ "Aufwärts aus eigener Kraft!" *VB*, December 27, 1933.

“Winter Relief”), which collected 97 and 91 million Reichmarks in 1931–32 and 1932–33 respectively.⁵⁹ Those who donated to the Nazi Winter Relief received a small paste or wooden badge in the shape of a Christmas decoration, and campaign workers passed out millions of them. For the Christmas campaign of 1936 alone, WHW district leaders ordered eighteen million badges from the NSV Central Office (the total population of Germany was about sixty-seven million).⁶⁰ Even the numbers of free Christmas trees distributed nationwide was listed in Winter Relief annual reports—741,436 in 1934–35 and 695,681 in 1935–36.⁶¹ As one reporter enthused, the “inner emptiness and hopelessness” of Weimar era Christmas charity had been replaced by a new “faith [in the] beautiful, wonderful feeling” of collective concern for the humble “people’s comrade.”⁶²

Propagandists idealized the success of Winter Relief, but poor Germans benefited from WHW campaigns. Even the undercover agents of the outlawed Sopade, who were highly critical of state-sponsored activities, recognized the importance of Winter Relief for generating popular support for the regime. Agents repeatedly noted that the annual WHW Christmas campaign was more than a publicity stunt. For many Germans, a WHW “gift” was an important source of sustenance. According to an extensive Sopade report on the 1934 campaign, popular approval depended on the competence of local organization. In some districts, Germans expressed satisfaction and praised the efforts of the Nazis. In one town in Bavaria, for instance, the free WHW Christmas trees delivered by the SA made an especially good impression when donated “without prejudice” to former Marxists.⁶³ This confirmation of the effectiveness of Nazi practice suggests that, at some level, claims about Christmas “unity” were working.

In other districts, popular opinions about Winter Relief were decidedly mixed. Some workers complained bitterly about the failures of the charity drive, joking that the acronym WHW stood for “*Wir Hungern Weiter!*” or “we’re still starving.”⁶⁴ Disgruntled “people’s comrades” revised the campaign’s central slogan. Where the official line maintained that “no one will starve, no one will freeze,” vernacular voices joked that “no one will starve without

⁵⁹ Statistics in Vorländer, *Die NSV*, 44, 47.

⁶⁰ “Lage- und Stimmungsbericht des Hauptamtes für Volkswohlfahrt,” December 1936, 2, in BA-Berlin, NS 22/845. See also Angele Brown, “Vom ‘germanischen Julfest’ zum ‘Totenfest’—Weihnachten und Winterhilfswerk-Abzeichen im Nationalsozialismus” in *Weihnachten. Aus dem Sammlungen des Deutschen Historischen Museums* 5 (1995): 23–30.

⁶¹ *Rechenschaftsbericht, Winter-Hilfswerk des Deutschen-Völktes 1934/35* BA-Berlin, R 18/5600; *Rechenschaftsbericht, Winter-Hilfswerk des Deutschen-Völktes 1935/1936*, BA-Berlin, R 22/843.

⁶² Bruno Nelissen Haken, “Festfreude—Keiner Steht Abseits!” *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, December 21, 1933.

⁶³ *Sopade*, 169.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

freezing.”⁶⁵ Complaints focused on strong-arm collection tactics, corruption, and the distribution and quality of WHW benefits. Rumors circulated that donations were used to pay for non-charity Nazi party activities, like Hitler’s Christmas celebrations with his favorite SA-Troop in Munich. The authorities discouraged outspoken criticism. A policeman in Essen, who questioned recipients about the quality of their Christmas gifts, remarked that “because of their answers . . . most of those who received gifts are ripe for the concentration camp,” a blunt reminder of the repressive apparatus that ensured public compliance in celebrations of “people’s Christmas.”⁶⁶ Jokes and rumors, informal complaints, and irritation with the uniformed SA men who solicited door-to-door donations illustrate the disappointments of the WHW campaign and, at least for some, the scramble for material well-being masked by the “illusionary world” of National Socialist Christmas. But complaints also call attention to the dependence of citizens on state provision of the material goods necessary to enjoy the “Christmas spirit.”

Through the auspices of Winter Relief, many Germans experienced first hand the “really existing Volksgemeinschaft,” with its dubious opportunism and incomplete social leveling.⁶⁷ Despite complaints and problems, the campaigns generated enthusiasm, mass participation, and popular gratitude: According to historian Herbert Vorländer, Winter Relief was one of the most popular aspects of Nazi rule.⁶⁸ Even when the WHW made promises it could not fulfill, the vision of a community of German “Aryans” engaged in providing “self-help” for the disadvantaged was partially realized in the Christmas campaign. Participation in a WHW campaign, either as benefactor or recipient, involved a performance of public consent to regime agendas that blurred racial ideology, community spirit, and familiar holiday practices.

