

PLEASURE AND POWER IN NAZI GERMANY



**Edited by PAMELA E. SWETT, COREY ROSS
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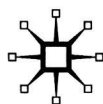
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Pleasure and Power in Nazi Germany

For Paul

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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	xi
1 Pleasure and Power in Nazi Germany: An Introduction <i>Pamela E. Swett, Corey Ross and Fabrice d'Almeida</i>	1
Part I Consumption and the Privileges of Pleasure	
2 Driving, Shopping and Smoking: The Society for Consumer Research and the Politics of Pleasure in Nazi Germany <i>S. Jonathan Wiesen</i>	19
3 Selling Sexual Pleasure in 1930s Germany <i>Pamela E. Swett</i>	39
4 Luxury and Distinction under National Socialism <i>Fabrice d'Almeida</i>	67
Part II Entertainments and the Aesthetics of Pleasure	
5 The Structure of Aesthetic Pleasure in the Nazi Reception of Goethe's <i>Faust</i> <i>David Pan</i>	87
6 'German Humour' in Books: The Attractiveness and Political Significance of Laughter during the Nazi Era <i>Patrick Merziger</i>	107
7 Pleasure, Practicality and Propaganda: Popular Magazines in Nazi Germany, 1933–1939 <i>Karl Christian Führer</i>	132
8 Radio, Film and Morale: Wartime Entertainment between Mobilization and Distraction <i>Corey Ross</i>	154

Part III The Pleasures of Community and Consensus

9	Seeing the World: Photography, Photojournalism and Visual Pleasure in the Third Reich <i>Elizabeth Harvey</i>	177
10	The Pleasures of being a 'Political Soldier': Nazi Functionaries and Their Service to the 'Movement' <i>Daniel Mühlenfeld</i>	205
11	The Pleasure of Terror: Belonging through Genocide <i>Thomas Kühne</i>	234
12	The Pleasures of Opposition: Leisure, Solidarity and Resistance of a Life-Reform Group <i>Mark Roseman</i>	256
	<i>Bibliography</i>	278
	<i>Index</i>	293

Illustrations

3.1 & 3.2	Magnus Hirschfeld and his Berlin Institute	45–46
3.3	Titus Pearls classified, 'On the see-saw of marriage'	50
3.4	Titus Pearls classified, 'Blocked path to fulfilment'	51
3.5	Titus Pearls classified, 'Two men of the same age?'	55
3.6 & 3.7	Lovers in different eras: two covers from <i>Neues Leben</i>	56–57
3.8	Hormones and the ageing process among males	59
3.9	'Why discouraged?'	60
8.1	Camera crews recording the victorious capture of Dunkirk, June 1940	160
8.2	Zarah Leander singing for wounded Wehrmacht soldiers	162
8.3	Soldiers stationed in Austria enjoying a '3-mal Wunschkonzert' show, 12 February 1941	164
9.1	Competition for readers of <i>NS-Frauenwarte</i> , June 1941: identifying landmarks from ten countries under German occupation	183–184
9.2	'Germany's sixth biggest city: Litzmannstadt'	187–188
9.3	'The transformation of Nera'	190
9.4	NS-Frauenschaft members and soldiers walking through Kiev	193
9.5	'Pictures from Romania'	195–196
9.6	Romanian women ambulance drivers	198
11.1 & 11.2	Close together: sexist and racist wall cartoons in the German casino of Novy Sącz	243

1

Pleasure and Power in Nazi Germany: An Introduction

Pamela E. Swett, Corey Ross and Fabrice d'Almeida

Although scholars generally (and with good reason) associate the Third Reich above all with pain, fear and violence, we cannot hope to understand its underlying social and cultural dynamics without seriously considering the role of pleasure. After all, one of the most important promises the Nazi movement made, both before but especially after the seizure of power, was '*Freude*', a term combining a sense of pleasure, happiness and joy. One struggles to find other dictatorial regimes in the twentieth century that made so much of this theme. For the National Socialists, *Kraft durch Freude*, or 'strength through joy', was more than just the name of a leisure organization: it denoted a broader idea, a programme of action, a promise of national fulfilment. In the competitive racial worldview of the Nazis, pleasure and power were inseparable, even mutually reinforcing. Strength came through joy and joy through strength. A contented people was a more productive and thus stronger people; and only a strong people could expect to achieve lasting contentment in the eternal struggle between the races. Pleasure in the Third Reich was both a means and an end.

