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‘National Socialism’s aspiration’, writes Thomas Rohkrämer in this new and engaging book on popular opinion in the Third Reich, ‘was not simply to fill a vacuum, but rather to awaken enthusiasm for a take-off into a new, and supposedly better future’ (p. 37). In this it was largely successful, at least until 1942–3 and, to some extent, beyond. Nazism, he argues, was not just a ‘protest movement’ against Weimar, and its rise to power and continuing appeal over twelve years cannot be explained solely by reference to the Republic’s failures. Rather it was a political phenomenon which exerted a ‘fatal attraction’ on millions of ordinary Germans, both lower middle class and working class. Its true significance can be seen in the way it began (with the support of a ‘good third’ of German voters in free and open elections in the early 1930s), and the way it ended (with most Germans choosing to fight on until 1945 regardless of the hopeless odds). In spite of this, historians have been reluctant to recognize the sheer popularity of the Nazi dictatorship and/or have pushed to one side the issue of why so many aligned themselves with this barbaric and criminal regime. Instead, emphasis has been placed on identifying, explaining, and differentiating between various forms of complicity, conformity, ‘immunity’, resistance, opposition, and dissent. For Rohkrämer this means that, as far as the attitudes of ordinary Germans are concerned, the wood has been missed for the trees.

How, then, does he account for the regime’s overwhelming popularity? Some of the causes, he argues, are quite bland: full employment, cheap holidays through the Strength through Joy organization, perceived opportunities for social mobility, and the supposed removal of class privileges. On these grounds he rejects as ‘too narrow’ the notion of Nazism as a political religion that sought to mobilize the irrational longing of the masses for spiritual leadership in the wake of rapid secularization and the ‘disenchantment’ of the world by science and reason. Yet, equally, he criticizes Götz Aly’s ‘materialist’ explanation of the Third Reich as a ‘convenience dictatorship’ (Gefälligkeitsdiktatur) which stayed in power by bribing the people with a generous range of economic gifts and social benefits made possible by
plundering occupied territories and dispossessing the victims of racial persecution. Rather, borrowing a phrase from the philosopher Ernst Bloch, Rohkrämer argues that National Socialism’s popular success was based on its ability to offer a consciously elastic ‘realm of beliefs’ (Glaubensraum) which could accommodate both other-worldly and this-worldly visions and combine idealistic with rational, goal-oriented aspirations. The common dominator was not a utopian desire for a new religion in an age of secularization, but the romantic yearning for community, for connection with Volk and homeland, or what Rohkrämer describes as a ‘single communal faith’ (ein gemeinschaftlicher Glauben) uniting all Germans.

In terms of the history of ideas, Rohkrämer traces the concept of a ‘single communal faith’ back to the early nineteenth century, but he also recognizes that it gained political traction only with the rise of radical nationalism in the 1890s and the rapid fluctuations between expectations of national greatness and fears of national decline brought about by the First World War. Even then, the advocates of ‘Conservative Revolution’ who carried the notion forward in more brutal form in the 1920s were ‘too elitist’ and insufficiently pragmatic to have any serious hope of success. Rohkrämer’s explanations therefore rely on elements of contingency as well as continuity. Without the economic crisis of the late 1920s and early 1930s, and without the ‘aestheticization of politics’ (Walter Benjamin) promoted by the ruthlessly popularizing and ‘ideologically polycratic’ Nazi movement (p. 53), the ideal of a ‘single communal faith’ as a ‘positive’ alternative to democratic pluralism may never have been attractive to the majority of Germans.

A second element in the pernicious appeal of National Socialism was Hitler himself. Here Rohkrämer largely follows Ian Kershaw’s approach, arguing that in the Third Reich power functioned less through authoritarian, top-down structures or strict, bureaucratic enforcement of ideological conformity than through the Nazi leader’s

2 See also Thomas Rohkrämer, A Single Communal Faith? The German Right from Conservatism to National Socialism (New York, 2007).
charismatic authority. When things went wrong, corrupt party officials at local level or Germany’s enemies abroad were blamed. When successes came, all the credit went to Hitler, who stood ‘above party’ and sectional interest. The emphasis on charisma also helps us to understand the regime’s need for constant success, its desire to project itself as based on the popular will, and its predilection for public spectacle and ritual, all of which served to reinforce the ‘Hitler myth’ as a key pillar of Nazi rule. All this is entirely convincing, but it is hardly a new, or controversial, line of argument.

More original and distinctive is Rohkrämer’s emphasis on ordinary Germans’ support for militarism, which he links in with a more nuanced interpretation of the public reception of rearmament and war. Not only did Germans applaud Hitler for his foreign policy successes before and after 1939, he argues, but they were also attracted by his risk-taking and his Politik der Stärke (p. 119) towards neighbouring countries and towards the West. The reintroduction of conscription in 1935, for instance, was hugely popular, not only, but especially, among young men. So, too, of course, were the victories over Poland in 1939 and France in 1940. The 500,000 women auxiliaries who volunteered for service with the Wehrmacht are a further indication that belief in soldierly virtues like ‘order’ and ‘discipline’, and pride in the apparent strength and invincibility of Germany, was not confined just to men (pp. 246, 249–50). Seen against this broader trend, the depressed and fatalistic mood of September 1939 appears as a short-term aberration. Even after 1945, when many West Germans rejected militarism, for instance, by joining the anti-rearmament ‘Ohne Mich’ movement, there was still a tendency to remember the excitement and feelings of wonder and awe occasioned by early Wehrmacht victories. In popular memory, the bad times had come only after the Russian campaign began to falter in the winter of 1941–2, and especially after the defeat at Stalingrad in 1942–3.

