

## Josephine Herbst, *The German Underground War* (January 8, 1936)

### Abstract

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Josephine Herbst (1892–1969) was an American journalist with ties to the Left and the American Communist Party. This article below, published in the American current affairs magazine *The Nation*, provides an outside perspective on the developments within Germany three years after Hitler and the Nazi party took power. Herbst portrays the German people as if in a state of depression. Goebbels's propaganda machine has saturated the press with outright lies and hoists the Führer on a pedestal as Germany's savior. She presents both a mixture of fear and optimism that perhaps overlooks the extent to which Hitler and the regime's early maneuvering and the gradual revitalization of the economy fueled the Nazis' support. Despite her puzzlement over the failures of the trade unions to mount an effective resistance, she does betray an air of optimism. She writes that with each of the regime's moves toward war, there is more and more support for the underground resistance. Her feeling that the underground opposition was growing in strength was misplaced. While the number of underground publications appearing in major cities was growing, open and forceful opposition to the regime remained limited in these early years and grew only slightly in the years to come. In most cases, vocal opposition centered on a very specific issue and rarely threatened to destabilize the general consensus built by the regime in its formative years.

### Source

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#### Anti-Nazi Feeling Rises

As I started to write this article a letter came from Germany from the wife of a teacher whose home I visited this summer. There are several children in the family, one a boy of fourteen. The letter covers four written pages, and there are practically no personal messages; many words are heavily underscored. I am to remember that people outside Germany are fed on lies and on stories started by petty faultfinders. In the main things are simply splendid. Der Führer has chosen the best and only way. People do not understand the importance of the Jewish question, that means everything to Germany. The Jews began their treacherous work during the war, when most of them stayed at home piling up wealth. Only the Führer saved the Fatherland from these people, and his warning took years to be heard. A few not so clever people have led in handling the Jewish problem, but one should look to history. Where will one find such a bloodless revolution? The victors usually put their enemies to death, but in Germany they have merely taken them into "protective custody."

Here is a not unintelligent woman writing at a time when Catholics and Protestants are being driven farther into their corners, when opposition opinion has no chance to be heard except through underground channels. Although she has a boy of fourteen who is doomed to serve in a labor camp, she writes only of the Jewish question. To be sure, when I talked with them face to face, this German woman and her husband made many qualifications. No doubt many letters like hers are flooding the mails at the instigation of Herr Goebbels. The one note of realism in the letter is a complaint about prices. Prices are terrible.

In 1922 and 1923 prices were also terrible. It was the period of the inflation. The frightfulness of prices, the daily battle for one egg, a little meat, drove the German people into the arms of Hitler. Hitler's arms were strengthened by the enormous resources of the Krupps, the Thyssens, and other industrialists, who

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in this last year have been able to declare bigger dividends than before. The Socialists, Communists, and trade unionists had no such backing. In 1930 prices were still the subject of continual complaint. I was in Germany then, and many persons were willing to have anything happen. Some of the unpolitically minded were as ready for bolshevism as for fascism, whichever would give a future to the children. Now, after years of expectation and patience, they still have high and even higher prices. The cost of living rose so sharply this summer that food riots broke out in Berlin and even in small towns in the provinces.

How long will the psychological reasons for submission to Hitler hold in the face of continuing economic instability for the great mass of people? Hitler has been successful in selling to the Germans the idea that he saved the country and all Europe from bolshevism, and that bolshevism is a destructive force, a strictly Jewish movement. Lately the term bolshevism with too much use has begun to lose its sharp edge. The Catholics also have been accused of bolshevism. The result has been to throw them into the opposition movement. In the Saar one of the illegal papers of the underground movement appears with the hammer and sickle combined with the Catholic cross. A priest about to be arrested was warned by the underground route; his house was surrounded by workers and peasants from the neighborhood, few of whom were Catholic, and the troopers coming to arrest him turned back at the sight of the dense crowd.