If the years since the First World War were widely viewed in Germany as a time of suffering, an ordeal born of defeat and externally imposed weakness, the national 'reawakening' promised by the Nazis connoted not only the restoration of German power but also the dawn of happier times. Indeed, this is very much how the pre-war years of the Third Reich were later remembered, as 'good times' sandwiched between the ordeals of depression and war.¹ But what did these 'good times' actually consist of? What role did small, everyday pleasures and amusements play in the construction of this memory? Did they represent a sanctuary of 'normal' private life amid the ever-growing demands of the state, or did they rather serve to bolster Nazi mobilization efforts? Were they

a constituent part of the machinery of the National Socialist regime, or were they rather secondary, unremarkable epiphenomena little different in principle from the entertainments and diversions readily observable elsewhere?

These are difficult questions that historians have only recently begun to address. Over the past couple of decades, the role of entertainment and leisure has undoubtedly occupied an increasingly prominent place in social and cultural historical research in general. Although this trend has been somewhat less visible in the particular case of Nazi Germany than for, say, Victorian Britain or France in the Belle Époque, it has gradually made its mark on the vast literature on the history of National Socialism. Ever since the appearance of Hans Dieter Schäfer's *Das gesplante Bewußtsein* in 1981, and certainly since the appearance of Hans-Ulrich Thamer's *Verführung und Gewalt* in 1986, numerous studies have focused on the evolution of leisure, entertainments and patterns of consumption under the Nazis, all of which have been viewed as an integral part of the attempt to neutralize the political energy of the population and to satisfy the elemental human desire for fun and sociability.² Scores of works have tackled various aspects of the media as purveyors of propaganda and 'distraction', most intensely in the case of film, and more recently in the area of radio.³ At the same time scholars have also turned increasing attention to the realms of sport, leisure organizations (especially *Kraft durch Freude*), travel and tourism, even smoking, as areas in which social values and a degree of consensus and stability could be constructed within the repressive outer parameters of life under the Nazi regime.⁴

Among the most notable early contributions to this ever-growing literature was Peter Reichel's *Der schöne Schein des Dritten Reiches*, which introduced the concept of 'fascination' as a means of showing how millions of ordinary Germans participated – both emotionally and physically – in the broader societal project of National Socialism. More recently, Götz Aly has argued that the capacity of the regime to integrate and mobilize the populace was based principally on the many material advantages it afforded them via its welfare system and requisitioned goods from the occupied territories, effectively turning the mass of ordinary Germans into 'Hitler's beneficiaries'.⁵ As stimulating and controversial as Aly's book has been, however, it largely leaves aside the question of emotional needs and involvement with the regime that Reichel's earlier work had begun to investigate. Admittedly, this is difficult analytical terrain for historians. But as Frank Bajohr's fascinating study of spa towns *Unser Hotel ist judenfrei* has shown, the problem of

sensibility and emotion is crucial for understanding the relationship between thought and action, or more precisely what causes people to act on certain thoughts and not on others.⁶ Over recent years, these complex interconnections have become a central theme in the wave of research on sexuality in the Third Reich, which has greatly improved our understanding of the ways in which cultural and political constraints shape social customs, and vice versa.⁷

By and large the picture that has emerged over the past two decades reflects the expanding interest in cultural history and the impact of 'cultural studies' approaches that look beyond the mechanisms of political steering and elite control to emphasize instead the ways in which cultural values, activities and objects are used and given meaning by ordinary people for their own ends.⁸ From this point of view, cultural goods such as package getaways, sporting spectacles and radio programmes are not primarily tools of manipulation but rather offerings that can be 'plundered' by users to suit, at least to a considerable degree, their own interests and needs. This is by no means to say that such activities are rendered politically useless in the process. Rather, it highlights the necessity of even as repressive a regime as that of the Nazis to cater to popular cultural expectations. The fact that these expectations and desires generally revolve around some sense of *pleasure* is the basic rationale behind the chapters that follow.

