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HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

THE SUBJECTIVE DIMENSION OF NAZISM*

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ABSTRACT. *The present historiographical review discusses the subjective dimension of Nazism, an ideology and regime that needed translation into self-definitions, gender roles, and bodily practices to implant itself in German society and mobilize it for racial war. These studies include biographies of some of the Third Reich's most important protagonists, which have important things to say about their self-understandings in conjunction with the circumstances they encountered and subsequently shaped; cultural histories of important twentieth-century figures such as film stars, housewives, or consumers, which add new insights to the ongoing debate about the Third Reich's modernity; studies that address participation in the Nazi Empire and the Holocaust through discourses and practices of comradeship, work in extermination camps, and female 'help' within the Wehrmacht. In discussing these monographs, along the way incorporating further books and articles, the piece attempts to draw connections between specific topics and think about new possibilities for synthesis in an overcompartmentalized field. It aims less to define a 'Nazi subject' than to bring us closer to understanding how Hitler's movement and regime connected different, shifting subject positions through both cohesion and competition, creating a dynamic that kept producing new exclusions and violent acts.*

Nazism loudly claimed to have established a new kind of objectivity, based on the alleged truths and necessities of race. Yet, it had an important subjective dimension, dependent as it was on the idiosyncrasies of its leaders, the personal motivations of their followers, and the isolation and humiliation of its real or perceived opponents. Nazism was not merely an ideology and a political regime, but needed translation into self-understandings, gender roles, and bodily practices. The extent to which this was accomplished is still being debated, and continuities with the pre-1933 decades have turned out to be more important than acknowledged in the regime's official image. But the remarkable effectiveness with which the Third Reich implanted itself in German society and culture after 1933 can only be explained by addressing how its ideological

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and institutional landscape offered unprecedented self-empowerment – at the expense of political opponents, social outsiders, and supposed racial others – as well as the semblance of a normal, sheltered life. Furthermore, the Second World War led to a whole range of imperial experiences for German invaders and occupiers, ranging from new touristic pleasures to the exertion of lethal violence. Even when military disaster was clearly on the horizon, the ineffectiveness of the resistance showed how difficult it had become to imagine a personal future beyond the Third Reich.

The subjective dimension of Nazism already preoccupied its contemporaries, both within the Third Reich's peculiar universe and among its opponents. Thus, the question of who 'the Nazis' were and how they related to 'the Germans' was central to the American endeavour to defeat Hitler and install a new democratic order on the ruins of his Reich. Had the countrymen of Goethe and Beethoven become deviant, a case for psychological diagnosis and treatment? Or was the publicist Dorothy Thompson right in holding that 'whatever may go on in the national mind, individual people remain individual people'?¹ While the view of the essential normality of Germans prevailed, as Michaela Hoenicke Moore has recently demonstrated, Americans remained suspicious of them and attempted to understand who they were. For this reason, they did not just delve deeply into the mindsets of those leading Nazis they were able to put on trial, but also eavesdropped on the conversations of ordinary POWs.² Among German interpreters of the Third Reich in the immediate post-war years, the question of subjective involvement in Nazism largely disappeared behind themes related to the anonymous workings of modern society. And soon a new self-definition as victims was established, which reduced personal agency to a morally innocent muddling through the constraints of dictatorship and war.³

Within the protective cocoon of the Cold War, this self-understanding remained largely unchallenged – including in the German Democratic Republic, where blame for Nazism's crimes was assigned to the capitalist system plus a limited number of degenerates. The prominent trials of the early 1960s sparked a debate about the perpetrators of the Holocaust, while simultaneously keeping them at a safe moral and psychological distance.⁴ When some

¹ On the first view, see Michaela Hoenicke Moore, *Know your enemy: the American debate on Nazism, 1933–1945* (New York, NY, 2010), pp. 217–33; see *ibid.*, p. 56, for the Dorothy Thompson quotation, which is from an article she published in *Foreign Affairs* in Apr. 1940.

² Richard J. Overy, *Interrogations: the Nazi elite in Allied hands* (London, 2002); Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, eds., *Soldaten: on fighting, killing and dying: the secret Second World War tapes of German POWs* (New York, NY, 2012); Felix Römer, *Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht von innen* (Munich, 2012).

³ Jean Solchany, *Comprendre le nazisme dans l'Allemagne des années zéro, 1945–1949* (Paris, 1997); Robert Moeller, *War stories: the search for a usable past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley, CA, 2001).

⁴ Devin O. Pendas, *The Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, 1963–1965: genocide, history, and the limits of the law* (Cambridge, 2006).

historians controversially began to address Nazism's relationship with German society, they preferred a rationalizing vocabulary and an emphasis on structural dynamics to an engagement with experiences and perceptions.⁵ And *Alltagsgeschichte*, the history of everyday life emerging in the 1980s, tended to foreground small-scale acts of resistance to, rather than subjective involvement in, the Third Reich.⁶ However, the picture has drastically changed since the 1990s. Active participation in the Nazi project, including the Holocaust, is now seen as a widespread phenomenon that raises fundamental questions about ideological motivation and social practice. As a result, the very notion of agency has become both more complex and more central to the understanding of the Third Reich.

