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ARTICLES

AN EMPIRE OF SHAMING: LAUGHTER AS IDENTITY POLITICS IN NAZI GERMANY

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In 1933, members of the Berlin SA arrested Hans Weinmann and his friend Horst Rosenzweig, two German–Jewish men whom they accused of distributing illegal leaflets. The SA celebrated the arrest by staging a derisive sketch in which they cast the detainees in major roles. They hung up a portrait of Friedrich Ebert, the Social Democratic first president of the Weimar Republic, in front of which Weinmann had to say a few words in Hebrew. He was forced to bow to a row of SA men, introducing himself with the words 'the Jew Weinmann, circumcised'. Before and after, he had to sing a song in which he described himself as 'sad': 'My greatest luck is now in sight: The Nazis caught me in the night. Why am I so sad, why feel such awful sorrow, when I might well be dead tomorrow!' Both were forced to dance what the SA called a 'Negertanz' ('negro dance') to duly selected music. Finally, the SA shaved the men's heads, and when Weinmann began bleeding Rosenzweig had to lick the blood from his friend's head.[1]

In their ritual of humiliation, the SA carefully chose each element for its symbolic meaning. At the same time, they asserted their position of power through a deeply interpersonal structure in which the prisoners had to act out the inferior position they were pushed into

[1] Wiener Library, 048-EA-0523, Ref. P.II.C., NO. 607, 4–5; quotations from the English translation available online at [https://www.testifyingtothetruth. co.uk/viewer/fulltext/104819/en/], accessed 8 June 2021. Martina Kessel, *Gewalt und Gelächter: 'Deutschsein' 1914–1945* (Stuttgart, 2019), 221–2.

according to their captors' desires. The SA men used the typical triad of what they considered enemy references—social democracy, Blackness, Jewishness—and forced their victims to inscribe themselves into each feature of Otherness: talking to a symbol of democracy in a language defined as non-German, dancing to a tune framed as Black, pointing out the fact of their circumcision, and finally having to embody the stereotype of the bloodthirsty Jew. The prisoners had to act out with their bodies that they were now 'sad' Jewish losers, so to speak, who had been overcome by cheerful non-Jewish victors. As their only permitted form of expression, this denied them the chance to interpret their fates themselves. The SA directed and watched this performance of imagined identities. By hurting and mocking their victims, they positioned themselves as German, and therefore distinct from these Others.

Such derisive laughter echoed through Nazi Germany. It was a structural feature, not an incidental one. Research on humour in National Socialism has so far often focused on its vast and multifaceted presence in the media.[2] However, a recurring experience for those hunted down as non-German was to be laughed at even as they were driven out, tortured, or killed.[3] But why? Humiliation and derision were not functionally necessary for persecution and genocide. Yet contemporaries ridiculed and mocked those they persecuted in so many theatrical and ostentatious acts of humiliation that they turned German society not only into a genocidal culture, but into an empire of shaming.

Mockery, I argue, had a systematic meaning: non-Jewish Germans created and acted out imagined identities while investing them with a particular reading of history.[4] In other words, contemporaries brought

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[2] Christian Adam, *Lesen unter Hitler: Autoren, Bestseller, Leser im Dritten Reich* (Berlin, 2010), 159–74; Patrick Merziger, *Nationalsozialistische Satire und 'Deutscher Humor': Politische Bedeutung und Öffentlichkeit populärer Unterhaltung 1931–1945* (Stuttgart, 2010). Merziger's key thesis that satire disappeared during National Socialism is to my mind unconvincing as he excludes any anti-Jewish satire.

[3] Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, 2 vols. (London, 1997–2007), vol. ii: *The Years of Extermination* (2007) describes many instances.

[4] See Alon Confino, *A World without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide* (New Haven, 2014), for a fascinating analysis of the importance of narratives of history.

their understanding of history and identity—defined as German—to life through derisive laughter and degrading violence. They gave expression to their distorted version of German history and their own self-understanding as hurt, humiliated victims, and they used their position of power to invert that imaginary historical narrative and make it a reality. Furthermore, by enacting their power through theatrical forms of mockery, they inscribed themselves into a specific notion of Germanness with a particularly high social status—namely the persona of the 'artist-soldier'.[5]

Accordingly, I do not so much analyse antisemitism in Germany as trace how contemporaries defined their Germanness as non-Jewish. This approach makes anti-Jewish impulses visible not only as Othering practices designed to reduce fellow Germans to mere Jewish stereotypes, but as part of the formation of the self as German. In recent decades we have learnt much about people's motives and contexts for participating in the Shoah and the multiple ways in which non-Jewish Germans produced a so-called *Volksgemeinschaft*, or 'people's community', creating time and again a boundary between those who were accepted as German and those who were not.[6] But we could more strongly foreground the production and affirmation of an exclusionary self as the basis of an exclusionary society. Weinmann and Rosenzweig's humiliating performance highlighted the relational dimension of identity formation. The SA literally walked them through elements they considered meaningful for projecting identities, turning hateful stereotyping into visible and audible display. By producing a supposedly negative mirror image through the cruel abasement of their prisoners, they positioned themselves as German in the sense of non-Jewish.

To be sure, no single interpretive framework suffices to explain why millions of Germans produced a genocidal culture that practised systemic violence. Structures, circumstances, individual

[5] Martina Kessel, *Langeweile: Zum Umgang mit Zeit und Gefühlen in Deutschland vom späten 18. zum frühen 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2001), esp. 321–30.

[6] Susanne C. Knittel and Zachary J. Goldberg (eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies* (London, 2020). For debates on the *Volksgemeinschaft*, see Martina Steber and Bernhard Gotto (eds.), *Visions of Community in Nazi Germany: Social Engineering and Private Lives* (Oxford, 2014).

dispositions, and different motives played their part in making many actively pursue Nazism as an opportunity, while others joined in reluctantly.[7] But constructing the self as non-Jewish meant finding the reason for participation within oneself. David Theo Goldberg has argued in a different context that the modern state was based not only on exclusion, but on the internalization of exclusion.[8] For German history, I emphasize that the self-definition of Germanness as non-Jewish (or non-Muslim or non-Black) was present as a potentiality from the late eighteenth century. It did not determine German history, but it did not disappear either and could therefore be appropriated and radicalized into an exclusionary self-understanding. For non-Jewish Germans, it became central during those periods we usually call democratization, when Jewish Germans achieved greater participation or normative equality in political, legal, social, and cultural terms. Gentile Germans activated the modern, essentializing notion of Germanness as non-Jewish when they could no longer see any difference in rights and habitus between Jewish and Christian Germans. This happened in Imperial Germany, as Uffa Jensen has shown, and even more radically in the Weimar Republic.[9] Humiliation was a way to live out, manufacture, and experience the self as an internal category of difference. In this sense, shaming was a deeply modern practice, making and marking an exclusionary understanding of identity that could be set in opposition to a democracy that had at least the potential to leave the self as a hierarchy behind.

