

Nazi Germany (1933-1945)

Introduction

This volume on Nazi Germany offers a variety of primary sources to students, educators, and other researchers. In working with a time period that has been documented extensively, we editors were able to put together a wealth of materials that lend themselves to classroom use, independent or guided primary-source research, and general interest reading. The selected themes—from foreign policy to consumer culture to racial policy—provide access to a diversity of experiences and developments that are too often reduced to a singular focus on Hitler and his genocidal policies. Teachers, students, and other users will discover images, documents, videos, and audio clips that will spark debates about power structures in the Third Reich, Nazi Germany’s relationship with other countries, and the experiences and behaviors of Germans from all walks of life—women and men, industrial workers, farmers, middle-class consumers, the architects of racial legislation, and those (such as Jews, leftists, sexual and gender minorities, Roma, disabled people, and “asocials”) whom the regime labeled as unwelcome and as a threat to the so-called “people’s community” [Volksgemeinschaft]. The selected sources, together with the accompanying abstracts, will hopefully inspire users to explore other historical materials, on the web or in the library.

1. Studying Nazi Germany

There is a tremendous body of scholarship on National Socialism, and our editorial goal was to reproduce materials—some well-known, some new—that provide a basic overview of this twelve-year period, while also pointing to novel and provocative avenues of thinking. With those aims in mind, we editors had to contend with the overwhelming scholarly and public interest in National Socialism, which made choosing a limited number of sources difficult. The Nazi era is one of the most documented in history: a quick search for “Hitler” in the German National Library [*Deutsche Nationalbibliothek*] catalogue produces over 16,000 results; in the Library of Congress catalogue, the terms “Nazi” and “National Socialism” yield around 9,000 titles each. Even accounting for some overlap, this is an astronomical number of published sources. In addition, public and scholarly interest in this period, which peaked initially during World War II and in the immediate postwar period, only to wane somewhat in the 1950s and 1960s, has increased again over the last few decades. A great source for gauging such trends is the Google Ngram Viewer (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>), which allows users to track the appearance of certain of keywords in books over long stretches of time. What we learn is that since the late 1970s, there has been a remarkably steady increase in books with “Nazi” in the title and, since the 1990s, publications specifically with “Hitler” in the title.

What is a scholar or student to do with this near obsession with the Third Reich, manifested in, for example, the widespread tongue-in-cheek reference to the History Channel as the “Hitler Channel” and the coining of the term “Godwin’s Law”? The latter “rule” indicates that the longer an internet discussion thread continues (and one can extend this to other forums and public debates), the more likely it is that someone will bring up Hitler—as a way of attacking another person or shutting down conversation, or as an attempt to derive historical parallels that would presumably guide individuals and policymakers away from unwise decisions.

Adding to this challenge is a part scholarly, part public debate about whether the years of National Socialism occupy an outsized place in German history and in modern history more broadly.^[1] After all,

this volume covers the shortest period of time in the *German History and Documents and Images* (GHDI) website. The twelve years of the Third Reich can be contrasted to some earlier chronological volumes that encompass around 150 years each. The Weimar Germany volume is rather short as well—fourteen years—and while this period after World War I has received plenty of attention from scholars, it is nowhere near as well researched as the Nazi era. Questioning the omnipresence of Nazi history can be an important exercise for scholars who are trying to encourage students to balance research agendas, discover continuities in history, and think in a long-term manner that doesn't privilege recent history or the history of atrocities. But it can also serve as a controversial political rallying point: take, for instance, the 2017 German parliamentary election season, when far right candidates pointed to what they saw as an almost masochistic obsession with the twelve years of Nazism, implicitly and explicitly calling on Germans to pull back on teaching and memorializing the Third Reich and its victims.

Students and teachers should be aware of these discussions, for they prompt important questions regarding the sources in this website. What kinds of issues do Adolf Hitler, the Nazi police state, and the lives of people in Nazi Germany pose to students, scholars, and the public today? What do these documents reveal about political decisions, individual choices, and historical causality during a period that still serves as the paradigm of state terror and genocide? What is unique about Nazi Germany, and which features of the Third Reich reflect longer, global trends? In light of these questions, we editors have tried to place the events of 1933–1945 in a broader context whenever possible—providing references to prior periods in German history and presenting a critical appraisal of the significance of the Nazi years in our source abstracts. We obviously take the position that the Nazi period deserves concentrated attention—that it provokes timely questions about ideology, conformity, free will, and modernity—which are essential to the study of history and critical for trying to understand today's world.