How can such broad and active participation be explained? A number of recent historians have foregrounded the *Volksgemeinschaft*, the idea of a racial community that lay at the heart of Nazi rhetoric. They argue that the notion was sufficiently powerful to involve millions of Germans in the Nazi project and to maintain their loyalty even in the context of an increasingly disastrous war.⁷ Not only did it mark a convergence between various strands of right-wing thought in interwar Germany. It was also compatible with other, related norms and persuasions, so that ordinary villagers or soldiers could act in accordance with the Third Reich's leadership without sharing every tenet of its ideology.⁸ Furthermore, the *Volksgemeinschaft* did not need to correspond to the 'reality' of German society to be plausible and effective. On the contrary, that many people perceived a gap between norms and their own experiences triggered a dynamic of resentment and denunciation. This vitally contributed to the exclusion of Nazism's 'enemies' and to the exertion of pressure on reluctant 'Aryans' to conform.⁹

⁵ See especially Hans Mommsen's contributions, collected in his *From Weimar to Auschwitz: essays in German history* (Cambridge, 1991). For a critique, see Nicolas Berg, *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker: Erforschung und Erinnerung* (Göttingen, 2003).

⁶ See Martin Broszat et al., eds., *Bayern in der NS-Zeit* (6 vols., Munich, 1977–83). Realms of consensus are more apparent in the oral history interviews with industrial workers analysed in Lutz Niethammer, ed., *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet, 1930–1960* (3 vols., Bonn, 1983–1990).

⁷ See, among others, Norbert Frei, 'People's community and war: Hitler's popular support', in Hans Mommsen, ed., *The Third Reich between vision and reality: new perspectives on German history, 1918–1945* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 59–77; Frank Bajohr and Michael Wildt, eds., *Volksgemeinschaft: Neue Forschungen zur Gesellschaft des Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt, 2009); Peter Fritzsche, *Life and death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA, 2008).

⁸ Michael Wildt, *Hitler's Volksgemeinschaft and the dynamics of racial exclusion: violence against Jews in provincial Germany, 1919–1939* (New York, NY, 2012); Thomas Kühne, *Belonging and genocide: Hitler's community, 1918–1945* (New Haven, CT, 2010).

⁹ Gisela Diewald-Kerkmann, *Politische Denunziation im NS-Regime oder Die kleine Macht der Volksgenossen* (Bonn, 1995), pp. 92–100, 109–112; John Connelly, 'The uses of Volksgemeinschaft: letters to the NSDAP Kreisleitung Eisenach, 1939–1940', *Journal of Modern History*, 68 (1996), pp. 899–930; Moritz Föllmer, 'The problem of national solidarity in interwar Germany', *German History*, 23 (2005), pp. 202–31, at pp. 222–8.

The recent emphasis on *Volksgemeinschaft*, however, still leaves open important questions. First, it has not gone undisputed. Critics have argued that it takes Nazi rhetoric too much at face value to convince as a historical interpretation, and that the whole tendency to highlight consent and participation underrates the crucial role of coercion in keeping the majority of dissident or sceptical Germans in check.¹⁰ Second, even if one accepts the basic interpretation, it remains a thorny issue how ideology actually translated into social practice and was appropriated on an individual level. Different views are available here. *Alltagshistoriker*, who used to foreground small-scale acts of resistance, have since moved on to address practices of integration into the Third Reich, such as the handshake across social divides or the Hitler greeting.¹¹ As part of a wide-reaching attempt to address crucial questions of twentieth-century German history through the prism of ego-documents, Mary Fullbrook argues that post-1933 subjects adopted and enacted a new repertoire of scripts, phrases, and actions. They thereby became a part of the Nazi project, while in many cases still disagreeing over specific issues or maintaining an inner distance.¹² With less emphasis than Fullbrook on ‘dissonant lives’, Peter Fritzsche stresses that Germans redefined their own selves by way of ‘racial grooming’, through procuring a certificate of ‘Aryan’ descent or becoming involved in a Nazi organization.¹³

Thus, the interplay between the ideological and institutional context of the Third Reich and the level of Germans’ self-understandings, motivations, and actions warrants further debate. A number of recent studies have provided important clues for such an analysis of Nazism’s subjective dimension. The following historiographical review will draw connections between them rather than discuss their respective contribution in detail (a task best left to single reviews). Thinking about new possibilities for synthesis seems especially important given the notorious overcompartmentalization of the historiography of Nazism. And it might be time for Third Reich specialists to problematize subjectivity more explicitly, following the lead of their

¹⁰ Ian Kershaw, ‘“Volksgemeinschaft”: Potenzial und Grenzen eines neuen Forschungskonzepts’, *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 59 (2011), pp. 1–17; Richard J. Evans, ‘Coercion and consent in Nazi Germany’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 151 (2007), pp. 53–81. For an important recent monograph that stresses popular reluctance towards the Third Reich’s demands, see Jill Stephenson, *Hitler’s home front: Württemberg under the Nazis* (London, 2006). For explorations of the Third Reich’s coercive apparatus see Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann, eds., *Concentration camps in Nazi Germany: the new histories* (London, 2010).