Furthermore, using laughter as a lens to study Nazi Germany accentuates the importance of symbolic violence in the development of German genocidal culture. The SA's construction of interpersonal relations was typical, and it produced a social fabric that both facilitated

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[7] Mary Fulbrook, 'The Making and Un-Making of Perpetrators: Patterns of Involvement in Nazi Persecution 1', in Knittel and Goldberg (eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of Perpetrator Studies,* 25–36, at 26. For the systemic character of violence, see Mary Fulbrook, 'Private Lives, Public Faces', in Elizabeth Harvey et al. (eds.), *Private Life and Privacy in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, 2019), 55–80, at 59–61.

[8] David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (London, 2002), 2.

[9] Uffa Jensen, *Gebildete Doppelgänger: Bürgerliche Juden und Protestanten im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2005); Kessel, *Gewalt und Gelächter*, 99–111.

genocidal radicalization and later shaped the very methods of mass murder. Symbolic violence also involved many more people than the genocide itself, with participants and onlookers creating public spaces of shared knowledge and possibly showing their support for persecution.[10]

In this article, I will demonstrate how laughter functioned as identity politics by looking at two dimensions that are hard to separate: first, laughter as a narrative concept, constructing a specific meaning of history and identity; and second, laughter as a practice and a recurring way for non-Jewish contemporaries to shape self and society through performative derision. Both the narrative concept and the theatrical performance point to the meanings non-Jewish Germans inscribed into the Holocaust, and these were crucial. Contemporaries rewrote the destruction of human lives into something else entirely—namely into a means of producing a modern society which they projected as the pinnacle of progressiveness. By enacting the exclusionary notion of Germanness through humiliation and violence, they defined themselves as creators of a new world.[11]

Laughter as a Narrative Concept

That laughter as a concept came to define self and history was due to its semantic development in Germany. From the late eighteenth century, German intellectuals established an imagined binary pitting what they called German humour against an irony which, depending on circumstance, they classified as Jewish or French, or associated

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[10] Kim Wünschmann, *Before Auschwitz: Jewish Prisoners in the Prewar Concentration Camps* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015), 207–8; Paul Levine, 'On-Lookers', in Peter Hayes and John K. Roth (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies* (Oxford, 2010), 156–69, at 158.

[11] See Peter Fritzsche and Jochen Hellbeck, 'The New Man in Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany', in Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick (eds.), *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge, 2009), 302–41, at 303, for the argument that exclusionary notions of identity were as modern as the liberal self. I argue that the liberal self was also a potential category of difference, making it easy for National Socialists to radicalize its exclusionary force. See also Confino, *World without Jews*.

with some other perceived antagonist. They associated the notion of humour with the willingness to produce a German nation, while dismissing irony as undue criticism, hostile, and non-German.[12] Consequently, the discursive binary of laughter became a vehicle for identity politics. Those who wanted to deny Jewish Germans their German identity could inscribe them with allegedly evil, non-German laughter, translating the religious difference between Christianity and Judaism into a supposedly essential difference between Germanness and Jewishness. In this sense, laughter had nothing to do with comedy. The trope served instead as a 'matrix of the imaginary',[13] bundling a whole set of invented binaries such as warrior versus pacifist and loyal versus treacherous that served to define human beings as either German or non-German. The seemingly harmless semantics of humour could thus turn toxic, signalling exclusion from the very idea of Germanness.

The meanings laughter acquired in the Nazi period were all present during the First World War as a potential waiting to be appropriated and transformed. In October 1914, the antisemitic agitator Theodor Fritsch aggressively put these ideas into practice. He attacked Jewish Germans as 'die lachenden Dritten'—'laughing third agents'—who did not belong to any identity or society, but transgressed all boundaries to profit at the expense of others and then crow over their own success.[14] That last point was central: by misrepresenting Jews as both transgressive and mocking bodies, Fritsch painted them not just as profiteers, but also as seeking to ridicule and shame those whom they exploited. Thus the trope of laughter centred on the idea of shaming or being shamed.

[12] Jefferson Chase, *Inciting Laughter: The Development of 'Jewish Humor' in 19th Century German Culture* (Berlin, 2000).

[13] Jacques Sémélin, 'Elemente einer Grammatik des Massakers', *Mittelweg 36*, 15/6 (2006/2007), 18–40, at 39.

[14] Theodor Fritsch, 'Burgfrieden', *Hammer: Blätter für deutschen Sinn* (1 Oct. 1914), 505–10, at 506. Cf. Elisabeth Albanis, *German–Jewish Cultural Identity from 1900 to the Aftermath of the First World War* (Tübingen, 2002), 37. On the figure of 'the third', see Zachary Sng, 'Figure³: The Metaphor between Virtue and Vice', in Ian Cooper, Ekkehard Knörer, and Bernhard Malkmus (eds.), *Third Agents: Secret Protagonists of the Modern Imagination* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2008), 60–76.

To be sure, humour in everyday life, the media, and other public debates served many purposes in the First World War, from expressing reservations or criticism to coping with the horrors of war. But the proponents of victory at all costs extensively evoked the discursive binary to exhort the German people to keep fighting. Joke books, semi-official trench journals, and official spokesmen alike urged soldiers to keep going by insinuating that the Entente would mock and belittle them as unmanly if they ever gave up. They equally denigrated the desire for peace as a supposedly Jewish trait.[15] Such voices emotionalized the debate about war aims and political choices and took it far beyond political differences, framing both a negotiated peace and a military defeat not only as an utter loss of German power, but as shamefully and humiliatingly undermining a purportedly fixed German identity.

In the Weimar Republic, those who hated defeat, revolution, and democracy used laughter as a narrative concept to describe German history as a story of hurt bodies and shamed feelings. The defamation of Weimar democracy as an allegedly Jewish republic painted all republicans as Jewish in the sense of non-German, while violence against Jewish Germans became a constant after 1918.[16] In addition, supporters of the republic were charged with mocking the hapless Germans. When the socialist Kurt Eisner, Minister President of Bavaria from November 1918 until his murder in February 1919, demanded that Germany should acknowledge its responsibility for starting the war—a highly sensitive issue—the Munich-based journal *Simplicissimus* accused him of inviting the Entente's 'Schadenfreude'.[17] Given the broader understanding of laughter as denoting identity, the journal also defined the German–Jewish politician and intellectual Eisner as non-German, thereby shifting politics into the realm of identity.

