Volksgemeinschaft: Nazi Radio and its Destruction of Hitler's Utopian Vision

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With the Ministry for Popular Enlightenment and Propaganda founded under the direction of Josef Goebbels on March 13, 1933, Nazi Germany began smearing its ideology across the nation.[1] At the heart of its propaganda campaign was the hope to create a utopic society that incorporated solidarity and social community.[2] Such ideology was communicated through the media, with radio playing an integral part. Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, radio had assisted in creating a common enemy and was successful in bringing a sense of *Volksgemeinschaft*, people's community. Nonetheless, the fundamental outcome of Nazi radio policy, such as the banning of foreign radio in 1939 actually culminated in radio undermining the idea of national community. Denouncements became the predominant example, as people were reported and subsequently charged for listening to foreign radio, whether or not the charges were true. A phenomenon then emerged where people rejected communal thoughts in favor of pursuing their own self-interests. Thus, the idea of *Volksgemeinschaft* was shattered paradoxically by the Nazis' own policy.

[1] Anthony Rhodes, *Propaganda: The Art of Persuasion: World War Two*, ed. Victor Margolin (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1976), 11.
[2] Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, "Selling Hitler: Propaganda and the Nazi Brand," *Journal of Public Affairs*, 9.1 (2009), 59.

The true revolutionary aim of the Nazi party was to bring about *Volksgemeinschaft*—the harmony of the classes and the elimination of the individual. From its inception, the Third Reich set about the ambitious task of reeducating the German people for a new society based upon a "revolutionary" value system.[3] Instead of feeling alienated in a time of industrialization and class conflict, man would now belong to a "pure" community, or *Volk*, which ruthlessly excluded undesirable groups, such as the Jews.[4] In order to promote such a message "propaganda was intended to be the active force cementing the 'national community' together,"[5] and radio was earmarked as the primary vehicle for delivery, as Goebbels believed "radio would do for the masses what newspapers had done for the 19th" century.[6] Its importance was further highlighted by Goebbels' one time deputy, Eugen Hadamovsky, who said:

> For the first time in history we now have in radio a medium which enables us to mold nations of many millions by daily and hourly influence…Radio can have the same impact as newspapers, but… is more up-to-date, more versatile, more profound, and more uplifting by virtue of its inherent artistic element.[7]

In addition, the spoken word would eliminate the possibility of misinterpretation and could penetrate each home, which would again give radio an advantage over the printed page and other mediums.[8] In order to capitalize on such a feature, the Nazis seized radio as a whole by

[3] David Welch, "Nazi Propaganda and the Volksgemeinschaft: Constructing a People's Community," *Journal of Contemporary History* 39.2 (2004): 214.
[4] Ibid., 217.
[5] Welch, 218.
[6] Rhodes, 26.
[7] Eugen Hadamovsky, *Propaganda and National Power*, ed. Christopher Sterling (New York: ARNO Press, 1972), vii.
[8] Keith Somerville, *Radio Propaganda and the Broadcasting of Hatred: Historical Development and Definitions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 112.

dismembering ten semi-public radio companies and creating the centralized Reich Broadcasting Corporation, which was another arm of the Ministry of Propaganda.[9]

Armed with the ability to communicate their propagandized messages over the airwaves, the Nazis set out to ensure that every German would hear their ideology. Consequently, by May 1933, German manufacturers started producing tens of thousands of cheap radios, known as the *Volsempfanger*, people's receiver.[10] These were heavily subsidized by the state, so that the cost of a radio did not surpass a worker's weekly wage, with the goal that there would be a set installed in every German home.[11] Such a policy proved successful, as the number of private radio sets quadrupled in Germany between 1933 and 1939.[12]

In cases where people could not afford a set of their own, communal listening was actively encouraged. For instance, over 3,000 listening rooms were created, so that the Nazis could indoctrinate the public with their ideas of *Volk*, which would be reinforced by the existence of a communal environment.[13] Many broadcasts were organized during working hours, causing factories and offices to suspend the working day for the rhetoric to be heard.[14] Furthermore, restaurants and cafés were also required to be equipped with wireless sets for public addresses, and loudspeakers were erected in the streets.[15] As a result, the Third Reich achieved a level of radio coverage unrivaled throughout the world. Hitler was now