¹¹ See Alf Lüdtke, ‘The “honor of labor”: industrial workers and the power of symbols under national socialism’, in David Crew, ed., *Nazism and German society, 1933–1945* (London, 1994), pp. 67–109; Andrew Stuart Bergerson, *Ordinary Germans in extraordinary times: the Nazi revolution in Hildesheim* (Bloomington, IN, 2004).

¹² Mary Fullbrook, *Dissonant lives: generations and violence through the German dictatorships* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 98–9, 165–6, 477.

¹³ Fritzsche, *Life and death*, pp. 76–142.

counterparts working on Stalinist Russia.¹⁴ Three recent trends seem especially noteworthy in this regard, and give the review its structure: the upsurge in biographical studies of leading protagonists of the Third Reich, which have important things to say about their self-understandings in conjunction with the circumstances they encountered and subsequently shaped; cultural histories of important figures of modernity, for instance film stars, housewives, or consumers, which add new insights to the ongoing discussion of Germans' involvement in the Nazi project after 1933; studies that address the peak of such involvement during the Second World War, namely participation in the Nazi Empire and the Holocaust.

I

A classic historiographical genre, biographies have long provided crucial insights into a regime that offered its 'leaders' unprecedented space for realizing their ambitions. Leaving aside both the interest—often more sensational than scholarly—in the personal lives of high-ranking Nazis, and studies that treat one of them in conjunction with a particular policy field of the Third Reich, the conceptual challenge lies in drawing connections between a specific protagonist and German politics, society, and culture. The seminal Hitler biography by Joachim Fest began with reflections on his 'ability to uncover the deeper spirit and tendencies of the age' as well as on 'the subjective element he imposed upon the course of history'.¹⁵ Conversely, Ian Kershaw revisited Hitler's life and career from the opposite vantage point of a social historian. He combined biographical reconstruction and 'functionalist' analysis by foregrounding what Germans wished to see in their future *Führer* and consequently projected onto Hitler, a priori an unremarkable man save for his undeniable manipulative abilities.¹⁶ In a more specific but highly influential study, Ulrich Herbert traced the SS intellectual Werner Best through the twentieth century, from his origins as a wartime youth and an extreme-right student, to his later years as a staunch defender against the charges that West German prosecutors levelled at him and other high-ranking Nazis. Crucially, Herbert stressed the interplay between personal agency, institutional structures, and racist ideology, in a model focusing less on Hitler's *Weltanschauung* than on the collective experiences of Best's generation.¹⁷

¹⁴ See Anna Krylova, 'The tenacious liberal subject in Soviet studies', *Kritika*, 1 (2000), pp. 119–46; Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on my mind: writing a diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Igal Halfin, *Terror in my soul: communist autobiographies on trial* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

¹⁵ Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler* (London, 1974), pp. 3, 4, 8.

¹⁶ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936: hubris* (London, 1998); idem, *Hitler, 1936–1945: nemesis* (London, 2000).

¹⁷ Ulrich Herbert, *Best: Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft, 1903–1989* (Bonn, 1996). Compare Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler's Weltanschauung: a blueprint for power* (Middleton, CT, 1972).

In many ways, the recent wave of biographies follow Herbert's lead in proposing refined analyses of the interplay between the circumstances their protagonists encountered, the lives they led, and the political outcomes they helped produce. A case in point is Peter Longerich's extensive study of Heinrich Himmler's life and career.¹⁸ Longerich explores how Himmler, born in 1900 to a Munich grammar school teacher who pedantically inculcated conservative values into his children, was bent on a career as a military officer only to be denied participation in combat because Germany surrendered and the new, drastically reduced armed forces never took him on. As a student of agricultural science, Himmler attempted to compensate for his own inhibitions and insecurities with an intense struggle for self-control and bossiness toward others. After his right-wing political activities radicalized between 1922 and 1924 (a crucial juncture that is, alas, very sparsely documented), he became a professional agitator and organizer for the Nazi party. Later, Hitler entrusted him with the leadership of the SS, where he found a testing ground for his control mania, striving to raise the organization's profile and to demarcate it from the plebeian SA through racial and moral elitism. In the process of building a state within the Nazi state, Himmler defined Germany's 'enemies' in a way that left maximum room for arbitrary judgement. His principal obsessions were of a homophobic and anti-clerical nature (the latter not least because he blamed the Catholic church for his early sexual inhibitions). Jews only became important to him during the war, as part of the 'Asian' forces that fought for world dominion with the Germanic race. In both ideological and institutional matters, Himmler combined rigidity with flexibility, his own quest for personal power with the imagined purity of the *Volk* and the SS *Orden*. Moreover, he displayed a capacity to make others dependent on him through a blend of sternness, care, and trust. This leadership style integrated and stimulated a complex institutional apparatus with shifting priorities alongside an all-encompassing quest for destruction. In his characteristically twisted way, Himmler insisted on 'decency' while at the same time claiming higher reasons for refusing Germany's supposed arch-enemies 'decent' treatment. Equipped with such moral self-justification, his influence increased even further when the war turned into a defensive struggle and the SS focused on crushing any resistance within Nazi-dominated Europe.