2. How to Use these Sources

When it was announced that the GHI Washington was updating the GHDI website, we editors encountered enthusiastic reactions. Some students and colleagues were happy to see the site expanded with additional sources that reflect contemporary discussions about National Socialism. Others were excited about enhanced opportunities for students to engage in digital humanities research. On the latter note, we understand that while some will come to this site with a high level of digital literacy, others will have had less experience navigating online primary-source collections. We therefore encourage users to approach the sources in flexible ways, whether by clicking around and working with a few documents and images, or by reviewing the whole site. Some students will use the sources to map ideas and keywords through flowcharts and timelines; others will simply learn to approach primary sources more critically. This is not a digital archive, and students will likely consult not only this collection but also a number of other websites for primary sources, such as newspaper archives and other collections related to Nazi propaganda or the Holocaust. With this in mind, we tried to offer a representative sample of sources from the Nazi period. Of course, this strategy has its own problems. For example: what counts as “representative”? The experience of a Jew who has just lost his or her livelihood differs from that of an “Aryan” German enjoying improved access to consumer goods in the late 1930s. And each Jewish or non-Jewish German in this period had different encounters with the regime, different levels of optimism and pessimism about the course of politics, and different financial resources at his or her disposal.

We have tried to present multiple perspectives, but there will always be gaps, especially as students and teachers look for sources that address specific topics. Those interested in military strategy during World War II, for example, will find that the collection devotes less attention to battlefield tactics than to the experiences of those soldiers on the Eastern front, or in Africa, who confronted the brutality of warfare or engaged in ethnic cleansing. We encourage users to take a textual, visual, audio, or video source that they find interesting and pull on its thread both within the volume and beyond the GHDI collection. For example, when one encounters declarations of confidence in early February 1933 that Hitler's tenure as

chancellor would be short-lived—much like his predecessors’—the reader might then go to the *Chicago Tribune* or the *London Times* to read what journalists abroad were predicting in early 1933. Did the same flawed assumptions about Hitler being “boxed in” by more mainstream politicians exist beyond Germany’s borders? Students, we have found, are often captivated by headlines announcing events as they played out, be it a newspaper editorial about the 1936 Berlin Olympics or a *New York Times* article from November 10, 1938, the day after *Kristallnacht*, reporting that “violent anti-Jewish demonstrations broke out all over Berlin early this morning.”[2]

Thus, we hope that these sources will not only provide “data” for students but also cultivate an excitement about doing original research and feeling history as it was lived. We encourage students to discuss biases in a source, to consider how *we editors* may have privileged certain types of documents and images over others (e.g. is there too much about the importance of propaganda in the Third Reich? Too little on the experience of non-Germans under occupation?), and to ask whether a certain source supports or challenges common assumptions about a topic. We also invite users to consider how best to use the various types of sources. How do we get beyond seeing the images as mere illustrations and read them critically as historical sources?[3] How does *listening* to the era’s popular music help us better understand life in Nazi Germany?[4] People often come to a site like this thinking they know a lot about National Socialism. Perhaps we can push against some long-held assumptions or introduce new themes.

Let us offer one more word about the structure of the site and one caveat. First, the editors have added to rather than replaced the excellent documents from the first edition of GHDl’s Nazi Germany volume; thus, the reader might find an abundance of documents or images on a particular topic that reflects the earlier and/or current editors’ particular interests, like the 1944 bomb plot against Hitler or propaganda and consumer politics. In other words, some themes simply get more attention than others, as is the case with any source collection. Second, teachers, students, and general readers must be acutely aware of the presence of neo-Nazi websites as they move from GHDl to other online sources. Search engines are much better than they used to be in devising algorithms that push white supremacy websites lower down the results list when one types in “Nazi Germany.” And, to be sure, students might *want* to access these sites for their own research into neo-Nazism. But the wide exploitation of Nazi history for tendentious and sometimes hateful reasons demands that everyone approach Nazi-themed sites with extra scrutiny and with an awareness that not all information on the internet is equally reliable.

3. Key Themes

Rather than offering a chronological summary of the Third Reich or a preview of the individual sources, which are already accompanied by abstracts, our goal in this portion of the introduction is to highlight a few themes that run through this volume and to point users toward productive avenues of thinking. When the first edition of GHDl was launched, this volume offered a number of “top-down” perspectives. That is to say, the collection tended to emphasize the importance of Hitler and his policymakers, the apparatus of terror they created, declarations from the regime, and Nazi foreign policy in the run up to and during the Second World War. In studying a dictatorship, these perspectives are fundamental, and we have maintained them. However, the original site also contained fewer—albeit excellent—diary entries and other reflections by people who experienced the Third Reich “from below,” and we have tried to amplify this “bottom up” approach in this edition. Some historians have struggled with how to fit the everyday life of Germans into their discussions of a regime based on intimidation. How does one balance glimpses into the prosaic existence of most Germans—working, shopping, vacationing, and spending time with family—with the realities that Nazi Germany was an extraordinarily invasive regime that regulated considerable aspects of public and private life?[5] Indeed, in planning this new edition of GHDl, we editors initially considered adding a separate chapter called “Everyday Life.” But we quickly encountered the problem that any such isolated chapter would be arbitrary. For each chapter—on racial policy, police control, resistance and rescue, or the Holocaust—needed to highlight the lived experiences of Germans and other Europeans under a dictatorship. Therefore, within each chapter we