The criticism of Eisner reflects general trends in the Weimar Republic. It has often been demonstrated that political debates in the 1920s

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[15] For the various meanings of humour in the First World War see Kessel, *Gewalt und Gelächter*, 22–30; for direct attacks on Jewish Germans using the trope of laughter see ibid. 84–93.

[16] Cornelia Hecht, *Deutsche Juden und Antisemitismus in der Weimarer Republik* (Bonn, 2003).

[17] *Simplicissimus*, 17 Dec. 1918, 475.

circled not only around how to do democracy, but whether to have democracy at all.[18] Yet the republic's opponents went even further. Because they resented democracy's inclusive potential, they translated the discussion over political systems into a conflict about which form of government was adequate for their exclusionary idea of German-ness. In the process, they not only intertwined political debates with identity, but also practised politics as identity politics. They achieved this by shifting attention from political issues to personalities, paint-ing political opponents and Jewish Germans as non-Germans who by definition would not act in German interests, but would hurt German identity. Two other tropes connected with accusations of mockery show how evocatively these imagined groups were marked as transgressing bodies who allegedly humiliated and hurt German-ness. Even outside right-wing circles, the Versailles Treaty and French occupation were delegitimized as a 'rape', picking up on how the Entente had criticized German war politics in 1914–18 and turning the politico-legal act of the treaty into an illegal, hurtful, and shaming practice that violated German boundaries and bodies.[19] Extending the metaphor, opponents of democracy described politicians who were willing to negotiate internally and externally as *Zuhälter* (pimps), thus depicting them as figures who forced Germany to prostitute itself to its enemies and thereby wilfully injured and heaped shame upon all Germans.[20]

[18] On the pervasive desire for strong leadership see Dirk Schumann, 'Polit-ical Violence, Contested Public Space, and Reasserted Masculinity in Weimar Germany', in Kathleen Canning, Kerstin Barndt, and Kristin McGuire (eds.), *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s* (New York, 2010), 236–53.

[19] On this and what follows see Martina Kessel, 'Demokratie als *Grenz-verletzung*: Geschlecht als symbolisches System in der Weimarer Republik', in Gabriele Metzler and Dirk Schumann (eds.), *Geschlechter(un)ordnung und Politik in der Weimarer Republik* (Bonn, 2016), 81–108, at 85–92. See also Sandra Maß, *Weiße Helden, schwarze Krieger: Zur Geschichte kolonialer Männlichkeit in Deutschland 1918–1964* (Cologne, 2006), 105–28.

[20] Kessel, *Gewalt und Gelächter*, 103–4; for the time after 1933 see ibid. 172. Hitler used the word 'Zuhälter' extensively; see e.g. Adolf Hitler, *Reden, Schriften, Anordnungen, 1925–1933*, ed. by Institut für Zeitgeschichte, 6 vols. (Munich, 1992–2003), i. 171. For his description of the Versailles Treaty as 'militärische Entmannung' (military emasculation) see ibid. 250.

Research on hate speech suggests that violence as a political tool can be more easily justified by its instigators when they insist that they need to avenge a great wrong, instead of only seeking to discredit their opponents' political goals.[21] Misrepresenting republicans as hurting and humiliating the German body politic served this purpose. The evocative imagery of democratic and Jewish Germans as hurtful, shaming figures presented the body they were allegedly hurting and shaming as non-Jewish, suggesting that it was German by definition.[22] These tropes turned proponents of peaceful negotiation both at home and abroad into perpetrators against German identity at the very moment when democracy formally allowed all political parties, Jewish Germans, and women to participate in shaping the present and the future, thereby seemingly levelling former status hierarchies. By defining republican and Jewish Germans as perpetrators, Weimar's opponents painted democracy not only as a bad political system, but as a space that allowed Germanness to be shamed, hurt, and ridiculed—a process they alleged could only be ended by abolishing the republic. By projecting Weimar as non-German, anti-republicans pitted their exclusionary idea of self against democracy.

These were the narratives that National Socialists drew upon when they reorganized in 1925. By structuring their political offers through the trope of laughter, they too presented their own experience as a story of hurt bodies and shamed feelings. But they radicalized it into a sequence of projected events that they implied would inevitably unfold unless they stopped it by force. In his so-called foundational speeches in 1925, Hitler presented a three-step version of history which he promised to overturn. The Nazis' opponents, so he claimed, had first tried to silence them, then ridiculed them, and finally resorted to

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[21] Christine M. Lillie et al., 'Propaganda, Empathy, and Support for Intergroup Violence: The Moral Psychology of International Speech Crimes', March 18, 2015, online at [http://bit.ly/1EjV8rA], accessed 11 June 2021.

[22] On the importance of hurting others in order to feel powerful see Heinrich Popitz, *Phänomene der Macht*, 2nd edn. (Tübingen, 1992). See also Kessel, *Gewalt und Gelächter*, 65–77, on how spatial and bodily transgression in the First World War was perceived as justified when seen as German, and as unjustified when defined as non-German.

violence because they could not stop them otherwise.[23] After that, the three steps of silencing, mockery, and violent assault served as a blueprint for their attack on democracy.

Reading National Socialist politics through the lens of laughter reveals how systematically the Nazis talked about identity. Political demands and promises were couched in the language of laughter, which was intended and understood to distinguish the German from the non-German. These semantics added a dramaturgical arc of tension to a programme that was eclectic except for its clear and continued insistence on an exclusionary identity, its deliberate misreading of political differences as attempts to shame those deemed to be true Germans, and its glorification of the Nazi movement as rising triumphantly against all odds. In September 1928, Hitler ended an appeal to NSDAP members with the threatening words: 'I expect each member of the party to fulfil their supreme duty so that at some point in future the enemies of our people will stop laughing.'[24] Likewise, in August 1930, when Hitler promised an integrative society to everyone who followed him, he claimed the future would belong to the man who 'laughingly defines himself as a German and no longer as a worker or as middle class'.[25] In his dramatic 1932 election campaign he brought up the trope at every one of the nearly 150 locations he visited, having crafted it into the emotive, rhythmic slogan 'verlacht, verhöhnt, verspottet'—'laughed at, mocked, and ridiculed'. In the face of this supposed adversity, he added, the German people would rise victoriously.[26]

Even when Nazi speakers toned down anti-Jewish attacks in the early 1930s so as not to repel possible voters, their use of laughter as a trope still told attentive listeners whom they had singled out as the ultimate enemy. In November 1928 Hitler attacked 'the Jew' as 'standing smilingly' behind democrats and communists, waiting for them to destroy Germany so he could take over.[27] In March 1929 he followed this up with even harsher and more graphic images, describing 'Jews' as 'rolling with laughter at the stupidity' of those who did not realize that they were aiming not for equality, but for dominance over

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[23] Hitler, *Reden, Schriften, Anordnungen*, i. 112.