In implementing his projects, Himmler could always rely on the loyalty and skill of Reinhard Heydrich, whose biography has now been written by Robert Gerwarth.¹⁹ Unlike Longerich, Gerwarth refrains from psychological reflections, instead emphasizing the comparative ordinariness of this son of a Catholic singer, opera composer, and conservatory director, born in 1904. The critical juncture for Heydrich came only in 1931, when the ambitious naval officer was dismissed for breach of promise followed by arrogant behaviour in a

¹⁸ Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler* (Oxford, 2012).

¹⁹ Robert Gerwarth, *Hitler's hangman: the life of Heydrich* (New Haven, CT, 2011).

court of honour. In this crisis, his future wife Lina von Osten pushed him to apply for a staff position with the SS. Heydrich was to prove extraordinarily adept at moving up within this particular universe, which offered him a quasi-military career, but this time with the promise of great personal influence and a sense of revolutionary purpose. In his relentless activity and ever-increasing radicalism, he was driven by a desire to compensate for his relative lack of extreme-right credentials and the persistent rumours about his (in reality non-existent) Jewish ancestry. Adhering to a leadership style that granted a great deal of personal initiative to his subordinates while at the same time routinely intimidating and bullying them, he developed the SD (Security Service) into a formidable surveillance and terror organization with ever-increasing power. While his anti-communist and anti-Semitic convictions are not in doubt, in the pre-war period he reserved his greatest venom for the fight against the Catholic church. During the war, Heydrich became the foremost organizer of the Holocaust, always striving to demonstrate the capacity of the SS to implement Hitler's visions. Appointed acting Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia, Heydrich worked hard to crush any resistance, mobilize forced labourers, identify those Czechs deemed 'Germanizable', have Jews and gypsies deported and killed, and promote German culture – until he died from his injuries after a half-botched assassination attempt in late May 1942.

The connection between the Nazi Empire and the subjectivities of its leaders is also brought out in Catherine Epstein's new biography of Arthur Greiser, the *Gauleiter* of the Wartheland.²⁰ Like Gerwarth, Epstein emphasizes the contingency and relative lateness of her protagonist's turn to the Nazi movement and subsequent career, while, like Longerich, devoting much effort to understanding his personality. Having grown up in the Prussian province of Posen as the son of a civil servant, Greiser (born 1897) experienced its loss to Poland after serving in the war as an aerial observer and, albeit very briefly, a combat pilot. While hatred of Poles was thus an integral part of his highly personal worldview, he only joined the Nazi party in 1929, after his Danzig-based business as a merchant of oil and fats had faltered. What drove Greiser was the sense of purpose provided by the movement, his lifelong quest for status, admiration, and a lavish lifestyle, as well as his rivalry with the local *Gauleiter* and Hitler protégé Albert Forster. As senate president of Danzig, he tried to demarcate himself from Forster through his comparative moderation. However, he soon realized that only radical zeal could give him an edge in the incessant competition for power within the Third Reich, and strove to distinguish himself as a model Nazi. This was all the more necessary since he was vulnerable due to his modest war record, his scant involvement in Free Corps activities in 1919, his lack of a close relationship with Hitler, and his divorce in 1934. Having been appointed *Gauleiter* of the Wartheland due to his borderland

²⁰ Catherine Epstein, *Model Nazi: Arthur Greiser and the occupation of western Poland* (Oxford, 2010).

background, he left a very strong mark on the 'Germanization' of this part of western Poland. Free from ministerial interference, he established a largely personal rule based on close relations with his subordinates and the patronage of Himmler, which brought him to pursue the most radical racist agenda, while also pragmatically drawing on Polish and Jewish forced labourers where this served his projects and ambitions.

