

Michael Wildt. *Hitler's Volksgemeinschaft and the Dynamics of Racial Exclusion: Violence against Jews in Provincial Germany, 1919-1939*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2011. 328 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85745-322-8.

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## The Production of the *Volksgemeinschaft*

Did the German people really constitute a *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community) during the National Socialist regime or was that term just a slogan without any material basis in everyday life? This delicate question is not new. It dates back to the first scholarly publications on the Third Reich, for instance Franz Neumann's monumental survey *Behemoth* from 1944 in which he criticized from a Marxist perspective Emil Lederer's assertion from 1940 that the German people lived in a fascist mass democracy.[1] More than seven decades later, the historian Michael Wildt from Humboldt University in Berlin took up the problem in his book *Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung* (*Volksgemeinschaft as self-empowerment*), which has recently been published under the title *Hitler's Volksgemeinschaft* in an English translation.

In laying the focus on political action rather than ideology, Wildt is able to offer a deep impression of what it actually meant for Jews to live in a society defined as a *Volksgemeinschaft* at least by its leaders. Based on a broad amount of sources both from the German Secret State Police ("Gestapo") and the Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith ("C.V."), the author looks closely at what happened on the ground in provincial Germany in the years roughly from the foundation of the Weimar Republic until the November Pogrom in 1938 and its aftermath.[2] Thus, the author refrains from any essentialist discussion of stable political concepts and puts the dynamic and violent character of the Nazi movement

at the center of his discussion. This is also reflected in his definition of the term *Volksgemeinschaft* as "the more or less secret complicity at the local level by which the valid legal order was effectively suspended for the Jews" (p. 155). Wildt asserts that the National Socialist concept of community was not simply a political reality but a work in progress: "In the moment when laws could be violated with impunity against a group, a boundary was drawn within which the *Volksgenossen* were constituted as a *Volksgemeinschaft*, and beyond which the Jews and other 'Fremdvölkische' (alien *völkisch* elements) were excluded as 'Gemeinschaftsfremde' (elements alien to the community)" (p. 155).

Wildt refers to Ernst Fraenkel's book *The Dual State* in describing two apparently contradictory political spheres which were constitutive for the National Socialist reign of terror: on the one hand, the "normative state" under the rule of law, which was valid only for members of the *Volksgemeinschaft*; on the other hand, the violence of the paramilitary groups SA and SS, who drew the boundaries between "us" and "them." [3] The application of Fraenkel's theory enables Wildt to withstand the fashionable addiction within social sciences to Carl Schmitt's existentialist distinction between friend and foe—a distinction that justifies rather than explains the struggle against the Jews.[4] Consequently, Wildt strictly deals with Schmitt only as a historical source. And yet one has to bring to mind some crucial problems in Fraenkel's theory as well: Is a state that suspends parts of its constitution and

imprisons the political opposition still under the rule of law? Is thus a concomitance between the “normative state” and the “prerogative state” even thinkable?

Wildt solves these problems by painting the picture of a multiple power structure with competing factions within the framework of the National Socialist state. The fight between these groups—or, as Max Horkheimer put it aptly, “rackets”—revealed a corrosion of the state’s monopoly on violence and led to new dimensions of anti-Semitic attacks (p. 147).[5] Regional chapters of the NSDAP and the SS behaved differently and sometimes even contradictorily; local non-party members occasionally joined boycott actions against Jewish shops or damaged Jews’ property. But Wildt makes clear right from the start that the “bystanders” and “passers-by” were also part of the National Socialist project—deliberately or not. Either one was “in” or “out”—*tertium non datur*, although the status of “Aryans” could change quickly with regard to their behavior. Passivity under these circumstances meant participation, and thus the creation of the *Volksgemeinschaft* needed a public stage where people could either partake in the “play” or just remain part of the audience.

Wildt illustrates this production of the *Volksgemeinschaft* by analyzing a photograph that pictures an anti-Semitic procession, or cortege, in Marburg in August 1933. The photograph shows a man with a large sign in his hands that reads: “I have defiled a Christian girl!” He is being walked through the streets by members of the SA. However, the crowd on the sidewalk behaves differently: a woman raises her right hand for the Hitler salute, others stand watching with little children on their arms, and some are even looking away. Yet Wildt makes clear that every person on the scene willingly or not belonged to a performance which was biased by those who were ready to enforce their intentions with violence.

