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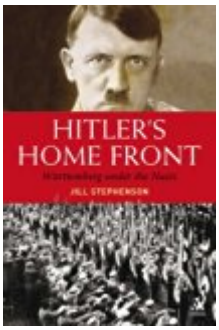
Jill Stephenson. *Hitler's Home Front: WÃ¼rttemberg under the Nazis.* London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006. 420 pp. Â£25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-85285-442-3.



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Of all the *Gauen*, Württemberg was one of the most remote from much of the action during the Third Reich. Not only was it relatively far from Allied air raids and liberated last by the Allies, but some of the rural areas of Swabia in particular were quite isolated in cultural, social, economic, technological, and political terms. Jill Stephenson chose it for her study of small town and rural life on "Hitler's home front," since she was interested primarily in "the effects" of this Third Reich, and its most destructive of twentieth-century wars, on even the most remote of German villages (p. 1). In her top-down analysis of the relationship between the National Socialist state and society, Stephenson describes with remarkable local detail the many attempts, and what she sees as the many conspicuous failures, of the Nazi regime to win local support. She also describes the many ways in which the Third Reich caused hardship and suffering for ordinary Württembergers, especially toward the end of the war. Critical of historiography that tends to identify with urban dwellers and to blame ordinary Germans uniformly for Nazi crimes, she makes a laudable effort "to understand the logic of the villagers' position" (p. 20). Yet because she focuses so unilaterally on this population's "***responses*** to the demands and pressures ***imposed by*** the Nazi regime" (p. ix, my italics), her overall interpretation tends to reiterate some rather stale excuses about the agency of ordinary Germans in everyday life.

Stephenson depicts National Socialism as an urban ideology "imposed" (p. 347) on indigenous rural communities by outsiders with the collusion of only a relatively small minority of ardent party activists. From before 1933 to the end of the war the NSDAP in Württemberg was relatively weak. The Nazis broke through during the final elections of the Weimar Republic, winning pluralities in rural areas by and large due to their attention to the issues of agrarian distress and anticommunism. But at least for most rural villages under 2,000 residents, these electoral victories were deceptive. Party membership and participation in Nazi organizations remained very low in comparison to other *Gauen*. In over 800 Württemberg communes, the NSDAP never established a local presence. To be sure, there were some active vanguards of the Party such as the racial hygenicists

in Tübingen and party bigwigs in Stuttgart, but in general, these small groups of Nazi enthusiasts were "a world away from the countryside" (p. 12). Coordination took place slowly and was largely unsuccessful beyond "impressions" (p. 349). Even before the war the NSDAP was seen by farming communities as an urban political phenomenon unsympathetic to the real interests of farmers. They responded to ill-fitting centralized policies with various forms of passive and active dissent ranging from grumbling, or refusing to fight in the final weeks of the war, to more proactive, organized efforts. The two main churches were highly effective in undermining the substitution of Nazi *Weltanschauungsunterricht* for religious instruction and preserving the sanctity of the Sabbath from Nazi party activities. The author sees these local communities as engaged in a kind of guerrilla warfare to resist the implementation of a *Volksgemeinschaft* incongruent with their daily life.

Throughout this period, labor supply was a recurrent factor shaping the success or failure of both policy implementation and political legitimacy. A relative paucity of ardent Nazis in rural localities created manpower shortages for the NSDAP when it tried to appoint reliable locals to positions of authority within numerous and competing party and state institutions. Without a strong base of support, the Nazis were forced to rely on an indigenous political-intellectual class whose ties to their locality were often stronger than their commitment to National Socialist ideology. As a result, many local political leaders were forced, or inclined, to make pragmatic concessions to local tradition with regard to some of the more radical Nazi policies, like scorched earth, or even more mundane matters, like illegal slaughtering of farm animals. According to Stephenson, this structural circumstance significantly compromised Nazi totalitarianism. As locals with close personal ties to the community, local party and state officials were highly sensitive to local interests and traditions, and therefore either failed to implement completely or sometimes undermined national policy at the local level.

Even before the Third Reich, farming communities had faced the challenge of labor shortages due to rural flight; but this situation was only made worse when, thanks to its imperial aspirations, the Nazi regime conscripted most adult men, and many farm horses, whose labor was crucial for the survival of the typical small-scale agricultural enterprises. The Nazi war effort created acute problems across rural society ranging from the practical problem of losing the only butcher in town to the military, to the more serious choice between resorting to subsistence agriculture for survival or foreclosing on the farm entirely. Obsessed with avoiding a repetition of the kind of food crisis that undermined the imperial regime of the First World War, the Nazi regime in turn created a policy framework to provide the urban proletariat, and the soldiers at the front, with sufficient food to avoid a "stab-in-the-back." This ever growing set of price restrictions, production quotas, and food rationing cost the regime considerable support in the countryside from a rural population that did not like market controls on their goods.