The interplay between biographical rupture and a turn to Nazism, the quest for recognition, the incessant redefinition of one's life to conform to the ideal of struggle: all these elements also emerge from Toby Thacker's and – again – Peter Longerich's biographies of Joseph Goebbels. Thacker closely relies on Goebbels's extensive diary to explore his ideological conviction in spite of his frequent acting and lying – an emphasis that Longerich agrees with while pushing the deconstruction of his protagonist's self-fashioning further.²¹ Born in 1897 to a clerical employee in the Lower Rhine area, Goebbels was a solitary child, an avid reader and writer, as well as a lover of music. Unable to fight in the First World War due to his limp, steeped in nationalist and anti-Semitic thought, alienated from his family's Catholicism, vaguely but intensely anti-capitalist, unemployed after his literature doctorate apart from an unsatisfying stint at a bank, Goebbels early on displayed a tendency to link Germany's fate to his own. Although at first he was far more interested in the arts than in politics or media, reports of Hitler's trial for the coup attempt in Munich motivated him to join the Nazi movement. He soon became a frequent, passionate, and successful speaker as well as an author of *völkische* articles and pamphlets. Personally flattered and impressed by Hitler, he became his devotee from 1926, when he took on the position of Berlin's *Gauleiter*, rapidly grasping the significance of popular media and personalized politics alongside public speaking and physical violence. Appointed Minister for People's Enlightenment and Propaganda in March 1933, Goebbels reorganized both high and popular culture, especially music and film, along Nazi lines, a role that suited his quasi-artistic self-understanding, yearning for power, and quest for personal luxury. He played a crucial role in the campaigns against both the Catholic church and the Jewish minority, and later became one of the key agents of the Holocaust, arguing for the introduction of the yellow star, the deportation of Berlin's Jews, and systematic killings in occupied Eastern Europe. Well aware of the dire military situation in the second half of the war and frustrated with Hitler's increasing elusiveness, Goebbels identified emotionally with the crisis of the *Volk* and repeatedly tried to turn things around – until he and his wife killed their six children and committed suicide in the *Führerbunker* on 1 May 1945.

²¹ Toby Thacker, *Joseph Goebbels: life and death* (Basingstoke, 2009); Peter Longerich, *Goebbels: Biographie* (Munich, 2010). Longerich's study is also more extensive and places greater emphasis on the institutional context in which Goebbels worked and which often limited his personal power.

These fine biographies provide important insights into a whole range of aspects, especially the Third Reich's ideology and propaganda, its system of terror and its politics of occupation, and the conception and organization of the Holocaust. But what conclusions do they allow regarding the subjective dimension of Nazism? In the first instance, they create a picture that differs from that given in Herbert's biography of Werner Best, which emphasized the SS intellectual's formative experiences in the Free Corps and in the right-wing student circles of post-1918 Germany, his detached, coldly rational demeanour, and his way of blending his own self with what he regarded as the purest version of Nazi ideology. By contrast, what stands out in these biographies is the contingency and idiosyncrasy rather than the inner logic and linear unfolding of their protagonists' involvement with Nazism. They were certainly 'uncompromising',²² but less in their commitment to a higher cause than in their personal ambition, which made them reject any limits to their own selfhood (not least those imposed by their childhood Catholicism, in the cases of Goebbels, Himmler, and Heydrich) except those set by Hitler. Such personal ambition was greatly enhanced by the models and plots that early twentieth-century German nationalism in combination with late Romantic high culture provided; one is particularly struck by the recurrent significance of music, be it Wagner's operas for Goebbels, the influence of Heydrich's father on his son, or the compositions of Hans Pfitzner, in which Greiser's second wife, a pianist, specialized. All four protagonists imagined themselves as heroic fighters but felt deprived of their full war experience through disability (Goebbels), Germany's sudden defeat (Greiser, Himmler), or rejection by military institutions (Heydrich, to some extent Himmler). Given such enormous expectations, the modest opportunities offered by the volatile Weimar economy seemed altogether unbearable. While Greiser appears to have genuinely been in dire straits due to the failure of his business, the point for the other three was less that they were unemployed than that they considered it beneath them to work as a bank clerk (Goebbels), for a producer of fertilizer (Himmler), or as a sailing coach for affluent young men (a decently paid position that was offered to, but rejected by, Heydrich).

Against this background, their turn to Nazism was consistent but also contingent. The movement, which had begun without their contribution (Goebbels, Himmler) or was already in full electoral swing (Greiser, Heydrich), came their way at crucial junctures in their lives, promising to get them out of personal crisis and to provide an ideological and institutional framework congenial to their desire for self-realization. Significantly, it gave room to personalities that were arguably deficient in a psychological sense (a case that Longerich, after consultation with psychotherapists, makes for both Himmler,

²² See Michael Wildt, *An uncompromising generation: the Nazi leadership of the Reich Security Main Office* (Madison, WI, 2010) and, in a similar vein, Christian Ingrao, *Believe and destroy: intellectuals in the SS war machine* (Cambridge, 2013).