[9] Dorothy Thompson, "The Great War of Words," *Saturday Evening Post* 207.2 (1934): 9-68.
[10] Somerville, 114.
[11] Rhodes, 26.
[12] Ibid., 27.
[13] Somerville, 114.
[14] Richard Grunberger, *The 12-Yaer Reich: A Social History of Nazi Germany 1933-1945* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 401-402.
[15] Ibid., 402.

unavoidable, as whenever he wished to make a public address, the people could not escape his oratory.[16]

Despite achieving unparalleled listener numbers, Nazi radio programs were initially inane and boring, simply a regurgitation of daily newspapers and periodicals.[17] People were forced to listen to elevated culture that the majority could not identify with, so people turned to foreign radio in droves to appease their appetite for entertainment.[18] Unfortunately for the public, and in a similar fashion to other aspects of society, their activities were soon picked up by the Gestapo and by "radio wardens" who snooped on people to see if they were listening to foreign radio.[19] The latter party was also required to report on audience reactions, preferences and requests to a central coordinating agency.[20] With audience feedback in hand, the Nazis began adapting their programming to the needs of the entire population. Chief radio commentator Hans Fritsche emphasized such policy, stating, "Radio must reach all or it will reach none."[21] Consequently, radio-station managers began adopting lighter programming that would encourage people to relax instead of being bombarded by Hitler's rhetoric. For example, radio-station managers "substituted a diet of light music for the Beethoven recitals with which they had briefly filled the ether."[22] Dance music was another example of the Nazi's adaptations,

[16] Thompson, 68.
[17] William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 247.
[18] Grunberger, 402.
[19] Grunberger, 402.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

which embodied the belief that the Nazis were trying to create a community, as it would bring people together to interact.[23]

In an added attempt to bring about *Volksgemeinschaft*, the Nazis were anxious to connect regional *Volk* culture with a German national community.[24] One such example was *The Hour of the Nation (Stunde Der Nation)*, which was broadcast every workday between 7pm and 8pm.[25] This show incorporated information about different regions within the nation to expand cultural knowledge and create a common understanding between Germans, thus promoting the values of community. In other circumstances, the Nazis were more subtle in their attempts to create *Volksgemeinschaft*, as their broadcasts were indirect in promoting regional cultures within Germany. For instance, the 1935 radio series, *German Nation on German Soil*, served as a means to give town-dwellers an awareness of laborers' activities.[26] One such example was *The Ages of Man*, which recalled a farmer's experience of birth, marriage and death. However, despite his death, the story emphasized how people will continue to make such a sacrifice for Germany because "blood and soil are eternal."[27] Although the story was fictional, the moral was clear: all Aryan Germans must continue to sacrifice themselves for the Third Reich. This went great lengths to move Germany closer to the ideals of a national community, and radio became a fundamental aspect of life. People felt closer to their Fuhrer given the tight nation he was creating.

[23] Ibid., 403.
[24] Adelheid von Saldern, "*Volk* and *Heimat* Culture in Radio Broadcasting during the Period of Transition from Weimar to Nazi Germnay," *The Journal of Modern History* 76.2 (2004), 342.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Grunberger, 403.
[27] Ibid., 403-404.

Since radio was rapidly becoming a way of identifying oneself within *Volksgemeinschaft*, suspicion rose of nonconformists to the regime. The most identifiable way of pinpointing a non-conformer was hearing someone listen to foreign radio. Despite not being initially banned by the Nazis, "in the decade following 1933, listening to foreign radio became increasingly risky" because the Gestapo were on the lookout for non-conformers.[28] As a result, they began employing fearful tactics to catch people listening to foreign radio, in order to protect the *Volk*. As Kathe Stolte explains:

> What happened went like this: when there was a building where the gestapo believed that people listened to foreign radio broadcasts, then a gestapo officer would stand in front of every apartment and one of their people went into the cellar where the electric unit was and pulled down the lever such that the power went out in the whole house. A moment later, the people who had been standing in front of these [doors] came up and-knock, knock-opened the door. In the confusion of the darkness, the people opened their doors and then the gestapo man, [standing] there with his flashlight, said "Where is your radio?" And then he went to the radio [and] called back downstairs, "You can turn the lights on again!" Then the BBC or Radio Strasbourg came on and you were arrested.[29]