The Nazi regime also struggled to replace the adult German men they had conscripted. They never quite succeeded and in the process contradicted their own ideology by importing members of "inferior races" to support populations in the Aryan heartland. Yet the pragmatic Swabian farmer viewed this issue solely from the perspective of labor resources. In contrast to the female German evacuees, many of whom found rural Württemberg too poor and backward, foreign forced laborers and POWs often came from poor rural backgrounds themselves and were therefore more readily integrated into rural Württemberg farm life. Long before the remote Swabian countryside was itself bombed and invaded by enemy forces, these stoic peasants had already been inundated by migrants of *Volksdeutsche*, evacuees

from cities, who had lost their homes to bombs or homeless armaments workers, as well as refugees from all parts of Germany and even Vichy France, fleeing the invading Allies. Rather than the classic culprit of coordination in the 1930s, Stephenson argues that it was this latter factor relating to total war--the influx of newcomers in the 1940s--that did most to change the character of these remote Swabian villages. It was only the growing prosperity and mechanization of farming in the 1950s that caused the structural modernization of the countryside.

Stephenson clearly relishes every moment rural Swabians challenged centralizing tendencies from Berlin. She shows time and again that they were quite conscious of their own self-interest, active and successful in criticizing the regime when their interests were at stake, effective in a wide variety of nonconformist behaviors, and not afraid to engage when Nazi policy contradicted their traditions or self-interest. They preferred their old calendar, life-cycle rituals, and organizations to the new Nazi ones. They were most effective in challenging Nazi policies on matters that directly affected their churches, since one could still meet on Sundays largely independent of the Nazi party. They undermined Nazi policies of compulsory sterilization and euthanasia with letter-writing campaigns, for instance, or by finding jobs for "useless eaters" and thus proving them "useful" (p. 129). Sensitive to history and culture, individual communities banded together to challenge the confiscation of their church bells; some even defied Hitler's final orders to fight to the last man and scorch the earth behind them.

Their ultimate priority was the preservation of the farm as an independent enterprise, but that goal was always filtered through local custom and social relations. Rural Swabians sold foodstuffs on the black market, not to undermine the war effort, but because of "a deeply ingrained tradition" of informal barter (p. 204) and in order to reject a system of economic constraints they considered unjust (p. 353). Because many Jews had traditionally played a significant economic role in these communities, as merchants and taxpayers, the enforcement of racial policy in these rural communities was almost exclusively dependent on how far local party activists were willing to act "against" both the local Jewish minority and a "disobedient" Aryan majority. For, Stephenson writes, "most villagers refused to participate in anti-Jewish activities" (p. 141-42, 148-49). They were reluctant to attack Jews in their own community and party activists preferred to harass Jews from other communities. The author's point is that rural farmers and artisans were perfectly capable of disobeying Nazi policy when it suited their economic interests--for instance, by behaving with some measure of hospitality and civility towards Polish forced laborers--but they did so through a reliance on tradition.

Stephenson seems to view traditions in rather concrete terms. Alternately, one could view them as highly malleable and easy to manipulate in different ways. For instance, Stephenson argues that rural Swabians resisted Hitler's final policies of scorched earth and fighting to the death out of a tradition of peace, linked to the memory of destruction during the Thirty Years' War. Yet the farmers of Württemberg had also helped destroy much of Europe in the Thirty-One Years' war from 1914 to 1945. They only "found peace" once violence threatened their own villages. Conversely, the author admits that the traditional dislike of "disruptive outsiders" (p. 22) was conflated to some degree with Nazi racial principles and that Nazi office-holders were also "the product of the Swabian cultural context" (p. 347). Clearly, tradition can be used both to create passive resistance to centralizing policies as well as legitimize and permit collaboration with the same policies.

For Stephenson, however, compulsory sterilization, euthanasia, forced labor, starvation, expropriation, deportation, and murder were all national policies more or less imposed on indige-

nous Swabians with only limited local support from radicals. "Small-scale farmers, artisans and their families," Stephenson writes, "were not in a position to influence government policy or its implementation" (p. x, 357). "The only forms of 'individual initiative' left to them" in the face of a despotic regime "were obstruction and disobedience" (p. 22, 173). "Both in intent and effect," their forms of obstructionism were parochial, self-interested, and pragmatic--not political or ideological (p. 3). Unaware, uninformed, and disengaged, Stephenson's descriptions of the rural population approach at times the myth of "the [politically] dumb Swabians" which she seeks to challenge (p. 11, xi).