The Church Struggle for Christmas

While Nazi attempts to orchestrate public celebration and coordinate charity giving were effective, their efforts to secularize Christmas met with less success. The holiday season was, in fact, an important, if rarely noted, aspect of the “church struggle” between the National Socialist state and organized religion. Christian liturgical forms, symbols, and sentiments, and the annual calendar of religious observance enticed Nazis who wanted to appropriate conventional

⁶⁵ Kurt Hirche, *Der “Braune” und der “Rote” Witz* (Düsseldorf: Econ, 1964), 125. For other WHW jokes, see F. K. M. Hillenbrand, *Underground Humor in Nazi Germany 1933–1945* (London: Routledge, 1995), 89 f.

⁶⁶ *Sopade*, 173.

⁶⁷ See John Connelly, “The Uses of National Community: Letters to the NSDAP Kreisleitung Eisenach, 1939–1940,” *Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996): 889–930, 928.

⁶⁸ Vorländer, *Die NSV*, 175–86.

Christmas rituals for state goals. Yet the enduring popularity of religious observance, backed by the institutional power of the church, presented a real challenge to nazification. Christmas had always evoked tensions between secular and religious observance. During the Nazi years, these tensions sharpened and helped to turn a broad range of religious activities into an arena of political contest and negotiation. Controversies over dechristianization played out in public and private celebrations with extraordinary resonance and revealed limits to the political manipulation of popular celebration and the fractures in constructions of a National Socialist identity.

Even if the Nazi hierarchy was itself divided about the importance of neopaganism and dechristianization,⁶⁹ Protestant and Catholic authorities regarded the threat of nazification with real concern. Both Churches campaigned to protect the Christian aspects of the holiday, and both were subjected to surveillance and harassment during the Christmas season, producing an atmosphere of mutual distrust between church and state during the holiday season.⁷⁰ Catholic and Protestant leaders at times used Christmas sermons to offer critiques of regime policies. Cardinal Faulhaber's Advent sermons protesting Nazi "paganism," delivered in Munich in 1933 are the most famous examples.⁷¹ In his Christmas address of 1936, the Pope himself spoke out against Nazi dechristianization.⁷² The Protestant High Church Council (*Evangelischer Oberkirchenrat*, or EOR), an umbrella organization established in the nineteenth century to represent the interests of Germany's regional churches, used its connections to local parishes to monitor and control Christmas festivities in schools, state institutions, and the military during the Nazi years. When provoked by heavy-handed acts of dechristianization, the EOR sometimes wrote formal complaints to state authorities. The Protestant leadership was especially concerned with the protection of church carols, which they viewed as "natural" repositories of the spirituality of the German people. When Nazi lyricists promoted nazified songs

⁶⁹ Richard Steigmann-Gall, "Rethinking Nazism and Religion: How Anti-Christian were the 'Pagans'?" *Central European History* 36 (2003): 75–105.

⁷⁰ See annual Christmas time reports in Heinz Boberach, *Berichte des SD und der Gestapo über Kirchen und Kirchenvolk in Deutschland, 1934–1944* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1971).

⁷¹ Michael von Faulhaber, *Judentum, Christentum, Germanentum. Adventspredigen gehalten in St. Michel zu München 1933* (Munich: Graphischen Kunstanstalt A. Huber, no date). More rarely noted is the implicit anti-Semitism in Faulhaber's critique of Nazi paganism, which further reveals the ambiguous relationship between church and state, as does his appropriation of militarist rhetoric and solstice symbolism in subsequent Christmas proclamations; see, for instance, "Kanzelerklärung Faulhabers," December 10, 1941, and "Faulhaber an die Geistlichen im Wehrdienst," November 30, 1942, both reprinted in Ludwig Volk, et al., eds., *Akten Kardinal Michael von Faulhaber 1917–1945* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1975), 858–9, 955–7, respectively.

⁷² Though his comments were no doubt censored in Germany, the Pope's stand probably encouraged German clergy to resist dechristianization: "The Pope's Christmas Broadcast: Warning Against Nazism and Communism," *London Times*, December 28, 1936, 9.

and rewrote traditional carols as part of dechristianization campaigns, the EOR instructed local clergy to ensure that, whenever possible, public singing retain the original lyrics.

While religious authorities negotiated with the Nazis over the uses of Christmas, clerical leaders remained within the limits of acceptable disagreement and moderated their demands after the start of World War II. In an offer that seemed to express traditional religious allegiance to the state in a time of war, the EOR wrote to the Nazi Minister for Church Activities in 1939 to suggest a sort of Christmas concord that would formally divide state and church holidays: "Christmas, the holiday of love, delight, and inner meditation—winter solstice, the last political gathering and concentration of strength at the year's end—this is how Germans should resolve the apparent contradiction" between the religious and political aspects of Christmas.⁷³ Certainly public religious announcements offered crucial support for National Socialism and the war effort. The "brown" Catholic Military Bishop Franz Josef Rarkowski used his 1939 Christmas sermon to urge support for the "national mission . . . precisely at Christmas time when all the depths of the German soul are made manifest."⁷⁴ As late as 1944, in its annual "Christmas Greetings," the EOR proclaimed that "the enemy . . . can never destroy the soul of our people, as long as belief in Christmas is anchored deeply in our hearts and holy duty drives us towards the mission of love, the love that today binds home and front in an incomparable readiness to sacrifice for the victory and life of the Volk."⁷⁵ Even though independent Church officials at times resisted overt dechristianization, they did little to challenge regime evocations of a national "soul" united in sacrifice.