In addition to the Gestapo, average people also placed enormous pressure on their peers to listen to Nazi programming. Failure to abide by societal ideals resulted in exclusion from the community, with no group suffering more than the Jews, though they were left with little choice. Already excluded from society, since *Volk* programs discussed the ideal Aryan family, Jews turned to foreign radio in a desperate bid to listen to non-propagandized news and often went to extraordinary lengths to do so.[30] For example, "Martha Paul was so scared of being

[28] Andrew Stuart Bergerson, "Listening to the Radio in Hildesheim, 1923-1953," *German Studies Review* 24.1 (2001), 101.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Von Saldern, 343.

caught by the Gestapo that she listened to Radio Luxembourg…only after hiding the radio under three pillows and then listening through all three of them."[31] Therefore, Jews, as well as other non-conformers, were becoming more alienated from society, due to their desperation to hear foreign news. Many were caught listening to foreign radio by spying community members. As a result, they were no longer welcome within the *Volksgemeinschaft*, since they were opposing the fundamental idea of the regime.[32]

Still, it is important to realize that radio was not the fundamental cause for the exclusion of the Jewish population from the national community. Rather, it should be attributed to the existing prejudices of German people towards Jews, according to L. John Martin:

> The effectiveness of propaganda is increased if its message fulfills a need or an aspiration of its target and if it agrees with existing values, attitudes, opinions, beliefs, norms-or whatever one would like to call them-of the audience.[33]

Hence, the Nazis simply exploited the tendencies people already possessed, in order to create their *Volk*, by offering a shared adversary. Kenneth Burke reiterates such a view, as he confirms that society requires a collective enemy for it to group together.[34] Thus, with animosity towards Jews already present, the Nazis were easily able to sway people with anti-Semitism in order to create a more solidified national community. Attempts to exclude the Jews using radio became more prominent as the 1930s wore on. For instance, in a bid to put an end to Jews listening to foreign criticisms of the Nazi regime, the Nazis confiscated the radios of Jews in 1939, in the city

[31] Bergerson, 101-102.
[32] Ibid., 99-102.
[33] L. John Martin, "Effectiveness of International Propaganda," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 398 (1971): 67.
[34] Kenneth Burke, *On Symbols and Society*, ed. Joseph Gusfield (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 212-213.

of Hildesheim, whilst they were praying in the local schoolhouse.[35] Jews were increasingly pushed out of the community so that the Nazis could consolidate their *Volk*.

With the advent of the Second World War on September 1, 1939, the Nazis were eager to prevent foreign radio from destroying their national community. Therefore, "a 'special war penal code' came into effect on the day of Germany's mobilization and dealt with both military and civilian behavior."[36] The code contained a section that "specified the death penalty for anyone who sought to 'undermine the will to fight.'"[37] Consequently, radio came under its realm, thus heightening the risk of listening to foreign radio, as Hitler had "deep concerns about the negative effects of enemy [radio] propaganda on the home front."[38]

Nonetheless, radio became increasingly difficult for the Nazis to control due to the easy accessibility of foreign radio, as explained by *Time* magazine:

> The cheap People's radios are designed to receive mainly the medium-waveband domestic German broadcasts. But the popular British Broadcasting Corporation's medium-wave news periods are frequently and easily received on People's radios… In short-wave bands, Germany's most gallant intruder is Moscow which, by some underground means the Gestapo has not yet uncovered, gets German news and broadcasts it back to Germany almost as soon as it happens. In spite of all the Reich's counteracting efforts, many Germans can and do learn what goes on.[39]

The BBC, and later Radio Moscow, also broadcast important news from the war front in German, including the names of captured German soldiers and sailors.[40] Germans then could

[35] Bergerson, 97.
[36] Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 183.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., 184.
[39] Julius Yourman, "Propaganda Techniques within Nazi Germany," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 13.3 (1939): 163.
[40] Gellately, 185.

not resist listening to foreign stations since they offered a glimmer of hope as to whether their husbands, sons or brothers were alive. With the need for closure or hope proving too great, people were enticed towards foreign radio, although needless to say they can hardly be impugned for doing so.