[24] Ibid. iii/1. 114. [25] Ibid. iii/3. 322.

[26] Ibid. v/1. 83, 134–5, 139, 266. [27] Ibid. iii/1. 275.

'Germans'.[28] The speakers merely needed to point to an imagined victorious laugh to get their message across.

By discursively linking both democracy and communism with Jewishness, National Socialists reinforced their identity politics. Discrediting both the Entente and domestic political alternatives to a victorious peace by framing them as Jewish had already been popular during the First World War.[29] Since the mid 1920s, the identification of all options other than National Socialism as Jewish turned political choices into an either–or decision of identity, with Germanness understood to be non-Jewish. Accordingly, democrats, communists, and anybody else resistant to Nazism were defined not only as political traitors, but as traitors against identity—as people who supposedly turned themselves into Jews through their behaviour. Of course, nobody was being victimized in the way that the Nazis claimed. The narrative of victimhood became attractive in Germany as a way to avoid debating German responsibility for starting and losing the First World War, and was intensified by the National Socialists. And in order to position themselves as victims, they needed antagonists, whom they constructed accordingly.[30] By systematically reversing the roles of victim and perpetrator in the 1920s and early 1930s, they narrowed down political options to a binary choice between supporting the allegedly shameful, non-German system of the Weimar Republic, or opposing it.[31] This reversal served to justify persecution and expansion at all times, adding a force of spite to the demand to fight the Othered.[32] The effectiveness of this fusion between National Socialism and the notion of Germanness as non-Jewish was demonstrated even by opponents of Nazism. When liberals outlined

[28] Ibid. iii/2. 59.

[29] Kessel, *Gewalt und Gelächter*, 86–7.

[30] Martina Kessel, 'Race and Humor in Nazi Germany', in Devin O. Pendas, Mark Roseman, and Richard F. Wetzell (eds.), *Beyond the Racial State: Rethinking Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, 2017), 380–401, at 382.

[31] On the Weimar Republic in general see Rüdiger Graf, 'Either–Or: The Narrative of "Crisis" in Weimar Germany and in Historiography', *Central European History*, 43/4 (2010), 592–615.

[32] Doris L. Bergen, 'Instrumentalization of *Volksdeutschen* in German Propaganda in 1939: Replacing/Erasing Poles, Jews, and Other Victims', *German Studies Review*, 31/3 (2008), 447–70.

political alternatives, they hastened to add that they themselves were not Jewish, confirming how quickly all opposition came to be translated into Jewishness in the sense of not accepted as German.[33]

During the Weimar Republic, and with an increasingly triumphant tone, the National Socialists coupled their reversal of victim and perpetrator roles with the second binary storyline of winners and losers. The undeserving winners of 1918, so the dichotomous narrative went, would, as mocking perpetrators, forcibly turn the National Socialists into victims and (temporary) losers of the contemporary moment. After 1933, the Nazis changed this binary of winners and losers by celebrating their victory.[34] The scene described at the beginning of this article offers a case in point for how the SA orchestrated this shifted hierarchy of imagined identities. Their self-defined victim status, however, remained a key component of German society after 1933, and was maintained by attacking Jews as perpetrators.[35]

In Nazi Germany, the binary of German humour versus Jewish laughter came to fruition as an alleged marker of identity. It not only travelled through the media, but was used by violent organizations and individual Germans alike, who celebrated their new power by turning the trope into a derisive performance.[36] Survivors' accounts tell us how the Gestapo accused the persecuted directly of laughing in order to paint them as guilty. During the November Pogrom in 1938, the Gestapo banned the Central-Verein (formerly the Central-Verein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens), one of the last Jewish organizations still in operation, albeit in much reduced and controlled form. Hans Oppenheimer, who worked for its journal, was present when the secret police shut down the Berlin office. He fled Germany immediately afterwards and wrote down his experiences a few days later. In his account, he emphasized the absence of physical violence,

[33] Eric Kurlander, '"Neither Jews nor Anti-Semites": The Liberal Answer to Hitler's Jewish Question', in id., *Living with Hitler: Liberal Democrats in the Third Reich* (New Haven, 2009), 152–93.

[34] Kessel, *Gewalt und Gelächter*, 138–40.

[35] Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008).

[36] Kessel, *Gewalt und Gelächter*, ch. iv. On intentional misreadings of Jewish self-irony as 'true self-allegations' see Louis Kaplan, *At Wit's End: The Deadly Discourse on the Jewish Joke* (New York, 2020), 153–81.

but quoted the few phrases the Gestapo had uttered, such as 'You'll see what happens next', demonstrating their superior knowledge,[37] or 'You'll stop laughing soon enough'. In brackets, Oppenheimer added, '(Of course, nobody had laughed)', emphasizing that the construction bore no relation to people's actual behaviour.[38]

In his oft-quoted speech from January 1939, Hitler combined the imagined roles of victim and victor in characteristic fashion. He justified German aggression by alleging that Jews were about to start another world war and promised that they would then be eradicated from the earth. He also said something he kept repeating until about 1943—namely that his promise to solve the so-called Jewish problem had been mocked loudest of all by the Jewish people before 1933—and he added: 'I believe that this once resounding laughter has by now died in the throats of all Jews in Germany.'[39] Hans Frank, the Governor-General of the occupied part of Poland during the Holocaust, excelled in this dialogical derision that produced knowledge and power. In August 1943, during the so-called Aktion Reinhardt, he gave a speech at a Nazi rally in Lviv. First, he described the genocide by saying that they had used a lot of 'insect powder' to cleanse the occupied territory and make it habitable for German people. He then observed that none of the thousands upon thousands of Jews formerly living there were still around, before turning to his audience and asking them in conspiratorial tones: 'You didn't do anything bad to them, did you?' The transcript notes that these remarks caused great amusement among his listeners.[40]

This continuity in the semantics of laughter does not mean that the National Socialists had been planning the Holocaust since the 1920s. Rather, they drew on narratives long established in German culture to essentialize imagined identities as German or non-German, to reverse the roles of victim and perpetrator, and to sidestep democratic

[37] Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, emphasizes this difference in knowledge as a key structure of persecution.
[38] Ben Barkow, Raphael Gross, and Michael Lenarz (eds.), *Novemberpogrom 1938: Die Augenzeugenberichte der Wiener Library, London* (Frankfurt am Main, 2008), 113.
[39] Max Domarus (ed.), *Hitler: Reden und Proklamationen 1932–1945*, 4 vols. (Munich, 1965), ii/1. 1058.
[40] Quoted in Dieter Schenk, *Hans Frank: Hitler's Kronjurist und General-gouverneur* (Frankfurt am Main, 2006), 313.

argument. By deriding the persecuted as sneering perpetrators, they positioned themselves as victims in order to justify all kinds of violence, and then radicalized that violence into the mark of a supposed winner. Endless repetition established a set of discursive tropes that could be drawn upon without needing to unpack their meaning in so many words. What made them effective, though, was the willingness of innumerable Germans to turn them into social practices, ensuring that communication with the persecuted took place primarily through symbolic or physical violence.