The existence of the underground movement is denied in the legal press, but twenty illegal papers come out regularly in Berlin alone. Hundreds of others appear irregularly. The papers are distributed by children and by workers during their working hours. The penalty for distributing such contraband may be the concentration camp; it may be death. Strikes are treason, and leaders are punished by death at the hands of a firing squad or by sentences to concentration camps. Yet strikes go on. Dozens occurred last summer, especially in the metal trades. Sometimes the strike consisted in a passive laying down of tools for an hour. Sometimes work was merely slowed up, "sticking," as they term it, "to the hands." Demonstrations used to be made for the release of Thälmann, the Communist leader, but lately there have been none, and it is not known for certain whether he is alive or dead. Only Germans who get their information from the legal press have any illusions about the so-called "bloodless revolution" of the Nazis; blood has flowed and is flowing. But if this last year was marked by the further concentration of wealth in the hands of the big industrialists, it is also notable that in the same period the underground movement made its greatest progress.

The outside world is always impatient of the predicament of a particular nation. Other people are always stupid and gulled by their leaders. Even within Germany itself some underground workers still puzzle at the suddenness of Hitler's blow. How could the powerful trade-union movement have been so easily crushed? The German worker, they say, was ideologically the best-informed worker in the world; he read economics, was versed in Marxist theory. The German worker was also patient and endowed with power to wait and endure. His very virtues became a trap for him. His long training under an earlier militaristic Germany in which order was a god made him an easier dupe.

It has taken time to recover from the blow of Hitler's seizure of power. At first Socialists and Communists did not work together and had no association with outside groups. But conversion is not the aim of the underground. Communists are willing to work with Catholics for religious liberty, and if, as an underground worker told me, half of a group of Socialists working with Communists in getting out a paper turn Communist, such an event is the outcome of an experience and not the focus of the movement. That neutrals have become weary of the parades, the constant orders to beflag houses, to appear on streets for "spontaneous" demonstrations has made it a little easier for the underground to work. The spying eye may not be so willing to see all that goes on around it. Moreover, the circle of Hitler's enemies widens every month. New recruits for the underground are made by Hitler himself. When he dissolves the *Stahlhelm* he suddenly touches many a family not formerly antagonistic. As yet they may merely not be so ready to hang out flags; they may smother their resentment and grow only a trifle more angry at the rise of prices; but by these tokens they serve the opposition whether they know it

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or not.

The recent drives against Catholics and Protestants are in reality against all secret enemies of the Third Reich. The theory that the stresses and strains possible in a democracy cannot be allowed to exist in the Nazi state demands eternal warfare against the opposition. In truth the Nazis can continue to exist only by exterminating the enemy. But can they exterminate so many? The underground movement, pressed down, bludgeoned into the earth, spurts up again in a new place. Hundreds of Nazi spies seek to stop the circulation of illegal papers, in vain. With cunning and courage the underground workers carry on their warfare. A neat office worker with a glass eye tears out his glass eye for his secret work, puts on the clothes of a beggar, stumps along with an empty socket in his face, defying identification. A Nazi spy is found out, and on his window in bold letters, no matter where he may move, the information is given that Spy So and-So lives within. Thus exposed, he is useless; he moves again, can find no hiding.

On the surface these tiny resistances seem mere pin pricks against the powerful front of the Nazis, but this front is to some extent deceptive. A people is made up of individuals, and in all Germany few persons appear happy, few talk freely, there is little play. Only once in several months did I see people having what appeared to be a good time. It was at night in a Nazi neighborhood of little clerks and petty officials. A corner beer cafe was brightly lighted, and through the partly open door voices singing old German songs came out. Through the opening I could see the beer maid standing by the table, swaying and leading the singing while the men waved their mugs. It was the only time I saw this happen--a common event in the old days when people often sang in beer halls. The mood of a people is not to be ignored, especially when at its base there is an organized and growing movement of resistance.