As the war progressed, by 1943, the Nazi Secret Service (SD) frustratingly reported that listening to foreign radio had become an open secret as "many men and women who were busy working in their gardens suddenly all went inside about five minutes before the regular BBC broadcast."[41] Moreover, the report also spoke of how people were regularly "overheard talking about the exact number of bombers that were shot down and the number and kinds of bombs, but before that information was reported on German radio."[42] As a result, the "special war penal code" was increasingly employed, and occurrences of radio crimes were regularly paraded in the press, carrying headlines such as "Listened to foreign radio: heavy prison sentence-warning to slow learners."[43] Such threats did little to discourage German mothers in particular from listening.[44]

Since possible sanctions did little to dissuade people from undermining *Volksgemeinschaft* by listening to foreign radio, the rate of denouncements unsurprisingly rose. Nevertheless, astonishingly 73% of reports in Dusseldorf originated from within the town, due to desperation by some to safeguard the national community.[45] However, although some accusations were valid, the flooding of denouncements was generally motivated by personal

[41] Ibid., 186.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Gellately, 186.
[44] Yourman, 163.
[45] Gellately, 186.

factors; unlike previous accusations against the Jews, racism was no longer the fundamental factor. People were out for themselves.[46] Hitler's idea of a "conflict-free 'community of people,'" was beginning to crumble.[47] One such reason for the plague of denunciations was emotional revenge, which led to a wave of accusations within families that were often petty. For example, one young girl reported that her brother listened to foreign radio, because she was fed up with her brother being a "know-it-all." Other ridiculous internal denunciations included one young boy turning in his aunt for no apparent reason. As a result, she was forced to spend time in custody until the matter was eventually cleared.[48] With Germans turning on Germans, the Nazis' "proclaimed social ideals of the solidarity of a 'community of people'" were literally shredded to pieces.[49]

This trend of individualism grew as outrageous allegations swept the system; people continued to see the new laws as ways to resolve personal matters. For instance, one man was denounced by his father-in-law for listening to foreign radio, but this was in fact an attempt to punish him for domestic violence. Despite any truth in the matter, the case quickly spiraled out of control, to the extent that the denouncer eventually committed suicide.[50] Another case of the laws being abused was one landlady denouncing her tenants for listening to foreign radio, but only after they complained they were not getting enough coal to keep warm.[51] In a paradoxical fashion, Nazi laws intended to solidify the national community had in fact began to rip the seams apart, as they offered fuel for individualism and self-interests to flourish.

[46] Ibid., 192-193.
[47] Ibid., 192.
[48] Ibid., 194.
[49] Ibid., 193.
[50] Ibid, 194.
[51] Gellately, 195.

This problem continued during the advancement of the Allies. Unlike when Germany was successful in the first years of war, the sounds of Allied bombings undermined public faith that Germany was still on the offensive. As the home front began to feel the brunt of the war, more Germans flocked to foreign broadcasts to gain an accurate sense of what was going on, pushing them further from *Volksgemeinschaft*. People now felt frustrated by what the Reich had created, and by the end of the war, "the vision of a 'national community' had dissolved."[52]

In conclusion, throughout the 1930s, the Nazis cunningly exploited the qualities of radio to make radio unavoidable to the nation and create the myth of *Volksgemeinschaft*. However, it was a false sense of community, as it excluded some based on race, glaringly contradictory to what a utopic vision should embody. Instead, it ironically provoked Germans to become more individualistic, as people began turning in those who were supposedly listening to foreign radio. Subsequently those who listened to foreign broadcasts were increasingly alienated from society, due to their desperation to hear non-propagandized broadcasts. This situation intensified with the arrival of the World War, since the creation of the "special war penal code" afforded people the opportunity to denounce enemies for listening to foreign radio with little regards to truth. Therefore, people's self-interests prevailed over the national community, and *Volksgemeinschaft* disintegrated since people wanted to know accurate events of Germany's downfall. Thus, Hitler's sickening utopic vision was ironically crushed by his own *Volsempfanger*.

[52] Carolyn Birdsall, *Nazi Soundscapes: Sound, Technology and Urban Space in Germany, 1933-1945* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 138.