For their part, the regime agreed to allow soldiers the opportunity to participate in Christian as well as state-orchestrated holiday celebrations. In December 1939, General Wilhelm Keitel, Chief of Staff of the High Command of the Armed Forces, issued instructions regulating Christmas celebrations in the military. Keitel outlined a dual structure for the holiday in close accordance with church demands for Christian observance, a task, he warned, that required "the greatest tact" on the part of military officers. All soldiers must participate in National Socialist celebrations of "German Christmas" centered on the Christmas tree, "an ancient Germanic symbol of the tree of life." But troops

⁷³ Werner, Evangelischer Oberkirchenrat, to Reichsminister für Kirchenangelegenheiten, November 13, 1939, EZA 7/3199.

⁷⁴ From a 1939 Christmas sermon delivered by Catholic Military Bishop Franz Josef Rarkowski, *Verordnungsblatt des Katholischen Feldbischofs der Wehrmacht*, December 1, 1939, 13–14, quoted and trans. in Gordon Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars: A Study in Social Control* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962), 157.

⁷⁵ Wieneke, "Grüßwort des Evangelisches Oberkirchenrats zu Weihnachten 1944," EZA 7/3199.

should also be given the opportunity to participate in separate holiday services performed by a Catholic or Protestant chaplain on December 25 or 26.⁷⁶ This practical compromise was undoubtedly meant to help minimize religious dissent from official Church representatives as well as maintain satisfaction in the ranks, where soldiers from widely different backgrounds shared holiday celebrations.

Despite these official arrangements, the boundaries between Nazi and Christian definitions of Christmas were continually contested in countless local celebrations. The war exacerbated these tensions when religious-minded Germans at home or serving in the military unavoidably participated in festivities with heightened anti-Christian content.⁷⁷ The files of the EOR include numerous letters from pastors, chaplains, and soldiers, who condemned dechristianized celebrations or praised the effectiveness of Church attempts to preserve the holiday's religiosity. One first lieutenant wrote from Italy in 1944 and again from Brüggén in 1945 to assure the Protestant Council that the company Christmas celebrations from both years included traditional religious music, which, in 1945, was like a "miracle" that preserved "the Word of God."⁷⁸ Not all army celebrations were so pious. A wounded corporal recuperating in a military hospital in Züllichau reported that although military festivities included traditional carols, "none of the nine Christmas celebrations were Christian [and] the magic of the winter solstice was the sole feeble content of the celebration." The corporal further noted that only a "handful" of his comrades professed a strong Christian faith and that "most soldiers acted passively" in the face of nazification.⁷⁹ On the one hand, clashes over dechristianization, at the institutional and everyday level, exposed the awkward juxtapositions at the core of a Nazi project centered on the radical reinvention of a German-Christian tradition and challenged the authority of the regime. On the other hand, the fact that Christmas could be partially nazified despite the resistance of church officials suggests that Nazi ideological transformations effectively colonized popular celebration, even in the realm of religious practice. Similar processes were at work in the domestic sphere, where private celebration proved surprisingly permeable to nazification.

⁷⁶ "Richtlinien für die Gestaltung der Weihnachtsfeiern in der Wehrmacht," December 14, 1939, BA-Berlin NS6/329, 157.

⁷⁷ In some cases, soldiers wrote directly to Nazi authorities to complain about heavy-handed propaganda; see Helmut Krausnick, ed., "Soldatenblätter und Weihnachtsfest—Ein Briefwechsel," *Vierteljahrbuch für Zeitgeschichte* 5 (1957): 297–299.

⁷⁸ Oberleutnant Eberhard Eilers to Oberkirchenrat Wieneke, January 13, 1944 and January 3, 1945, EZA 7/3199.

⁷⁹ Akten Vermerk, January 23, 1945, EZA 7/3199.