Laughter as a Practice: Performing Imagined Identities

As Hans Frank demonstrated, laughter as a narrative also functioned as a performative and dialogical tool. Hitler invited listeners to laugh along by breaking off mid-sentence after making a derisive remark, while the audience's appreciative sniggering signalled agreement and spared him from having to explain the regime's decisions any further.[41] Victor Klemperer noted that attentive listeners had realized this long before the National Socialists came to power, so that after 1933 they did not expect the leadership to keep the population informed of their plans and decision-making.[42] Instead, activists adopted mockery as an interactive production of power, displaying knowledge of what was happening in general or more specific terms. Two women who participated in the Germanization of occupied Poland were 'bursting with laughter' (as one of them wrote in a letter home) when a policeman they knew explained to a Jewish woman whose furniture they had taken that they were only 'borrowing' it.[43] When a man deported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz asked a guard when he would see

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[41] Kessel, *Gewalt und Gelächter,* 126–47.

[42] Cf. Christoph Sauer, 'Rede als Erzeugung von Komplizentum: Hitler und die öffentliche Erwähnung der Judenvernichtung', in Josef Kopperschmidt (ed.), *Hitler als Redner* (Tübingen 2003), 413–40, at 420.

[43] Quoted in Elizabeth Harvey, '"Wir kamen in vollkommenes Neugebiet rein.": Der "Einsatz" von Mitgliedern nationalsozialistischer Frauenorganisationen im besetzten Polen', in Marita Krauss (ed.), *Sie waren dabei: Mitläuferinnen, Nutznießerinnen, Täterinnen im Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen, 2008), 83–102, at 93.

his wife and daughter again, from whom he had been separated upon arrival, the guard laughingly told him he should watch the smoke of a particular chimney.[44]

Many mocking performances stood out due to their theatricality.[45] After the establishment of the concentration camps, SS guards enacted their power through sarcastic sketches, presenting themselves as the best personnel for a career in the new corridors of power.[46] Maximilian Reich, a journalist deported from Vienna to Buchenwald and Dachau in 1938, described how the SS applauded each other for coming up with new ways of demonstrating to the prisoners that they had lost their agency.[47] In the occupied territories, and particularly in Eastern Europe, German soldiers and personnel forced Jewish civilians to dance, sing, and soil themselves according to German desires. In the process, the perpetrators also strengthened their group cohesion.[48]

Thus the specific form the violence took was important. Beyond demonstrating career suitability and group cohesion, the theatricality can also be understood in the light of yet another element of German culture that I have conceptualized as the idea of the 'artist-soldier'—a persona fusing intellectual or artistic prowess, political acumen, and the willingness to fight when necessary. When the Old Reich imploded in the 1800s, it was supposed that this figure had failed to emerge, but in 1870–71 Bismarck and army chief Moltke were praised as educated artist-soldiers or artist-politicians for having forged a German nation through the art of war against France. After unification, being seen as an artist-soldier offered the highest symbolic status in German culture. Men did not have to be politicians, soldiers, or artists, but needed to be perceived as fighting for Germany in whatever form, as possessing the

[44] Wiener Library, 059-EA-1345, P.III.h. No. 554 (Theresienstadt), 27, Vally Fink (Prague), from Theresienstadt to London.

[45] Peter Loewenberg, 'The Kristallnacht as a Public Degradation Ritual', *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 32/1 (1987), 309–23.

[46] Christopher Dillon, *Dachau and the SS: A Schooling in Violence* (Oxford, 2015), 133.

[47] Maximilian Reich, 'Mörderschule', in id. and Emilie Reich, *Zweier Zeugen Mund: Verschollene Manuskripte aus 1938. Wien – Dachau – Buchenwald*, ed. by Henriette Mandl (Vienna, 2007), 35–243, at 216.

[48] Thomas Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's Community, 1918–1945* (New Haven, 2010), 102.

credentials for political action (this was a masculinized and masculinizing notion), and as appreciating art that was defined as German.[49]

Until the 1920s, this imaginary notion was politically open and claimed across the political spectrum. But it remained the preserve of socially elitist White men with a Christian background, who jockeyed for position and kept the status for themselves. Here again, the First World War proved to be an important turning point on two counts. First, the Jewish middle classes had embodied this ideal persona long before 1914 in terms of education and art; but when German–Jewish men fought in the First World War, they added the missing 'soldier' element by fighting and laying down their lives. One could say that they entered not only society and politics on a normatively equal footing, but also did so inwardly in terms of the most esteemed ideal of identity, whose status they claimed for themselves.[50] Second, those who refused to accept defeat in 1918 defined the Versailles Treaty as an attack not only on German power, but also on this understanding of identity. During the negotiations at Versailles over reductions to the German commercial fleet in 1919—and remember that Germany had been the second-biggest global economic player behind the USA before 1914—*Simplicissimus* published a cartoon of a fat and derisive Uncle Sam talking down to a sad half-soldier, half-Deutscher Michel: 'So, now you've lost your trade fleet too. Now you can go back to being the land of poets and thinkers.'[51] While German–Jewish men were laying claim to the most prestigious ideal of Germanness, the Entente was depicted as seeking not only to crush German power, but also to destroy the very identity that—for *Simplicissimus* at least—had finally been attained by the entire nation through the war.

In the Weimar Republic, National Socialists also adopted and adapted this persona.[52] They restricted its political applicability

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[49] Kessel, *Langeweile*, 321–30; ead., *Gewalt und Gelächter*, 16–17, 39–55, 120–1.

[50] To my mind, the infamous *Judenzählung* ('Jew count') in 1916 was an attempt to withhold this status from them by discrediting them as shirkers; see Kessel, *Gewalt und Gelächter*, 52–5.

[51] *Simplicissimus*, 25 Feb. 1919, 605.