whom he diagnoses with an attachment disorder, and Goebbels, whom he interprets as a narcissist craving recognition), to others who were, like Greiser and Heydrich, basically rather ordinary, and to aesthetically underwhelming men as well as to blond and good-looking ones. Yet, Nazism also set high standards against which, significantly, its leading protagonists appeared less than perfect: Goebbels and Himmler for physical reasons, Greiser and Heydrich because they lacked extreme-right credentials. This perceived deficiency led them to constantly try to demonstrate their conformity and, even better, to shape the content and outlook of the Third Reich themselves. When Greiser's rival Alfred Forster once quipped 'If I looked like Himmler, I would not speak of race', he missed one of Nazism's crucial features.²³ Hence, the blend between ideological extremism and personal idiosyncrasies in the cases of Goebbels and Himmler, who blamed their own frustrations on, respectively, the Jews and the Catholic church, and the flexibility of Heydrich and Greiser, who only developed an interest in anti-Semitism after realizing that this was what Hitler's regime demanded and rewarded. Hence, also, the need for constant masculine self-assertion, through relationships with women which bolstered their egos²⁴ and by imposing their will on subordinate men. When Best retrospectively underscored Heydrich's 'unconcealed subjectivity',²⁵ he hit the nail on the head, yet failed to recognize just how central such subjectivity was to the peculiar universe the Nazi leaders had created.

The four men's murderous energy will always remain difficult to explain. What does become clear is their increasing fascination with what one might call proxy violence, which manifested itself in different ways: Goebbels's experience as a preacher of hate, from halls full with hostile communists to the Sportpalast, where he called for 'total war' in February 1943; Heydrich's brief excursions to Norway or Russia, where he took part as a pilot in attacks on retreating troops; Himmler's trips to various sites of the Holocaust and the way in which he couched his blend of pleasure and revulsion in a rhetoric of 'decency'. Moreover, the Third Reich allowed its leading protagonists to create and rearrange ensembles of individuals, groups, institutions, and ideas according to their preferences and with breathtaking speed, if not always within the borders of Germany then certainly in the occupied territories of the Nazi Empire. The time-honoured distinction between 'personality' and 'structure' was thus blurred or even transcended, an aspect particularly evident in Himmler's but also in Greiser's and

²³ Cited in Epstein, *Model Nazi*, p. 94. The centrality of the difference between racist norms and actual bodies is highlighted by Paula Diehl, *Macht-Mythos-Utopie: Die Körperbilder der SS-Männer* (Berlin, 2005).

²⁴ The complicity of leading Nazis' wives has been stressed by Gudrun Schwarz, *Die Frau an seiner Seite: Ehefrauen in der 'SS-Sippengemeinschaft'* (Hamburg, 1997).

²⁵ Cited in Gerwarth, *Hitler's hangman*, p. 72. On the relationship between Heydrich and Best and the break between them in 1939, see Herbert, *Best*, pp. 228–33.

Goebbels's case.²⁶ For this, Hitler's role was crucial, primarily as a leader who provided incentives to be 'radical' while limiting personal access and approval, a combination that proved a great motivation to Greiser and many others. By contrast, direct persuasion seems to have been less important, with the notable exception of Goebbels who was consequently the only one remaining at the *Führer's* side to the end.²⁷ Once Hitler and the framework he and his followers had established were eliminated, the version of subjectivity that had been so distinctive for high-ranking Nazis lost its foundation.²⁸

II

One of the most important and long-standing debates in the historiography of Nazi Germany has been concerned with assessing its modernity. In the 1960s, Ralf Dahrendorf and David Schoenbaum emphasized the Third Reich's peculiar blend of reactionary aims and unintentional modernizing effects.²⁹ In the early 1990s, Rainer Zitelmann sparked controversy by interpreting Hitler and other leading Nazis as intentional modernizers who aimed at a more technologically advanced and socially equal society.³⁰ His critics charged that this amounted to an unduly positive view of the Third Reich that mistook propaganda for reality, glossed over the actual demodernization it caused, and marginalized its racism and anti-Semitism.³¹ Some contributors to the heated debate pointed to the multi-faceted and open-ended character of modernity. While insisting on crucial differences between the Nazi regime and liberal democracy in contrast to Zitelmann, they argued that the Third Reich transformed not so much social structures as Germans' perceptions and

²⁶ See also the characterization of the Reich Security Main Office as a flexible and ever-radicalizing institution in Wildt, *Uncompromising generation*.

²⁷ Ludolf Herbst, *Hitlers Charisma: Die Erfindung eines deutschen Messias* (Frankfurt, 2010), questions the notion of Hitler's personal charisma, instead interpreting it as a carefully crafted and promulgated myth. Herbst's book is a critique of the extensive use of the concept, especially in Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte, IV: Vom Beginn des Ersten Weltkriegs bis zur Gründung der beiden deutschen Staaten, 1914–1949* (Munich, 2003), pp. 675–83, 935–7.

²⁸ Reactions to this insight included many suicides by devoted Nazis, see Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 152–3, 161.

²⁹ Ralf Dahrendorf, *Society and democracy in Germany* (New York, NY, 1967); David Schoenbaum, *Hitler's social revolution: class and status in Nazi Germany, 1933–1939* (Garden City, NY, 1966).