The Spirit of the German Home

For regime leaders who wanted to construct a "revolutionary" National Socialist culture and identity, the appropriation of the family sentiments evoked by Christmas offered an attractive means to politicize the intimate sphere of private life. In accordance with Nazi gender ideologies that viewed the family as the "germ cell" or essential building block of the national state, the party and particularly the National Socialist Women's League (NSF) paid close attention to women's roles in domestic celebration and invested them with political meaning. New Nazi symbols and rituals offered a colorful and appealing version of the domestic holiday, which celebrated the family's place in the larger national community, and the nazification of the private holiday appealed to Germans for a number of intersecting reasons. Contrary to the conventional historiography, nazified celebrations successfully penetrated family festivity. Private Christmas celebrations were a relatively effective example of what Adelheid von Saldern calls the "apparently productive synthesis between the 'public' and the 'private'" that typified everyday life in Nazi Germany.⁸⁰

In theory, women and particularly mothers were crucial for strengthening the bonds between private life and the "new spirit" of German community. According to Auguste Reber-Grüber, the director of the women's division of the National Socialist Teacher's Union, the German mother was the "priestess" and "protector of house and hearth." Under her moral and physical direction, traditional family holidays would "bring the spirit of the German home back to life."⁸¹ Another expert on "women and tradition" argued that women naturally understood the importance of the "new Christmas" because they were "anchored more deeply than the man in the native soil of authentic national character."⁸² The Nazi press provided countless practical suggestions to link theory and practice, which encouraged women to redefine familiar Christmas and Advent traditions in ways that would "reinvigorate" the national community. The ritual of lighting candles on the Christmas tree, for example, was meant to create an atmosphere of "pagan demon magic" that would subsume references to the star of Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus in a feeling of "Germanness." Mothers and children were told to make home-made decorations shaped like "Odin's Sun Wheel" and bake holiday cookies shaped like a loop—a fertility symbol—or in the form of a "Sig-rune: the sign of struggle and victory."⁸³

⁸⁰ Adelheid von Saldern, "Victims or Perpetrators? Controversies about the Role of Women in the Nazi State," in *Nazism and German Society*, ed. Crew, 151.

⁸¹ Auguste Reber-Grüber, "Frau und Feier!—Ein Aufruf," *Die Deutsche Schulfeier*, 1, 1 (October, 1936), 9. For Reber-Grüber's role in the NSLB, see Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 202–9.

⁸² Elisabeth Schnidtmann-Leffler, "Frau und Volkstum, Brauch und Sitte/Eine weihnachtliche Betrachtung," *Deutsche Frauen-Kultur*, 12 (1934): 225–227.

⁸³ Dora Hansmann, "Adventszeit—magische Zeit: Vom heidnischen Dämonzauber und von

Traditional women's tasks, which depended on individual creativity and handcrafts (*Basteler*)—like wrapping presents, decorating the home, baking holiday foods, organizing family celebrations—now had “eternally German” meanings that linked special, everyday acts of holiday preparation and celebration to a cult of sentimentalized “Nordic” nationalism.

While it is impossible to know the number of solstice cookies baked by German women, these everyday activities are worthy of serious consideration. The borders between traditional practice and Nazi ideologies were extremely porous in domestic celebration. Nazified celebratory frameworks, promoted repeatedly in the mass media, clearly shaped the holiday experience, even at home. The Christmas memories of Hermann Glaser—part of the “uncanny idyll” of his childhood under National Socialism—illuminate the subtle way Christmas injected ideology into the practices of consumption and the rituals of private celebration. At his friend's house, the presents under a large tree included Winter Relief badges, the receipt for a payment on the family Volkswagen, and an anti-Semitic tract by Julius Streicher, the notorious Nazi bigot.⁸⁴ Singing is another example. To the consternation of religious leaders, Germans sang a number of Nazi Christmas carols that combined the pathos and often the words and melodies of older songs with ideologies of blood and soil; the most successful Nazi carol, “*Hohe Nacht der klaren Sterne*” (“The High Night of Clear Stars”) was so naturalized that it could still be sung in the 1950s as part of an ordinary family holiday.⁸⁵ The kitschy commercial trivia of domestic celebration likewise merged with fascist symbols. Home decorations featured Nazi insignia, including swastika-shaped Christmas tree lights or chocolate SA or SS men.⁸⁶ The popularity of sentimental National Socialist knickknacks is underscored by Party efforts to enforce a “law for the protection of national symbols” after 1933, which banned the “misuse” of Nazi symbols, including various forms of nazified Christmas kitsch.⁸⁷

unseren Adventsbräuchen,” *Die Deutsche Frau*, supplement to *VB*, December 6, 1936. For an extensive list of prescriptive women's activities in the Christmas season, see Reichsausschuß für volkswirtschaftliche Aufklärung, ed., *Weihnachtsfibel für das Deutsche Haus* (Stuttgart, Berlin: Deutschen Verlags-Anstalt, 1935); also Breuer et al., *Von wegen Heilige Nacht*, 81 ff.

⁸⁴ Hermann Glaser, “Ohne besondere Vorkommnisse,” in *Jugend im Dritten Reich*, Glaser and Axel Silenius, eds. (Frankfurt a. M.: Tribüne, 1975), 48–9.