Overall, Rohkrämer underpins his argument with careful use of a variety of rich sources, from Sopade and SD mood reports to diaries, letters, memoirs, post-war opinion surveys, and published oral history interviews. In his introduction and throughout the book Rohkrämer subjects these raw materials to a thorough and largely convincing Quellenkritik. On the question of how different genera-

tional identities are constructed, however, one might have expected a more critical attitude, especially in view of the growing body of literature challenging the idea that there was a common German war experience for any or all age groups during and after the First World War. The highly stylized autobiographical pieces in the Abel collection, for instance, should be seen for what they are: a group of essays written in 1934 by dedicated Nazis that say more about the authors themselves and about the regime’s wish to peddle certain myths concerning its own origins than about the wider enthusiasms of the German population.

In any case, regardless of when they were born, how they experienced the First World War, and whether or not they identified themselves as belonging to a particular class, region, confession, or generation, in Rohkrämer’s account most ordinary Germans, including those who were initially quite sceptical, were able to find some reason for joining the National Socialist Glaubensraum after 1933. Beyond this, generalizations are difficult to make. Indeed, while supporters of the regime bought into the same broad, generic vision of a bright new tomorrow under Hitler and, as such, were bound together in ‘a common structure and alignment’ (einer gemeinsamen Struktur und Ausrichtung), there were also ‘numerous individual variations’ in motivation (p. 14). Even the founders of the Confessing Church were not directly opposed to Nazism as a political cause, but merely to its interference in spiritual questions and matters of faith (pp. 138, 291). Most ordinary citizens were coldly indifferent towards, or, at best, mildly supportive of anti-Semitic persecution, but hardly enthusiastic, especially when it came to boycotts of Jewish shops. They were also mistrustful of the official justifications for ‘euthanasia’; uncertain or fatalistic about war in 1939; and resentful of the brutal campaigns targeting individual Christian


5 See also the comments on the Abel collection in Benjamin Ziemann, Contested Commemorations: Republican War Veterans and Weimar Political Culture (Cambridge, 2013), 124.
priests and religious symbols in schools that were periodically launched by fanatical Nazis at local level. Nonetheless, violence against ‘outsiders’ was approved of where it was seen as necessary to the imagined future happiness of the German people. This imagined future happiness also involved the retention of the Hitler regime at almost any cost, even after war without end and then impending defeat had become a daily reality.

From 1942 at the latest, knowledge of the mass crimes committed by the SS and the Wehrmacht in occupied countries was commonplace. In line with Nazi racial teaching, certain categories of ‘enemy’ were regarded as ‘sub-human’ and their murder was thus legitimized, especially in the East. For soldiers in the combat zones this was combined with an acceptance of atrocities against foreign civilians as a ‘natural’ part of war (‘Krieg ist eben Krieg’) and an emphasis on the ‘manly’ duty to defend the homeland (pp. 246, 264–6). Even in July 1944 most Germans disapproved of the assassination attempt carried out by Stauffenberg and his fellow conspirators, and were prepared to fight on in spite of the radically dwindling prospects of victory. Ultimately, however, Hitler’s failure to come up with a ‘miracle weapon’ which would turn the tide in Germany’s favour, his eventual suicide in the bunker in Berlin, and the overwhelming material superiority of the Allies all destroyed the will to resist further.

What we are left with, then, is the ‘banality’ of Germans’ enthusiasm for National Socialism, including the regime’s use of violence. Nazism was popular when it was successful. Its successes, and the propaganda around them, offered some excitement in what was otherwise a humdrum existence, a sense of living in ‘great times’, and an emotionally satisfying level of distraction from the hardships of everyday life. After 1942–3 fascination gradually gave way to fear and introspection, the Volksgemeinschaft to a focus on individual survival and private family interest. Defeat in 1945 was total. Yet even if Hitler was now condemned as a criminal or madman who had led Germany into an unwinnable war, something remained of the old attraction to National Socialism in the accounts that ordinary Germans told themselves (and others) about their experiences in the 1930s and early 1940s. In this sense, Rohkrämer’s findings also have a bearing on our understanding of Germans’ somewhat detached or semi-hostile attitudes towards Allied de-Nazification trials after 1945, their reluctance to accept collective or personal responsibility.
for wartime atrocities, and their support for the amnesties offered by the Adenauer government in the early 1950s.

In conclusion, this is a fine piece of scholarship which will be of great interest to all those concerned with the question of popular feeling in Nazi Germany and how to measure it, particularly in relation to the mindset towards rearmament, racial persecution, wartime violence, and military comradeship. An English translation must surely follow.

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