There can be little doubt that pleasure and enjoyment promised far greater returns as a means of social stabilization and political acquiescence than outright repression or indoctrination ever could. Although Nazi cultural authorities themselves seemed to recognize this, the question of whether pleasure should exist 'for its own sake' or merely as a means to an end was never definitively resolved. There was an inherent tension between the overarching goal of national mobilization and the tactics of gratification. While wedding a sense of satisfaction to demands for self-sacrifice was a strategy deliberately employed by the regime, this was a difficult amalgamation to achieve. And indeed, as Peter Fritzsche has recently emphasized, a certain sense of pleasure could be found – even 'sold' and marketed, as it were – in giving to the Winter Relief campaigns or in making other personal sacrifices at the behest of the state and party.⁹ We also should not overlook the fact that victims of the regime too sought pleasure to the best of their abilities after 1933. Marion Kaplan's lauded study of Jews in Nazi Germany quite plainly shows that, despite the struggles of the 1930s, German Jews continued to find pleasure in their daily lives – falling in love, marrying and starting families.¹⁰ Some survivors of the camp system remembered

stolen moments of enjoyment as essential to maintaining the will to survive.¹¹ Marianne Ellenbogen, the subject of Mark Roseman's gripping tale of survival underground in Germany, enjoyed picnics and outings in the depths of the war, exhibiting a gaiety that her friends remembered as both astounding and critical to her ability to 'pass' as a non-Jew.¹² Ultimately these countervailing tensions between control and release, between gratification and abstinence, and between resistance and escapism, are common to all societies at all times. However, the contradictions that were involved, as shown by these and other examples in the chapters that follow, were greatly magnified and thrown into especially sharp relief by the total claims of National Socialism and its violent, expansionist aims.

The purpose of this volume is to explore the relationship between pleasure and power in the Third Reich in a more focused manner than has hitherto been undertaken. There are, to be sure, many studies that have tackled this topic in some form or another, and the chapters that follow explicitly build on this literature. Yet none have taken pleasure per se as the focal point. One possible reason for this is the ambiguity surrounding the term 'pleasure' itself. Although one can to some degree contrast it with pain and discomfort, and associate it with leisure, fun and satisfaction, people can also derive a sense of pleasure from work and effort, from discipline and duty, and even from having coped with the experience of pain and discomfort. Moreover, the connotations of terms such as *Freude* or *Vergnügen* have changed significantly over time. Whereas in the early part of the twentieth century *Vergnügen* carried certain negative undertones of self-indulgence and idleness, its meaning has become more neutral over the following decades. Clearly, notions of pleasure are not fixed and immutable but are socially constructed. And as such, they reflect not only changes in social values over time but also differences between certain social groups. For instance, the forms of pleasure and sociability prevalent at the corner pub and the bourgeois gentlemen's club were obviously quite distinct. But it is precisely because of this fluidity and contingency that notions of pleasure can be of interest to historians as a lens through which to investigate patterns of social and cultural change.¹³ From this point of view it makes little sense to impose analytical limits on the term from the outset. Rather, the aim here is to explore a selection of the diverse meanings of pleasure and pleasure-seeking under the Nazis and above all the ways in which they interacted with other priorities and necessities in social and political life.