⁸⁵ Private conversation with Karl-Heinz Schoeps, Professor of German Literature, University of Illinois, 1997; on Nazi carols in general, see Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann, *Das Buch der Weihnachtslieder: 151 deutsche Advents- und Weihnachtslieder. Kulturgeschichte, Noten, Texte* (Mainz, Munich: Piper-Schott, 1994), 306–326.

⁸⁶ See holiday advertisements in the *VB* before 1933; and for a rare photo of a private Christmas tree decorated with swastika-shaped electric lights, see Cornelia Rühlig, et al., eds, *Walter: Leben und Lebensbedingungen eines Frankfurter Jungen im III. Reich* (Frankfurt: Historisches Museum, Frankfurt 1983), no page number. On the persistent popularity of Nazi kitsch, see Saul Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).

⁸⁷ On the law, see StA-M Pol. Dir. 6958; for examples of outlawed Christmas kitsch, see StA-M

The "activity and mood reports" of the NSF show that numerous German women participated directly in the nazification of Christmas and reveal the fluid borders of domestic celebration. The remarkable number of female volunteers in the NSF and its satellite organizations in 1936—about eleven million, or one-third of Germany's thirty-five million women—gives some indication of the potential adoption of transformed rituals.⁸⁸ The disparate elements of a nazified domestic Christmas appealed to Germans for a number of reasons, even as the collapsing boundaries between "authentic tradition" and Nazi invention caused confusion and some consternation in the private sphere. For committed National Socialists, celebrating a Nazi Christmas demonstrated allegiance to the new order. Following the correct ritual forms requisite for a Nazi Christmas, however, could be difficult. In domestic festivities, deeply rooted religious observances could clash with the winter solstice-derived flame and nature rituals so important to Nazi practice. Just as Christian leaders worried about the dechristianization of holiday songs, Nazi women wondered if religious observance was still appropriate in celebrations of "people's Christmas." Gertrud Schlotz-Klink, the director of the NSF, noted in 1936 that members had problems finding Nazi Christmas books and other holiday articles in stores that still primarily sold conventional Christmas goods. They experienced "much doubt and discontent" when confronted with the question of whether "convinced National Socialists" could still celebrate Christmas in a Christian manner, with nativity plays and Christian carols.⁸⁹

The "people's Christmas" also placed new emphasis on women's public roles. Armed with directives from the central office, NSF volunteers organized a number of activities during the holiday season. They worked on Winter Relief drives, sponsored exhibitions with holiday themes, put on school plays, organized Christmas markets, and held "pre-Christmas" holiday celebrations for youth and women's groups.⁹⁰ Women's holiday activities may have been kept separate from men's, but they constituted a "special female public sphere" that gave participating women a new prominence in national politics and injected politics into private life.⁹¹ Christmas potentially altered women's self-perception, as their conventional holiday practices, already valorized as one of

Pol. Dir. 6971, 6967, 6982, and "Patentierter SA.-Weihnachtsmänner," *Der SA-Mann*, December 16, 1938.

⁸⁸ In "Victims or Perpetrators," von Saldern asserts that "these women (NSF members), and especially those who were leaders, accepted the role allotted to them by the Nazi system," 151.

⁸⁹ *Monatsbericht der Reichsleitung der NSDAP, Reichsfrauenführung für die Monate November/Dezember 1936*, in BA-Berlin NS 22/924, 2-3.

⁹⁰ *Rundschreiben No. F/40, Feiërgestaltung "Vonweihnacht,"* von Gaufrauenchaftsleitung München-Oberbayern, Abtl. Jugendgruppen, Kultur, Erziehung, Schulung, an alle Kreis-Frauenchaftsleiterinnen (etc.), November 12, 1937, in BA-Berlin NS 44/52.

⁹¹ Von Saldern, "Victims or Perpetrators," 151.

the peak moments of domestic life, became signs of participation in the national community.

Domestic celebrations of Nazi Christmas promised a return to the middle-class respectability that, as George Mosse concludes, was fundamental for modern nationalism and National Socialism.⁹² Many families found attractive the promise of a return to "traditional" family values and sought "the emancipation of women from the women's emancipation movement," in the infamous words of Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg.⁹³ Furthermore, the focus on Volk and family explicit in the Nazi holiday challenged the excesses of modern commercialization. In his response to an ethnographic survey on Christmas traditions in 1956, an unusually frank school administrator from Westfalen explained that "in the beginning, National Socialism made a halting attempt" to preserve the traditions of the family Christmas, "but it wasn't carried out." Since then, he complained, "family celebration has been degraded into the simple giving of presents, and the mother has been dethroned."⁹⁴ Postwar commentary seldom offers such open admiration of the sober values explicit in Nazi celebration, which valorized hand-made goods over banal mass-produced kitsch, meaningful "völkisch" rituals over presumably empty commercial (or Christian) forms, and collective over individual festivities. Such remarks are as revealing as they are rare, since they testify to popular investment in the fascist values celebrated in the Nazi holiday.