[52] Birgit Schwarz, *Geniewahn: Hitler und die Kunst* (Vienna, 2009), and Wolfram Pyta, *Hitler: Der Künstler als Politiker und Feldherr. Eine Herrschaftsanalyse* (Munich, 2015), focus on Hitler and do not discuss these changes.

solely to themselves by throwing it open socially.[53] They offered any-body a symbolic share in the ideal provided they went along with Nazi politics—be they agrarian countryside dwellers, old elites, academics, white- or blue-collar workers, or even women if they re-mained in an appropriate position or participated through relations with men. Hitler's supporters and ghostwriters depicted him as the greatest artist-soldier ever by presenting him as one born to the role. In the process they removed the need for formal education while still honouring it, thus bypassing the old, conservative elites. Na-tional Socialists also radicalized what they called the art of politics, treating not only war, but also all anti-democratic, anti-Left, and anti-Jewish violence as forms of 'art' that helped mould the Nazi identity and the society it was embedded in. They drew on the imaginary of the great artist who could only be great if he followed his intuition regardless of rules—least of all democratic ones. By enacting this imaginary through politics and violence, they translated humiliating and murderous politics into what they saw as creative and product-ive behaviour, thus manufacturing their own self through violence against those defined as non-German.

Performances of the non-Jewish self as an 'artist of violence' took many forms, but often involved staging the disempowerment of the Jewish self. The relational, interpersonal, and public character of these productions was remarkable, revealing a desire to hurt the bodies and souls of those hunted down, and creating non-Jewish power by sharing knowledge about how it was achieved. In pillory processions, Jewish and Gentile Germans were forced to sing self-derogatory verses accusing themselves of engaging in illicit sexual relations.[54] Elsewhere, non-Jewish Germans symbolically appropriated the bodies of the persecuted, staging themselves as 'winners' by acting out the fate of the 'loser'. Carnival parades were a case in point. These region-ally highly important and ritualized forms of public entertainment underwent intensive expansion after 1933 for reasons connected to

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[53] On this and what follows see Kessel, *Gewalt und Gelächter*, 128–32. These ideas can also be traced in Georg Schott, *Das Volksbuch vom Hitler* (Munich, 1924), who saw himself as Hitler's first biographer.
[54] Michael Wildt, *Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung: Gewalt gegen Juden in der deutschen Provinz 1919 bis 1939* (Hamburg, 2007), 232–4, 248, 365–7.

both economics and tourism.[55] At the same time, the parades became a public stage on which to perform non-Jewish self-empowerment. They reflected each major phase of persecution in visible and audible forms of public shaming. Carnival floats in Cologne, Düsseldorf, Mainz, Nuremberg, and Singen featured live tableaux that re-enacted how German Jews were forced to emigrate, had their property taken away, and were disenfranchised.[56]

A central topic was forced emigration, with local carnival associations, schools, and elites impersonating those whom they forced to leave. In 1934, in the southern German town of Singen, the local association of bar owners and the local shooting club took part in the carnival parade with a float carrying a sign that read 'From Berlin to Palestine' on its side, with smiling women and men looking out of its windows.[57] In the 1938 parade, a group of adults on foot carried suitcases, and a caption on a contemporary photograph states that 'the last' would now leave. To mark themselves as Jewish, the actors wore papier-mâché false noses, which were available to buy in all sizes.[58] Exclusion was inscribed not only into entertainment, but also into a consumer culture that was geared towards specific desires.

The expropriation of German–Jewish property was also re-enacted publicly. In Schwabach, a town south of Nuremberg, David Bleicher and Moritz Rosenstein were forced to give up their business in 1935. A few months later their loss was staged by a float in the parade of 1936 entitled 'Firmenwechsel', meaning 'change of firm', but also 'change of

[55] E.g. through subsidized bus tours and cheap tickets; see Laura Engelskircher, *Karneval im Dritten Reich am Beispiel der Städte Speyer und Mainz* (Speyer, 2010), esp. 44–6, 65–6, 74. Marcus Leifeld, *Der Kölner Karneval in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus: Vom regionalen Volksfest zum Propagandainstrument der NS-Volksgemeinschaft* (Cologne, 2015).

[56] Live tableaux were an important feature in German culture, also to stage democracy in the Weimar Republic. Manuela Achilles, 'With a Passion for Reason: Celebrating the Constitution in Weimar Germany', *Central European History*, 43/4 (2010), 666–89.

[57] Stadtarchiv Singen, 432, Archiv der Poppele-Zunft 1863 e.V., photograph 'Von Berlin nach Palästina', Fastnachtsumzug 1934. For an analysis of carnival see also Kessel, 'Race and Humor', 391–3.

[58] Stadtarchiv 432, Archiv der Poppele-Zunft 1863 e.V., photograph 'Die Libanontiroler hauen ab', Fastnachtsumzug 1938.

ownership'.[59] The name 'David Bleichstein' was emblazoned on the top and sides of the float, corrupting the two names into one and thus implying that all Jews were interchangeable. With one of the male actors wearing a long black coat, a black hat, a fake long beard, and fake sidelocks, and another in modest clothing like that of a street vendor, the actors transformed German businessmen into Eastern European orthodox Jews and peddlers. At the same time, the perpetrators of such symbolic violence literally hid inside the stereotypical clothing that misrepresented the persecuted, thereby marking only the victims as actors.

The participants in these parades demonstrated what it meant to be German: they brought Jews back in distorted form into a public sphere that the excluded could no longer define on their own terms. Furthermore, the demeaning costumes donned by the actors turned baseless allegations into a tangible spectacle and thereby 'proved' them. Carnival participants visualized the standard charge that German Jews were merely hiding their real Jewishness under a superficial veneer. When Jewish Germans self-defined as German, they were accused of hiding illegitimately behind a mask and committing a crime of identity. When carnival actors stepped in and out of their disguises, they translated anti-Jewish allegations from media sign systems into lived experience and asserted themselves bodily as masters over a difference they were unable to prove.

A brochure for the Munich parade in 1935 (which featured a tank) spelled out explicitly how such self-empowerment could be read as part of the persona of the artist-soldier. The anonymous author started by asking the rhetorical question of whether it was counter-intuitive to see soldiers and jokers side by side, only to affirm emphatically that German society would not be fully integrated until nobody in this 'cheerful society' could tell soldiers and jokers apart, and until those who fought and those who provided entertainment became one.[60] Shaming the persecuted worked as an identity practice, proving one's Germanness by dominating the Othered at will and demonstrating who enjoyed the power of definition.

[59] Stadtarchiv Schwabach, Foto 809 B, photographer Käte Schönberger.
[60] Quoted in Carl Dietmar and Marcus Leifeld, *Alaaf und Heil Hitler: Karneval im Dritten Reich* (Munich, 2010), 156.