expanded the number of sources by and about “ordinary” Germans. We suggest, however, that students and teachers talk about these challenges. Does “everyday life” mean “normal life”? What counted as “normal” during these years—or in any political setting—and is it possible to make generalizations when so many Germans were shut out of society, politics, the military, and the economy for ideological reasons during the 1930s and 1940s? Does a focus on everyday life shift too much attention away from the top-down apparatus of persecution? How did people live with what one historian has referred to as a “split consciousness,” which allowed Germans to support or tolerate a brutal regime *and* to proceed with their daily (often joyful) rituals, as if the regime’s crimes did not exist?[6]

Another theme running through the selected sources is racism, and it too reflects a larger debate in the field of German history. To what extent was Nazi Germany a “racial state,” to invoke the title of an important book in the field?[7] In other words, how much did Hitler and top Nazi leaders’ obsession with Jews and other racial and biological “inferiors” guide their policies and define life in the Third Reich? To what extent did other considerations and realities—such as the raw desire for power, the focus on economic recovery, and the manifestation of different forms of non-racialized prejudice (such as portraying Jews as *economic* exploiters as much as *racial* inferiors)—define the Nazi years? One may also ask how unique Nazi Germany was in isolating and persecuting minorities. While recognizing the unprecedented industrialized murder of Jews and other populations, historians also see modes of thinking and forms of segregation that were found in other racist regimes, like the American South and South Africa. In other words, we may ask whether the Nazis built a “racial state” par excellence—with political and social life revolving around antisemitism and the biological health of the *Volk*—or whether Nazi Germany was more complex in its goals and more similar to other regimes than we would like to acknowledge?

Another theme raised by the featured sources is one that, again, scholars are asking themselves: How modern was the Third Reich? For many years, historians and the general public tended to view the Nazi movement as fundamentally backward looking—calling for a return to a glorious Germanic past, pushing women into their traditionally confined domestic sphere, and retreating into a world defined by “blood and soil.” There is no question that this depiction captures some of the realities of Nazi ideology and life in the Third Reich. We can point to countless retrograde gender policies and numerous jeremiads against the corrupting influence of modern art, Hollywood, and other forms of “Jewish modernity”; we have included several sources on these themes. Indeed, Hitler aimed to erase from Germany the corrupting influence of “degenerate” and overtly “modern” forms of cultural and social expression and return the nation to a putatively pre-modern period of *völkisch* purity. And yet, we now have a more complicated picture, one of a leader and a regime that embraced modern forms of propaganda and media and of a populace that enjoyed the fruits of modern consumer culture, such as cinema, radio, music, and motorized travel. One historian has characterized National Socialist ideology as “reactionary modernism,” reflecting the movement’s regressive ideological goals and the modern means it employed to attain them.[8] Others emphasize that “the Nazis” cannot be reduced to a monolithic group with a single view of modernity or any social or cultural issue. Our sources on film, leisure, advertising, and mechanized war and genocide should prompt students to think through this question of how modern Germany was in the 1930s and early 1940s. Why might this question matter? Does the “modernity” of the Third Reich mean that life during the Nazi years shared familiar features that we would easily recognize in other countries at the time and even today? If the Nazis were “moderns,” then what does that say about the role of science, medicine, and the media in paving the way for the Nazi dictatorship and its crimes?

The final theme emerging from the selected sources might be referred to as the “coercion and consent” debate. Many students come to the study of Nazi Germany with the assumption that the average German who was not branded as an outsider was brainwashed into supporting the schemes of ideologues like Hitler, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, and SS leader Heinrich Himmler. There is also the

attendant view that, under the Nazi dictatorship, Germans lost their ability to resist, speak out against the regime's policies, or exercise free will. If they weren't the passive victims of a propaganda blitz, as this theory goes, then Germans were at the very least coerced into supporting Hitler's brutal aims. It is not surprising that many students, scholars, and the general public have subscribed to some version of this "coercion" thesis. This approach, drawn from older theories of totalitarianism, is common in cable television documentaries, which often highlight Hitler's worldview and the oppressive aspects of the Nazi state. But people also adhere to this view because there is good evidence for certain aspects of it. The Nazi regime was a violent police state that presided over a network of what grew to be hundreds of concentration and death camps. It threatened to punish critics of the regime with prison time or death, and it militarized large aspects of society. Finally, it indoctrinated Germany's youth in racialized thinking and encouraged neighbors to denounce each other to the authorities.^[9]