The Sopade reports offer further insight into the appeal of "people's Christmas" in the domestic sphere. Agents repeatedly expressed surprise at the effectiveness of Nazi Christmas propaganda and complained that discontent with shortages, so deeply felt in a time of celebration, did not translate into direct political action.⁹⁵ In a report on Christmas in 1938, the last holiday before the war, the Sopade included an unusual letter on "the general mood" in Germany during the holiday season. Despite the images of "festive joy" promoted by the regime, the agent wrote, the people were not taken in by Nazi holiday propaganda: "the greater the official celebration, the greater the people's self-awareness." The "socialist education" of former party comrades helped them see through the lies of the dictatorship, but even among the "politically unschooled people" who lack "a political worldview, [the] self-awareness . . . is

⁹² George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985).

⁹³ Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des XX. Jahrhunderts* (1930), quoted in George Mosse, *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural, and Social Life in the Third Reich* (New York: Schocken, 1981), 40.

⁹⁴ Dietman Saueremann, ed., *Weihnachten in Westfalen um 1900. Berichte aus dem Archiv für westfälische Volkskunde* (Münster: Volkskunde Kommission für Westfalen Landschaftsverband Westfalen-Lippe, 1976), 113–114.

⁹⁵ Sopade, 1392, 1400.

astounding!" For the apolitical, the driving force behind expressions of dissatisfaction was the lack of essential goods, especially holiday food and the "tidbits" associated with a proper Christmas. The abuses of the secret police also encouraged criticism, but according to the anonymous agent, political awareness was for the most part "more felt than conscious" and took the form of worries and uncomfortable feelings rather than active resistance to National Socialism. In conclusion, the agent sounded a note of Christmas optimism, confident that "despite everything . . . the day of democratic and socialist freedom of the German people will arrive."⁹⁶

Reading this report between the lines suggests that its author was deeply troubled by the popular appeal of the Nazi holiday. The "politically unschooled people," probably the majority, were more concerned with food and fuel shortages than politics. Reports on public opinion compiled by the Nazi SD and circulated at the highest levels of the Nazi government confirm these conclusions. At times, people worried about shortages of essential goods, despite government attempts to get extra rations on the market in time for Christmas.⁹⁷ But more often, according to the SD, Germans approved of official holiday entertainment and greeted annual holiday speeches from Hitler and Goebbels with particular enthusiasm.⁹⁸ The dominant view that emerges from the reports of the SD is one of stability and political quiet during the holiday season. Even after the start of World War II, when increasing shortfalls made the Christmas spirit more elusive, the secret police reported that complaints about official policies dissolved in an overall "Christmas mood."⁹⁹

War Christmas

Just as Nazi cultural producers had appropriated holiday neo-paganism and nationalism familiar from the late nineteenth century, wartime propaganda could draw on well-established popular traditions. Germans had absorbed generic narratives about soldiers and families on the home front celebrating "War Christmas" (*Kriegsweihnachten*) since the Franco-Prussian war, when invading German soldiers had supposedly enjoyed an especially chauvinist Christmas during the victorious "Siege of Paris" in December 1870. "War Christmas" had acquired the status of myth during the First World War. According to numerous stories, sermons, and press reports, the wartime holiday

⁹⁶ As a piece of socialist holiday propaganda, from an anonymous agent in Berlin, the letter is somewhat unusual; it is more of a holiday rumination than the "factual" report typical of the Sopade; *Sopade*, 1308–1309.

⁹⁷ *MadR*, 1822, 3044, 3145, 4502, 4577, etc.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1859, 3123, 6203.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1888, 3075, 3135–3139, 4598, 4600, 4633.

supposedly united Germans of all faiths and social status in celebrations of national pride. Divided families “held out” for the good of the “front community,” while mortally wounded soldiers expired peacefully under the Christmas tree. After the start of World War II, Nazi propagandists recycled such myths with initial success. In official celebrations and in countless Christmas books, newspaper and magazine articles, and holiday newsreels, the party relentlessly promoted the “spirit” of “German war Christmas.”¹⁰⁰ Mass organizations like the National Socialist Women’s League and the Hitler Youth organized package drives for soldiers at the front (see Figure 4), which could still evoke a massive public response in December 1941, when the ill-prepared German army began its retreat from Moscow. According to the SD, the public enjoyed radio and newsreel reports of soldiers’ front-line celebrations, at least in the first years of the war.¹⁰¹ As the German war effort began to fall apart, however, the sacrifices required by “war Christmas” became increasingly unbearable.



Figure 4: Berlin schoolgirls pack Christmas packages for single soldiers at the front, no date (courtesy of the Preussischer Kulturbesitz-Bildarchiv, Berlin).

¹⁰⁰ The BA-FA has numerous examples of “War Christmas” newsreels; see, for example, “Vorbereitungen für die ‘Volkswiehnacht 1940,’” *Deutsche Wochenschau* Nr. 536, 51 (December 11, 1940), BA-FA, DW 536/1940.