³⁰ Michael Prinz and Rainer Zitelmann, eds., *Nationalsozialismus und Modernisierung* (Darmstadt, 1991); Rainer Zitelmann, *Hitler: the politics of seduction* (London, 1999).

³¹ Hans Mommsen, 'Nationalsozialismus als vorgetäuschte Modernisierung', in his *Der Nationalsozialismus und die deutsche Gesellschaft: Ausgewählte Aufsätze*, ed. Lutz Niethammer (Hamburg, 1991), pp. 405–27; Norbert Frei, 'Wie modern war der Nationalsozialismus?', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 19 (1993), pp. 367–87; Bernd Weisbrod, 'Der Schein der Modernität: Zur Historisierung der Volksgemeinschaft', in Karsten Rudolph and Christel Wickert, eds., *Geschichte als Möglichkeit: Über die Chancen der Demokratie* (Essen, 1995), pp. 224–42.

expectations, or that it hinged on a modernist fascination with states of emergency and the radical transformation of a malleable social body.³²

Historians have since become more prepared to acknowledge that modernity is essentially ambivalent and therefore not incompatible with Nazism.³³ But the subjective dimension of this relationship warrants further exploration and debate. The Third Reich venerated certain stereotypical twentieth-century figures, such as the heroic warrior or the racially defined *Übermensch*, while marginalizing others, especially those associated with weakness and Jewishness, to the point of extinction. In that sense, it aimed at eradicating ambivalence.³⁴ Yet, it also thrived on ambivalence, in the sense of redefining and exploiting many of the diverse versions of subjectivity that had been such an integral part of Weimar-era modernity.³⁵ Without taking this combination of rigidity and flexibility into consideration, the attraction and power of Nazism's subjective dimension remains difficult to understand. The studies of gender images and consumer culture under review in this section demonstrate how, after 1933, Germans were invited to see themselves as part of a new whole at the most mundane level—as women and men, as shoppers for coffee and washing powder, or as cinemagoers admiring prominent actors and actresses.

In this vein, Jana F. Bruns has recently provided an analysis of the film stars Marika Rökk (who was Hungarian) and Zarah Leander and Kristina Söderbaum (who were both Swedish) within the broader context of Nazi popular culture. Her interest lies in their position as 'icons on which people focus their attention and their desires' and 'models for self-transformation'.³⁶ Siding with authors who have previously emphasized the polyvalence of the films produced under the Third Reich,³⁷ Bruns highlights that Rökk, Leander, and Söderbaum married seductiveness and conservatism, agency and subordination. All three formed part of a cinematic culture that took shape in the mid- to late 1930s. It was anti-feminist yet created new spaces for women, deeply ideological yet highly entertaining, prescriptive yet allowing for

³² Mark Roseman, 'National socialism and modernisation', in Richard Bessel, ed., *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: comparisons and contrasts* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 197–229, at pp. 233–5; Peter Fritzsche, 'Nazi Modern', *Modernism/Modernity*, 3 (1996), pp. 1–22.

³³ See the comprehensive overview by Riccardo Bavaj, *Die Ambivalenz der Moderne im Nationalsozialismus: Eine Bilanz der Forschung* (Oldenbourg, 2003). For a critical view, see Mark Roseman, 'National socialism and the end of modernity', *American Historical Review*, 116 (2011), pp. 688–701.

³⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY, 1989); Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: conformity, opposition, and racism in everyday life* (New Haven, CT, 1987).

³⁵ For a development of this argument, see Moritz Föllmer, 'Which crisis? Which modernity? New perspectives on Weimar Germany', in Jochen Hung, Godela Weiss-Sussex, and Geoff Wilkes, eds., *Beyond glitter and doom: the contingency of the Weimar Republic* (Munich, 2012), pp. 19–30, at pp. 26–7.

³⁶ Jana F. Bruns, *Nazi cinema's new women* (Cambridge, 2009), quotations pp. 6, 9.

³⁷ Erik Rentschler, *Ministry of illusion: Nazi cinema and its afterlife* (Cambridge, MA, 1996); Mary Elizabeth O'Brien, *Nazi cinema as enchantment: the politics of entertainment in the Third Reich* (Columbia, SC, 2003).

selection and appropriation. Within this culture, the stars performed different roles: the exotic revue dancer (Rökk), the lascivious seducer (Leander), and the self-sacrificing, morally pure 'Aryan' woman (Söderbaum). Plot lines and characters, poster images and press commentary oscillated between, on the one hand, considerable fascination with fluid, titillating identities and, on the other, the reassurance that all three were at heart authentic and modest women. However, it became more difficult to integrate entertainment and foreignness during the war, which caused Rökk's career to falter, prompted Leander to defect to her native Sweden (although her box-office hit *Die große Liebe* ('The Great Love') continued to be shown), and led Söderbaum to play more interesting but fatally doomed characters.