And yet scholarship has revealed that there is more to the story. From the early days of the Third Reich until well into the war, there was widespread support for the regime, and this support was not simply the product of coercion. The featured sources prompt one to question where coercion ends and consent begins. As fawning letters to Hitler testify, the *Führer* was highly popular for much of the Third Reich, with Germans buying into the "Hitler myth" that their leader was almost god-like in his ability to right the wrongs of the past and usher in a new era of greatness for their country.^[10] Likewise, it took the work of millions of German citizens to put Nazi visions of a racially pure society into place. Of course, not everyone bore the same level of responsibility, and people acted out of a variety of motives—whether outright support for the regime, fear of the police or Gestapo, or a sense of detachment from the larger architecture of racial policies; "doing your job" in an authoritarian regime does not necessarily mean embracing that regime. In contrast, however, there were also people who resisted the Nazi regime, often to their own detriment, and there were even soldiers who refrained from engaging in genocide.^[11] Some of them were executed for their actions; others were simply reassigned to new tasks. Issues of consent and coercion, resistance and complicity are extremely complex. We hope that the broad range of responses to the dictatorship and its crimes presented here will encourage users to ask tough questions like: it is realistic to expect most Germans to have acted with the same level of civil courage as the relatively small number who took action against the state?

The reality is that Hitler was both a popular politician who offered rapid economic recovery and territorial adjustments to a people beaten down by the Great War and economic depression, *and* a politician who inspired fear, conformity, and distress about the extent of his bellicose policies. Coercion and consent are not mutually exclusive in a dictatorship. Support for National Socialism could be combined with disapproval of specific policies. Loyalty to the Nazi cause and the war effort could be twinned with disapproval of brutal racism. Nationalism, belief in the *Führer*, concern for loved ones on the battlefield—a constellation of emotions and commitments can exist in a setting where top-down violence and fear of stepping out of line is widespread. The sources in this volume speak to these complexities. The Third Reich still attracts so much attention because it compels us to think through the nature of individual consent, the power of the state, the ability of demagogues to win over the public, and the dangers of watching rapid social and political change uncritically.

Germans could not predict the future. We have the benefit of hindsight, knowing that the Third Reich ended with bombed out cities, refugees clogging roads, and tens of millions of dead combatants and civilians. We must maintain some sensitivity to the voices of those who, at the time, simply tried to lead their lives without endangering themselves and their families. But we must also recognize the consequences of apathy, indifference, and fear, as well as the reality that many Germans knew of, approved of, and contributed to the brutality that suffused the Third Reich and that reveals itself in so many ways in the featured sources.

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NOTES

- [1] See “Forum: German History beyond National Socialism,” *German History* 29, no. 3 (2011): 470–84; and S. Jonathan Wiesen and Geoff Eley, “Beyond National Socialism?,” *German Studies Review* 35: 3 (October 2012): 474–79.
- [2] “Berlin Raids respond to Death of Envoy,” *New York Times*, November 10, 1938, p. 1.
- [3] For more on photography’s importance to this period and its use as historical evidence, see the special issue in *Central European History*, vol. 48, no. 3 (2015), especially the introduction by the collection’s editors, Elizabeth Harvey and Maiken Umbach, “Introduction: Photography and Twentieth-Century German History”: 287–299.
- [4] See Brian Currid, *A National Acoustics: Music and Mass Publicity in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
- [5] For an introduction to the concept of everyday life history, see Alf Lüdtkke, ed. *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, translated by William Templer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) and Paul Steege, Andrew Bergerson, Maureen Healy and Pamela E. Swett, “The History of Everyday Life: A Second Chapter” in *The Journal of Modern History*, 80, no. 2 (June 2008): 358–378.
- [6] Hans-Dieter Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewußtsein: Über deutsche Kultur und Lebenswirklichkeit. 1933–1945* (Munich: Hanser, 1981).
- [7] Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wipperman, *The Racial State: Germany, 1933–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), and Devin O. Pendas, Mark Roseman, and Richard Wetzell, eds., *Beyond the Racial State: Rethinking Nazi Germany* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- [8] Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
- [9] See Richard J. Evans, “Coercion and Consent in Nazi Germany,” *British Academy Review*, issue 10 (2007): 26–27.
- [10] Ian Kershaw, *The “Hitler Myth”: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).
- [11] Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

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