¹⁰¹ *MadR*, 1888, 3075, 3135–3139, 4598, 4600, 4633.

Despite regime efforts, popular celebration during wartime suffered from a number of practical problems, from material shortages to family separation and casualties. SD reports collected from across the "Reich" in December 1941 called attention to the frantic mood that undermined the holiday spirit. Germans shopped for gifts earlier and much more quickly than in peacetime to avoid disappointing shortages in a last-minute rush. Widespread fears about the poor quality and limited availability of gift items encouraged excessive and thoughtless spending. Shoppers reportedly cared little about price and spent freely and even recklessly on toiletries, household items, wine and spirits, and other practical gifts; storekeepers used the opportunity to unload poor-quality stock. Because of shortages in stores, German newspapers ran pages of private ads offering used gift items for sale or exchange. Books—not subject to rationing—were extremely popular, and in the rush to find presents of any kind, people bought books by weight or cover appearance, not by title or contents. Shoppers complained about rude sales staff and suspected that the best goods went to "regular customers" with connections (*Stammkundenprinzip*). In big cities, retail staff overwhelmed by the crush of desperate shoppers had to close salesrooms or receive customers in limited groups; in several cases, the police had to intervene to keep order, predominantly in tobacco and toy stores. Despite problems with shopping, reports from across Germany agreed that the "emergency holiday distribution" of coal and food met with "great contentment," though complaints from more than one housewife about receiving two eggs instead of the promised five underscore the deprivation faced on the homefront.¹⁰²

After 1941, the regime pushed increasingly politicized and dogmatic forms of celebration, perhaps in an effort to shore up compliance in the face of consumer shortages and personal and military losses. As hard-core party ideologues took control of propaganda outlets, public celebration unraveled. The authorities cancelled the annual Christmas markets. Winter Relief drives, an important source of material comfort, became more tenuous as the war continued and the economy deteriorated. Conflicts between church and state flared during the holiday season.¹⁰³ The Battle of Stalingrad marked a turning point, when the defeat of the German Sixth Army coincided with "War-Christmas" in 1942.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 3136.

¹⁰³ On the church, see *ibid.*, 555, 1864, 6207–6212; compare to "Die Kirche in der Weihnachtszeit," SD report from February 16, 1944, in BA-Berlin, NS 6/106.

¹⁰⁴ Wolfram Wetze and Gerd R. Ueberschär, eds., *Stalingrad. Mythos und Wirklichkeit einer Schlacht* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1992).

The SD reported that the population waited “on the hour” for radio reports on the battle during the holiday season.¹⁰⁵ The regime responded with a somber Christmas radio address, delivered by Goebbels, and with the now infamous Stalingrad Circle Broadcast (*Stalingrad Ringsendung*), broadcast on Christmas Eve.¹⁰⁶ According to the SD, listeners found some comfort in these media events. If so, the Christmas cheer was short-lived. In the last SD report on the holiday in 1943 (before the service was canceled for spreading defeatism the following summer), agents acknowledged that “according to most accounts, a true Christmas mood did not appear.”¹⁰⁷ Despite massive propaganda campaigns and concerted efforts to provide Germans with the trappings of a normal holiday, Christmas became more and more irrelevant in the crisis conditions of total war (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: Christmas in the bunker of the Moabit hospital, Berlin, 1944 (courtesy of the Preussischer Kulturbesitz-Bildarchiv, Berlin).

¹⁰⁵ Heinz Boberach, “Stimmungsschwung in der deutschen Bevölkerung,” in *Stalingrad. Mythos und Wirklichkeit*, 61.

¹⁰⁶ On Goebbels’s speech, see “Durch Kampf und Arbeit zum Sieg und zum Frieden: Reichminister Dr. Goebbels sprach zu den Deutschen an der Front, in der Heimat und in aller Welt,” *VB*, December 25/26/27, 1942, 1–2. On the Stalingrad radio broadcast, see “Weihnachtsringsendung von allen Fronten,” broadcast on December 24, 1942, in Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv (DRA), 2570043. For a more “upbeat” broadcast from 1940, see “Deutsche Weihnacht 1940,” from December 24, 1940, in DRA 2955859.

¹⁰⁷ *MadR*, 6203.