Stephenson similarly claims that locals "persisted in operating with no more distant horizon than their traditional community" (p. 21). At its core, Stephenson is correct: rural farmers and artisans in Württemberg did refuse to conform only on issues that directly influenced them or their community. And I do not doubt that they liked to act *as if* their everyday life was not political. But just because there were no Jews or Socialists in their particular villages, or because Swabians did not "feel any 'overarching responsibility to the Volk'" (p. 22, 25), or for Nazi crimes for that matter, does not mean their everyday ways of being, believing, and behaving was isolated from larger social relationships and systems of mass destruction. After the war, she explains, French occupation forces required every household to provide a complete outfit of clothing for a former forced worker. Among the German populace, "this was regarded as a particular hardship after years of cloth rationing" (p. 338). Yet their far better standard of living had been made possible for most of the war through the exploitation of the resources and people from occupied countries (p. 166). Our historiography should not be reproducing a myth of spatial and social isolation that itself served as a cultural support for Nazi crimes.

Similarly, rural Swabia was certainly years behind many other parts of Germany in terms of modern conveniences and infrastructure, but that does not mean that Swabians were "untouched" (p. 33) by modernization. Theories of critical geography[1] suggest that changing sets of unequal power and exchange relations often link urban-industrial and national-political centers to underdeveloped sectors and regions; they are preserved as underdeveloped in order to exploit their resources. In Stephenson's account, I saw considerable evidence that rural Swabians, too, were deeply and inextricably embedded in national markets and institutions. The movement of groceries to urban dwellers, of values through religious and political institutions, of rural youth to industrial sectors in search of jobs, of adult males as soldiers for national armies, and of migrant farmhands forced into Württemberg by economic or imperial forces: all are evidence of this connection. As Stephenson argues, these allegedly remote villagers suffered, and complained vociferously, whenever those markets and institutions failed to serve local interests. Yet, the author accepts the premise that their world really was conditioned by "restricted horizons and adherence to the familiar" (p.xi). By accepting at face value their claim to live beyond the pale of politics, it seems that she has mistaken a stratagem for an ontology.

In the end, Stephenson argues that these particular Germans never really became Nazis. Most simply paid lip-service in outward conformity to a regime to which they were actually indifferent. While few local Nazis subscribed completely to the regime's eugenic and antisemitic principles, Nazi racial ideology "failed to penetrate villagers' consciousness" (p. 346, 348). Here I think that the author makes too much of the totalitarian aspirations of the Third Reich and not enough of its everyday practice. According to Stephenson, the party sought to transform ordinary Germans into Nazis "from above" through *Menschenführung* (p. 67). She is correct in saying that, from the per-

spective of party radicals, anything short of 100 percent must be evidence of non-conformity. Yet I can think of many reasons why state and Party records, Party newspapers, or postwar questionnaires and chronicles might have overreported incidents of everyday nonconformity, underreported incidents of informal collaboration, and emphasized the leading role of Party policy in implementing the ***Volksgemeinschaft***. Unfortunately, the author fails to seriously consider the proactive agency of ordinary Swabians in nazification, coordination, and terror within the scope of everyday life (cf. p. 90, 140, 209, 336, 354).

Stephenson has written what will no doubt be considered the standard survey of Württemberg during the Third Reich and responsibly makes many legitimate and carefully worded disclaimers about the difference between murder and discrimination, about an appropriate place for German suffering in the historiography, as well as the relative weights of conformity and nonconformity on each issue in each local population. I would like to suggest, however, that conformity and nonconformity are more than just numerical quantities or characterizations for kinds of people. As Stephenson knows, Hitler was willing to wait until after the war to win the long-term battle against his own people's conservatism so long as they first collaborated with him in his genocidal war for ***Lebensraum*** in the meantime (p. 251). By enabling rural Swabians to distance themselves psychologically from "the Nazis'" excesses, small acts of nonconformity facilitated a large degree of collaboration. Here is where I most disagree with the author's interpretation: in her tendency to laud as "dissent" the idiosyncratic deviations of an "***a la carte*** Nazi" (p. 350). The fact that these rural farmers and artisans subscribed only to the parts of National Socialism that they liked, the ones that fit into their tradition and community, did ***not*** allow them to "avoid being colonized" by the Nazi regime (p. 359). The same rural Swabians who made friends with Polish forced laborers working on their farms could also hope that the Nazi regime would approve the murder of more Russian POWs to create more abundant food supplies for Aryans (p. 172). This does not seem to me to be the passive obstructionism of parochial farmers; here self-interest, racism, perhaps even tradition, provided a key element of support for a genocidal war. Nonconformity did not save rural Swabians from responsibility for the suffering of others and even their own suffering. They made themselves into a more reliable foundation for the regime's most important medium-term goals by selectively approving and disapproving of Nazi policy.

Note

[1]. Edward W. Soja, ***Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*** (London: Verso, 1989); David Harvey, ***Paris: Capital of Modernity*** (New York: Routledge, 2003).

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