The carnival floats also reinforced that bodies not only represent social order, but are the site of the ultimate experience of symbolic structures.[61] In a yearly ritual entertainment that was relished by participants and spectators, activists clad their own bodies in mocking attire to define Jewish Germans as non-German. Furthermore, the parades provided a public space that made ritualized degradation effective. Laughter was and is a powerful means to confirm ascriptions and make them stick. But whether spectators laughed along or not, they lent weight to symbolic violence through their very presence and their gaze.[62] At the very least, they created a space from which alternative voices were excluded.[63] Furthermore, the participants created 'eine Zeit ohne Beispiel', as Goebbels called National Socialism—'a time with no precedent or comparison'.[64] By acting as what they perceived to be Jewish losers, they positioned themselves as German winners. By doing so theatrically, they inscribed themselves into the symbiosis of the artist-soldier.

Humiliating acts only broadened in scope and brutality after 1938; they did not change in character. Self-referential justifications became even more pronounced during the Shoah, when Goebbels ordered that those being killed were to be portrayed ever more ruthlessly as guilty in order to make sense of the killing.[65] As more and more non-Jewish Germans wielded immediate power over human beings they defined as non-German, both at the front and in the camps, so there were more and more instances in which they forced the persecuted to embody and thereby 'prove' that they were perpetrators.

During the pogrom of 1938, for example, it was mostly educated middle-class men who were deported to Dachau or Buchenwald. When prisoners managed to discuss literature or philosophy among

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[61] Eric Santner, 'Mein ganz privates Deutschland: Daniel Paul Schrebers geheime Geschichte der Moderne', in Jörg Huber and Alois Martin Müller (eds.), *Die Wiederkehr des Anderen* (Basel, 1996), 169–96, at 188.

[62] Hannes Kuch and Steffen K. Herrmann, 'Symbolische Verletzbarkeit und sprachliche Gewalt', in eid. and Sybille Krämer (eds.), *Verletzende Worte: Die Grammatik sprachlicher Missachtung* (Bielefeld, 2007), 179–210, 203.

[63] Leifeld, *Kölner Karneval*, 23.

[64] Joseph Goebbels, *Die Zeit ohne Beispiel: Reden und Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1939/40/41*, 4th edn. (Munich, 1942).

[65] Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination*, 476–9.

themselves, they were able to act like the male *Bildungsbürger* (educated citizens) they were; yet when guards found out, they forced them to fight and physically injure each other, symbolically transforming them from Germans into Jewish perpetrators even against their own kind.[66] The taunts heard by Central-Verein members in Berlin in 1938 were radicalized by camp guards into utterances like 'Why are you laughing so dirtily, you swine?' In response, prisoners knew they had to keep silent—though their silence did not guarantee their survival either.[67]

The oft-discussed binary of purity versus dirt implied by the guard's use of the word 'swine' was another means to turn an imagined boundary into a visible and felt difference. According to Mary Douglas, dirt does not signify disorder in a society that uses it to structure identities and sociality. Rather, in such a context the idea of dirt symbolizes the very ability to control what is represented as dangerous by means of the metaphor. But to achieve the feeling of control, both ends of the binary need to be deployed again and again.[68] The more dangerous the Other is made to appear, the more gratifying the process of creating what is called order becomes for those who dismiss others as dirt. In other words, the greater the perceived danger, the greater the satisfaction in being able to submerge an identity marked as dangerous under real or imagined filth.[69]

Again, Germans in power combined actively soiling the people and places they overpowered with forcing those they persecuted to dirty themselves. During the occupation of Eastern Europe they systematically destroyed Jewish monuments and sites of memory, including cemeteries, and associated those they persecuted with the taboo of dirt. They turned the grave of a famous zaddik in Ciechanów in Poland into a public latrine,[70] imbuing the last resting place of a leading Jewish figure with a humiliating meaning. In the camps they went a step further: they forced the inmates to soil themselves and others.

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[66] Reich, 'Mörderschule', 140.

[67] Ibid. 148.

[68] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1984), 161–2.

[69] Sng, 'Figure³', 63, 66–8.

[70] Thomas Rahe, *'Höre Israel': Jüdische Religiosität in nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern* (Göttingen, 1999), 41.

According to Pelagia Lewinska, a Polish resistance fighter, the latrines in Auschwitz were constructed in a way that made it almost impossible not to do so.[71] Summing up her twenty months in Auschwitz as 'mud', Lewinska realized that the dirt had a purpose and a meaning for the perpetrators. In terms typical of survivors' accounts, she noted that the SS 'with their well-cultivated sense of humour' pushed women deeper into the dirt whom they saw moving slowly or with difficulty. According to her, the SS turned each human being into a 'ridiculous monster of mud', so that the inmates themselves could barely look at each other without revulsion.[72] The guards' behaviour should not be defined as dehumanization. It rather reflected their desire to exercise power over human beings whom they could force time and again to literally disappear under dirt and excrement—to break their prisoners' sense of self and laugh at them from a position of supremacy.[73] It has often been discussed how prisoners tried as best they could to keep themselves clean and helped each other to do so as a key practice of retaining agency and their sense of self. Lewinska and a friend also vowed that they would not let each other die in the mud.[74]

Other guards used spatial boundaries to act out their narratives of identity. Charlotte Delbo, a French writer and member of the French resistance after 1941, was deported in 1942 to Ravensbrück and Auschwitz-Birkenau. In her post-war recollections she described how SS men in Auschwitz-Birkenau drew lines that prisoners were forbidden to cross.[75] Then they would throw a cigarette over the line,

[71] Pelagia Lewinska, 'Twenty Months at Auschwitz: New York 1968', in Carol Rittner and John K. Roth (eds.), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* (New York, 1993), 85–98, at 87.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Johannes Lang, 'Questioning Dehumanization: Intersubjective Dimensions of Violence in the Nazi Concentration and Death Camps', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 24/2 (2010), 225–46.

[74] Lewinska, 'Twenty Months', 87.

[75] For a discussion of space both as a means of torture and as demonstrating the agency of the persecuted see Christiane Heß, *Ein/gezeichnet: Zeichnungen und Zeitzeugenschaft aus den Lagern Ravensbrück und Neuengamme* (forthcoming). See also Dominique Schröder, *'Niemand ist fähig, das alles in Worten auszudrücken': Tagebuchschreiben in nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern 1939–1945* (Göttingen, 2020).

demand that a prisoner fetch it back, and shoot them the second they crossed the line. Finally, Delbo added, the SS would laugh as they checked whether their 'game' was dead.[76] In other camps, guards cruelly staged Jewish religion as the pathway to death. Above the gas chamber complex in Treblinka they hung up a star of David, and in front of one entrance they installed a parochet with an inscription stating that this was 'the Lord's gate' through which all the righteous should pass.[77] In this way they turned the sacred symbols of the Jewish religion into symbols of death in order to strike a final emotional blow before killing their victims.