Officially sponsored celebrations of Nazi "War Christmas" became increasingly surreal, exemplified in attempts to generate a new domestic ritual featuring the resurrection of dead soldiers on Christmas Eve. The instructions for this "celebration" were contained in a propaganda booklet called *Light Must Return*, printed for Christmas 1943. Local party officials were instructed to make private visits to the wives and mothers of soldiers killed in battle, distribute the booklet, and offer their condolences. Full of comforting holiday stories, Christmas speeches, illustrations, and homespun parables, the booklet included a poem by Nazi poet Thilo Schiller called "The Dead Soldier's Homecoming." Here was the centerpiece of the Christmas Eve resurrection myth, summarized in the lines "And when the candles burn down on the tree of light/the dead soldier places his earth-encrusted hand/lightly on each of the children's young heads/we died for you, for we believed in Germany."¹⁰⁸ This material may simply represent the vacuous ideas of desperate propagandists. "If this is the best they can do," noted an EOR administrator in the margins of a church report on the new ritual, "we do not have much to worry about."¹⁰⁹ Yet the reception of this Christmas cult of death is open to question. Popular myths about the return of the dead during the holiday season reached back to Walter Flex's World War I Christmas poems and indeed to sentimental nineteenth-century stories, perhaps most familiar from Hans Christian Anderson's *The Little Match Seller*, first published in 1846. Placing candles on the graves of loved ones on Christmas Eve—particularly fallen soldiers—was a longstanding popular tradition, and these expropriated rituals may have offered some a sense of solace.¹¹⁰ Another potential response to the regime's last-ditch attempts to promote a War-Christmas cult of death during December 1943 and 1944 survives in a Christmas joke that made the rounds in Berlin during those years: "Think practically, give coffins."¹¹¹

Conclusion

In a Christmas speech in December 1933, Joseph Goebbels triumphantly proclaimed that the new "people's Christmas" was to be "the most beautiful day of the nation [and] a bridge to a new community."¹¹² Defeat and occupation

¹⁰⁸ A copy of the booklet (*Licht muß wieder werden*, ed. by Hauptkulturamt der Reichspropagandaleitung with Hermann Liese and Alwin Rüffer, no date) and a hand-signed note from Liese with instructions for distribution in EZA 7/3199.

¹⁰⁹ Handwritten note in EZA 7/3199.

¹¹⁰ For one example of this ritual from World War I, see Jo Mihaly, . . . *da gibt's ein Wiedersehen! Kriegstagebuch eines Mädchens 1914–1918* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1986). On Walter Flex's "Weihnachtsmärchen" (Christmas Fairy Tale) and the cult of death in general, see George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 75.

¹¹¹ Erich Kästner, "Weihnachtsschwarzmarkt in Berlin," in *Weihnachtsgeschichten aus Berlin*, ed. Gundel Paulsen (Husum: Husum Druck- und Verlagsgesellschaft, 1993), 15–17.

¹¹² "Nationalsozialistische Weihnacht," *VB*, December 24/25/26, 1933.

after 1945 exposed the criminal nature of this “new community,” and Germans replaced its holidays with other celebrations that could fabricate sanitized versions of the personal and national past.¹¹³ In West Germany, Christmas reemphasized Christianity and consumption. In the East, official and popular celebrations recuperated socialist traditions familiar from the 1920s. The “timeless traditions” of German Christmas were in permanent flux, as the adoption and then rejection of Nazi appropriations suggests. Yet the holiday’s associations with social harmony and middle-class respectability offered an appealing image of national solidarity adaptable to opposing political beliefs; in this sense at least, its “spirit” was “universal.”

Nazi propagandists and cultural workers turned this Christmas myth into a celebration of an exclusionary racial utopia, prosperous and vital, free from social conflict, and purged of Jews and “internal enemies.” Countless Germans engaged in regime-sponsored Christmas practices that bore these meanings, because participation brought significant material and symbolic rewards. But if a close look at Christmas in the Nazi period shows that popular response to the holiday was more complex and ultimately more positive than historians have generally assumed, it also reveals the contradictions of political culture in Nazi society. The tensions between official and vernacular interests in rituals that were constantly reenacted and open to contest threatened to escape party control, despite the pretensions of the totalitarian state. The “people’s Christmas” faltered on confessional, class, and political differences—often expressed in terms of allegiance to “traditions” that resisted political manipulation—and on the increasingly difficult conditions of daily life, not least when the regime revealed its murderous intentions in World War II. The orchestration of Christmas evoked conflicted responses, but its success suggests nazification nonetheless made remarkably deep inroads into the fabric of everyday life during the twelve years of Nazi rule.¹¹⁴ This was not simply a result of manipulation from “the top down”; nor was Nazi political culture an “illusionary world” lacking real popular engagement. The regime certainly used Christmas to promote and naturalize its racist ideologies. At the same time, as participants in nazified public rituals and private celebrations, Germans built the racial state from the bottom up. Even if they were not party members, celebration empowered “ordinary Germans” as agents in the daily acts of identity production that defined the boundaries of community in Nazi society.

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¹¹³ For a description of Christmas and the “unmasterable past” in postwar West Germany, see Joe Perry, “The Madonna of Stalingrad: Mastering the (Christmas) Past and West German National Identity after World War II,” in *Radical History Review* 83 (2002): 7–27.

¹¹⁴ As Klaus Vondung concluded in his groundbreaking study of Nazism as a political religion, the systemic and institutional transformations sought by National Socialists to reconstruct German national culture were firmly in place by 1940; Vondung, *Magie und Manipulation*, 116–7.

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