Apart from these conceptual uncertainties, another reason why the theme of pleasure has not featured centrally in the historiography of

the Third Reich is of course the brutality of the regime. Indeed, the very association of Nazism with notions of 'pleasure' or 'enjoyment' can be disconcerting. Given the enormity of the regime's crimes, it seems in some ways trivial to ask about how Germans – let alone those who were incarcerated or fell under German occupation – enjoyed themselves during the Nazi period. Yet the question of enjoying oneself can be posed very differently, and depending on how one approaches the topic such matters were far from inconsequential. Rather than enquiring into the history of amusements, luxuries and leisure for their own sake, the more pressing concern is to try to understand their social and political functions in what became a genocidal society.¹⁴

Exploring the history of pleasure under the Nazis thus requires us to approach it not only as a matter of sentiment and feeling, but also in relation to a variety of other factors, including the level of material comfort enjoyed by the populace, the availability of goods and services and the creation of institutions for the purpose of providing them. In other words, we must approach pleasure not merely in terms of social practices and cultural values, but also as a question of politics. Naturally, this is not to say that pleasure in the Third Reich was reducible to political decisions and control. But nor was it immune from them. To offer an example, in Nazi Germany (as elsewhere) the consumption of alcohol and tobacco, and the meanings attached to them, depended not only on social customs, cultural expectations and the level of popular demand, but also on the willingness of the state to ensure their provision in certain quantities at certain prices. The uses and cultural meanings of goods can change dramatically depending on whether they are plentiful or scarce, officially favoured or disfavoured. The importance of such political controls becomes even more visible in the case of the armed forces. Clearly, the consumption of alcohol by soldiers depended directly on strategic decisions taken by army command. Much the same can be said about prostitution, which was often 'rationed' to troops or even camp guards in very calculated amounts. In Auschwitz, for instance, the general command allowed its personnel to frequent the nearby bordello in downtown Oświęcim precisely twice a week, Monday and Wednesday from 6.00 pm to 11.00 pm. And such deliberate decisions about access to pleasures directly affected non-Aryans as well: the Auschwitz commandant also provided the forced labourers with a bordello within the camp. In these and many other ways, the contours and forms of pleasure in the Third Reich were powerfully shaped by political decisions.

While it is therefore crucial to consider the role of such structural factors in shaping the history of pleasure, the history of emotions and

perceptions, inspired by the work of Alain Corbin and others, can also help us to refine our questions further by introducing a number of additional factors such as physical sensations, people's horizons of expectation and collective cultural sensibilities.¹⁵ It would obviously be illusory to think that the complex framework of the senses could function in Nazi Germany as if in a laboratory experiment, excluding the multiplicity of variables at work in real life to test the single factor of political control in isolation. The pleasure industry of urban nightlife, for instance, by no means conformed completely to the ideals of cultural ideologues. In the cabarets in the Reich capital itself, striptease went on despite the many criticisms of nude, lascivious dancing by prudish elements both within and outside the party. Far from inevitably leading to the closure of such establishments, such complaints more often simply led to recommendations to make the nature of the performances clearer at cabaret entrances so as to avoid the embarrassment of straitlaced spectators who might unsuspectingly wander into a show. Claire Waldoff, the famous singer of the 1920s, continued to appear on stage long after Alfred Rosenberg's Combat League for the Protection of German Culture had attacked her performances – largely because so many First World War veterans, including many Nazi officials, enjoyed her act.

As the insights of cultural studies showed us long ago, popular pleasures and amusements – including even the most heavily commercialized and centrally mediated cultural artefacts – can function as a technology of domination as well as a site of creativity and emancipation. This is applicable not only to democratic societies but also to totalitarian ones. Indeed, as Philippe Braud has emphasized in his work on emotion and politics, it makes little sense to deploy conceptual models that approach this subject too rigidly or that uphold distinctions without careful examination.¹⁶ Contrary to the common liberal tendency to criticize the appeal to emotion and feeling as inappropriate for an ideally rational public sphere, he argues that it is crucial to pay attention to such issues if we want to understand public discourse in democratic systems. If we extend Braud's observations to the case of Nazi Germany, then it is clear that neither a liberal 'Habermasian' approach to public communication nor an older model of the totalitarian state that stresses only terror and indoctrination are adequate for understanding politics and culture in the Third Reich. Even before 1933, the Nazi movement proved highly adept at stirring emotions for political purposes. Once in power, this emphasis on feeling became thoroughly institutionalized. The Nazis understood better than most political movements of the