In violent sketches, the SS forced prisoners to 'transgress' by crossing into forbidden territory and then cast them as losers of history and identity. By forcing the persecuted to embody the role of perpetrator, Germans were able to assume that role themselves without self-defining as such.[78] By directing a theatre of murder, they staged themselves as violent artist-soldiers, creating a new form of sociality by overpowering and destroying human beings. Time and again their shaming reproduced the binary reversal of meaning in which life for non-Jewish Germans meant death for Jews. SS Sturmbannführer Bruno Müller led the Sonderkommando 11b, one of the mobile death squads operating in occupied Eastern Europe. Before shooting a woman and her 3-year-old child in August 1941, Müller pronounced, 'You have to die so that we can live'.[79] The victims of persecution underwent deep humiliation as a separate and additional layer of torture. Many of them recognized how non-Jewish Germans inscribed their power to hurt into the traditional values of German culture and used them as categories of difference, since their meaning depended on whether somebody was accepted as German or not. For camp inmates, the promise of freedom by complying with cultural norms only signalled death. Indeed, one prisoner in Sachsenhausen

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[76] Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (New Haven, 1995), 68–9.

[77] Rahe, *'Höre Israel'*, 44–5.

[78] Kessel, 'Race and Humor', 397.

[79] Quoted in Klaus-Michael Mallmann, Volker Rieß, and Wolfram Pyta (eds.), *Deutscher Osten 1939–1945: Der Weltanschauungskrieg in Photos und Texten* (Darmstadt, 2003), 153. On the binary reversal of meanings see Boaz Neumann, *Die Weltanschauung des Nazismus: Raum–Körper–Sprache* (Göttingen, 2010).

completed the contemptuous phrase *Arbeit macht frei* ('Work sets you free') with the words 'Yes, in crematorium no. 3'.[80]

Laughter in Nazi Germany: Identity Construction through the Power to Hurt

Practices of humiliation are not unique to Nazi Germany, but the meaning they created and conveyed during Nazism was specifically German. In mocking the persecuted, some non-Jewish Germans positioned themselves as winners of history and identity. Others claimed to be artist-soldiers, bringing this long-established persona to fruition by ignoring any boundaries for violence, thus creating a new society by degrading and destroying human beings. Mockery was not an afterthought, but a core structure of exclusion and killing—a means for perpetrators to invoke their reading of history and identity in order to avoid having to justify their actions.

The storyline they invoked—an imagined narrative of hurt and humiliation that they now sought to invert—relied on their defining Germanness, and thus the modern self, as a category of difference. Participants organized the genocidal culture as an endless web of intersubjective relations, no matter how brief their involvement or whether they did any more than just watch what happened or laugh along. Their relationships of humiliation were designed to hurt their victims bodily, cognitively, and emotionally before killing them. Those affected, in turn, had to find the strength to bear this additional pain, including the sounds of a laughter I cannot even attempt to make heard in its cruel power.

The question why Jewish Germans were identified as the greatest threat to Germanness can only be answered if we read modern German history as a history of imagined identities and realize that the notion of the modern self as German was constructed as a category of potentially exclusionary difference. The definition of Germanness as non-Jewish had been present since the 1800s, but did not previously

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[80] Quoted in Nicole Warmbold, *Lagersprache: Zur Sprache der Opfer in den Konzentrationslagern Sachsenhausen, Dachau, Buchenwald* (Bremen, 2008), 270.

dominate politics. Yet it was never abandoned either. Opponents of the processes of democratization that took place from the late nineteenth century, especially in the Weimar Republic, pitted their hierarchical notion of identity against equal rights and democracy. They undermined the understanding of politics as the democratic and peaceful negotiation of conflicting interests geared toward compromise, as the Weimar Republic allowed and called for. They achieved this by doing politics as identity politics and by foregrounding the essentialist definition of Germanness as non-Jewish as the guiding principle for producing one's identity, all in the context of an exclusionary society which they defined as the height of modernity.

Accordingly, these violent and degrading practices were deeply modern, and the form they were given mattered. Conceptualizing the German self as a category of difference was a modern practice. Therefore, modern society in general is to my mind constitutively based on inclusion and exclusion, or at least on inclusion and hierarchy. Historical actors could decide either to reduce hierarchies, or to radicalize hierarchy into exclusion. Everything was possible. Whoever disliked equality for Jewish Germans could draw on the notion of Germanness as non-Jewish to undercut a democratization based on human rights and respect. Framing the reversal of victim and perpetrator roles in terms of humiliated and hurt bodies gave an additional and decisive impulse to act against those projected as non-German perpetrators. The radicalization after 1933 became possible because there were always enough people who desired to belong by wielding power over those whom they defined as not belonging. In the process, they positioned their notion of identity as a key structure of the modern world.

To be sure, for the many actors who tried to make Weimar democracy work, Nazism was reactionary, destroying respect and human rights along with democracy. But National Socialists themselves claimed to be modern as well, drawing on the trope of laughter as well as the imagined identity of an ideal persona with immense symbolic status in German society. They understood themselves as modern not by creating a new world-view, but by offering an opportunity for people to share in an imaginary identity previously treated as exclusive. They were successful not least because many of those who accepted Weimar democracy in formal terms still shared

the understanding that Germanness was non-Jewish, even if they did not take it to its deadly conclusion. This also means that the idea of identity politics should not only be applied to marginalized groups seeking acceptance, but to groups in power who define democracy as a threat to their entrenched position and the privileges that come with it.[81] After 1918, too many people resented the idea that democracy could dispense with identity beyond citizenship, while insisting on being totally distinct from Jews.

Those Germans who became Nazis played that to their advantage. They centred the demand that people prove their own worth as Germans by demonstrating how they were not Jewish. They attracted people from different classes and milieux by creating a malleable and conflicting programme of many interests, all of which were based on this core principle. National Socialism offered a new status—a notion of Germanness with the highest symbolic value—as a trophy for anyone who helped create a society fit for such an identity. But they never defined social or political structures beyond saying that these would be for Germans only, because identity politics was their lifeline—a lifeline defined by death. Those who bought into this ideology defined the Shoah as their greatest *Leistung*, or 'success', and for this reason invested their leaders with charisma regardless of military defeats. To my mind, this explains why even in the last days of the war, non-Jewish civilians continued to drive the few victims who managed to escape the death marches back into the hands of the SS.[82] They did this not so much because these survivors were witnesses to the Shoah, but simply because they were survivors. For those who saw the Shoah as the ultimate *Leistung*, the greatest achievement and promise fulfilled by and for an identity defined as German, one surviving Jew was one too many.

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[81] On the USA in recent decades see Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (New York, 2020).
[82] Linda C. DeMeritt, 'Representations of History: The *Mühlviertler Hasenjagd* as Word and Image', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 32/4 (1999), 134–45.

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