Apart from these more theoretical issues, Wildt describes “a straight-forward continuation of anti-Semitic violence from the Weimar Republic to the National Socialist regime” (p. 60). He chronicles a history of boycotts, slanderings, denunciations, rallies, damages of property, and even violent attacks against Jews which proceeded cumulatively and found its first climax in the November Pogrom. Nonetheless, Wildt is one of those scholars who emphasize that the pogrom was part of a chain of events rather than a sudden and unpredictable eruption after allegedly calm pre-Holocaust years.[6] Although Wildt hesitates to write a “pre-history” (p. 8) to the Holocaust, his book indicates that the functionalist

assumption of the mass destruction of European Jewry as merely an effect of the dynamic of war is at best insufficient. From the beginning of the National Socialist movement, the production of the *Volksgemeinschaft* as a political goal was inseparable from the exclusion of the Jews. “Exclusion,” however, always implied that Jewish life and health were unworthy of protection and thus, that violent and even deadly attacks on Jews would go unpunished.

This pervasive threat to life and limb also found expression in the demographic data: in Gelnhausen for instance, a small town in the region of Kassel with a total population of up to 20,000, the number of Jewish inhabitants declined from 162 in May 1933 to 130 in 1936 and 55 in March 1937. On “1 November 1938, a few days before the nationwide pogrom, the last Jewish family departed” (p. 123). But personal experiences with anti-Semitic violence were not necessarily the decisive reason for Jews to leave their hometowns. The dwindling of trust in local municipal authorities who had ceased to support their Jewish fellow citizens was sometimes even more threatening than the mob on the streets. And the ongoing boycott of Jewish shops was enforced with great success by the so-called *Stürmer-Kästen*—“large display cases over one meter wide, painted bright red and decorated with anti-Semitic slogans” (p. 142)—which denounced those “Volksgenossen” who continued to buy from Jewish shopkeepers. Hence, the social exclusion of the Jews went hand in hand with economic discrimination and the cancellation of legal protection.

All these aspects of the persecution of the Jews are well known. What is new in Wildt’s survey is both the selection of sources and the focus on the production of an “Aryan” in-group. This special perspective provides a new look at the dynamics within German society before the outbreak of the war. To conclude, Wildt’s book offers readable and detailed insight into what it meant to produce a *Volksgemeinschaft*. It is by now a standard work on the early years of National Socialist anti-Semitism and supplies an inspiring view on the transformation of German society between the years 1919 and 1939.

#### Notes

[1]. See Franz Leopold Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944), 365f; and Emil Lederer, *State of the Masses: The Threat of the Classless Society* [1940] (New York: Howard Fertig, 1967), 127–131.

[2]. Dirk Walter has thoroughly analyzed anti-

Semitic violence in the Weimar Republic with regard to the cities. See Dirk Walter, *Antisemitische Gewalt und Kriminalität: Judenfeindschaft in der Weimarer Republik* (Bonn: Dietz 1999). See also Christhard Hoffmann, Werner Bergmann, and Helmut Walser Smith, eds., *Exclusionary Violence: Antisemitic Riots in Modern Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

[3]. See Ernst Fraenkel, *The Dual State. A Contribution to the Theory of Dictatorship* [1941] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Wildt deals with Fraenkel on pp. 94–97.

[4]. Raphael Gross, in *Carl Schmitt and the Jews: The*

*“Jewish Question,” the Holocaust, and German Legal Theory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), has shown that the term “decision” was deeply connected to Schmitt’s Jew-hatred.

[5]. See Max Horkheimer, letter to Henryk Grossmann, Pacific Palisades, January 20, 1943, Max-Horkheimer-Archive, University Library of Frankfurt a.M., VI 9.248.

[6]. See Alan E. Steinweis, *Kristallnacht 1938* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), which also takes the continuity of violence into account without minimizing the significance of the November Pogrom.

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