The war preparations of Hitler contain the germ. of their own doom. Never did a people want war less and seem more certain to get it. With hypocritical cunning the Nazi leaders attempt to lull the people with talk of pacifism. They were delighted this summer at Mussolini's plans. Whether Italy won or lost, Germany seemed certain to gain. Particularly they hoped that the League of Nations would be discredited. "That foolish collective arrangement" the Germans want to see dissolve of ineptitude; meanwhile, with eyes on Italy, Germany is perfecting its war machine.

The inevitability of war is realized not only by the underground movement but by workers in general. Ask any of them what is ahead, and the brief answer is war. Perhaps this fortifies them so that they are willing to risk the strikes that always bring death or the concentration camp to some of them. They mean to make a fight for their freedom, and it is not by chance that in the underground press they frequently refer to themselves as slaves. Some workers hope that the ever-widening circle of Hitler's enemies will give the underground opposition strength to rid Germany of Hitler even before a great war comes; others feel they can only get rid of Hitler in such a world cataclysm.

The circle of enemies widens as the profits of the industrialists increase, as the living conditions of the workers go down with almost toboggan swiftness. The demonstrations against religious groups are grandstand play. The real enemy at the Nazi throat is bred by the Nazis themselves -- the high prices and the depreciated standard of living of the masses. This enemy, of all their enemies, they are unable to down if they wish to protect the fortunes they were put in the saddle to perpetuate and increase. The Krupp works at Essen are working at full speed, but the sick list among Krupp workers went up 75 per cent last year as a result of the lowering of the standard of living.

A maid in a hotel complains that times are bad, tourists few, and only business men appear to travel, but she adds, "Anyhow we have our pride." Hitler reanimated the people by breaking down the Versailles treaty. But pride will not sustain a nation forever. Even Hitler's success with the youth movement carries a taint. Among the ardent Nazi youths many are too young as yet to test this new state. Can it give them jobs? So far its offer to youth is the labor and military camp. And within the labor camps an authentic junior opposition movement flourishes. Tiny leaflets are got out in secret; strikes break out over poor

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food, working conditions, even over songs they are asked to sing.

In 1924 I visited universities at Bonn, Jena, Freiburg, and Marburg. I lived in student homes where there was literally nothing to eat except black bread, cabbage, and plum jam. Students with set stern faces were already rabidly nationalistic in resentment at their defeat in the war. Maps of the world with patches of color to denote the presence of Germans were on the walls of the homes. At that time students wanted someone to blame. Hitler had begun to shrill in Munich, and his accusations against the Jews were part of his program. But few students knew of him. They were rather accusing the academic world of pre-war Germany with its slavish adherence to militarism. They wanted to get away from the old Germany; they blamed the academic mind and its worship of pure intellect. Students rebelled against old forms, went nature crazy, became vegetarians, gave up smoking, and, in disapproval of the old aristocratic corps, even eschewed beer-drinking. These perfectly good impulses to break the old pattern were frayed and wasted under the vacillating Social Democracy, and like spoiled children who tire of a too indulgent parent, they took to Hitler and his narrow fanaticism. Some of the students of 1923 and 1924 have gone into the camp of the opposition, many have knuckled under to the Nazi rule. This jumble of passions and feelings that followed the war was exploited by the Nazis. The young people have been particularly appealed to. Games and exercises are more diverting than hard studies. A sense of importance has been given to youth which will only be defeated by the actuality of a Nazi state. Can it provide for the future? The answer is, only by war.

Whether the youth will accept war remains to be seen. The older generation is dead against it, but is powerless. The avalanche has been set in motion; let him who can get out of the way. All are caught in the big downward slide. Little children do not spend much time with parents who might try to put anti-Nazi thoughts into their heads. Even on Sundays the child is taken from his parents for long hikes supervised by Nazi teachers. The entire world is being remade for the child in the Nazi form. No wonder parents are full of dread which makes them turn not unwillingly to news of an opposition movement. They may not be part of it, but they no longer are so willing to inform on someone who is.

Source: *The Nation*, January 8, 1936. Available online:

<https://www.marxists.org/subject/women/authors/herbst/fascism.html>

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