Nancy R. Reagin's study of housekeeping and nationalism leads us into different though related territory.³⁸ Since the foundation of the Empire in 1871, and even more after Germany's defeat in the First World War, cleanliness was elevated to a specifically German, timeless quality that was dependent on and implemented by women. The very banality of this branch of nationalist discourse served to link the private to the public, everyday activity to a greater sense of purpose. This pre-history made it easy for housewives to blend into the post-1933 cultural universe. Housekeeping courses and advice centres, the mandatory 'service year' for young women that was introduced in 1939, the *Eintopfsontage* ('Stew Sundays'), Christmas celebrations, selections for the Mother Cross award: all refashioned and racialized bourgeois domesticity. 'Asocial' mothers were excluded from the *Volksgemeinschaft*, or at best coerced into it in a special camp for mothers and children, the Hashude Settlement in Bremen. Outreach programmes targeting *volksdeutsche* minorities in Eastern Europe, and the promotion of a range of frugal practices in line with the Four Year Plan tied housewifery to the Third Reich's imperial project. So did participation in the 'Germanization' of the Wartheland or Danzig-West Prussia after the conquest of Poland. There, female members of various Nazi organizations drew on a familiar blend of domesticity and national identity, starkly contrasted with Polish dirtiness and disorder, to educate resettled ethnic Germans or decide which residents could be naturalized.³⁹ Housekeeping was thus a vehicle that allowed many women to play a significant and comparatively independent role in the definition and implementation of Nazism.

If domesticity was thus integrated into the post-1933 cultural universe, the same goes for consumption and commerce, a process recently analysed by S. Jonathan Wiesen.⁴⁰ His focus is on the discursive and imaginary dimensions

³⁸ Nancy R. Reagin, *Sweeping the German nation: domesticity and national identity in Germany, 1870-1945* (New York, NY, 2007).

³⁹ Here, Reagin follows up on the pioneering study by Elizabeth Harvey, *Women and the Nazi east: agents and witnesses of Germanization* (New Haven, CT, 2003), who foregrounds young, independent women.

⁴⁰ S. Jonathan Wiesen, *Creating the Nazi marketplace: commerce and consumption in the Third Reich* (New York, NY, 2011).

of the economy rather than the mere realization of material interests stressed by Götz Aly.⁴¹ The key argument of the book is that business elites held on to bourgeois values and marketing professionals refined their persuasion techniques, but that such continuity and partial autonomy were, for the most part, compatible with Nazism. While the Four Year Plan's ethic of self-denial for the sake of autarky posed evident problems, the Third Reich depended all the more on a credible scenario of future material abundance. And the ubiquitous emphasis on *Leistung* (achievement) and struggle provided ample ideological space for economic competition. Against this backdrop, business elites and marketing professionals proved skilful at adjusting to the framework of what Wiesen labels the 'Nazi marketplace'. Public relations came to resemble American models while frequently highlighting the Germanness of the product or company under discussion. Advertisers and graphic designers enjoyed greater recognition as professionals than before. The business elites gathered in the German Rotary movement were attracted to the rhetoric of *Leistung*, which dovetailed with their own quest to invest their belief in the individual with a deeper spiritual purpose. The *Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung* (Society for Consumer Research), founded in 1935, was preoccupied with the more concrete question of Germans' thoughts, feelings, and desires. It showed a keen interest in the complexities of both individual and group psychology and was convinced that its approach was superior to American materialism and conformism.

What follows from seeing film stars and housewives, businessmen, market professionals, and consumers in conjunction?⁴² To begin with, it makes us recognize that Nazism allowed for a wide range of legitimate subject positions. The 'ordinary Germans' whose attitudes and actions have been so intensely debated in recent years were in the first instance a cultural construction, as consumer advertisements or the rhetoric surrounding domesticity exemplify. Pre-existing identities stemming from the early twentieth or even nineteenth centuries were integrated into the post-1933 cultural universe. For contemporaries, it was easy to see the Third Reich through the prism of an emerging society of middle-class consumers who benefited from modern products and services, all the more since propaganda blamed what deprivation persisted on the failures of the Weimar 'system' and on Germany's enemies. Significantly, this entailed a partial overlap between Nazism and bourgeois values, which emerges clearly from Reagan's book on housekeeping and Wiesen's chapter on the Rotarians as well as from recent studies of (sub)urban images and lifestyles.⁴³ By contrast, it has hardly been addressed by leading German

⁴¹ Götz Aly, *Hitler's beneficiaries: plunder, race war, and the Nazi welfare state* (New York, NY, 2006).

⁴² Some of the following arguments have been developed in Moritz Föllmer, *Individuality and modernity in Berlin: self and society from Weimar to the Wall* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 105–31.

⁴³ Sandra Schürmann, *Dornröschen und König Bergbau: Kulturelle Urbanisierung und bürgerliche Repräsentationen am Beispiel der Stadt Recklinghausen (1930–1960)* (Paderborn, 2005);

historians of the *Bürgertum*, who seem to prefer the vague notion of a rise 'from the ashes' after 1945 to a serious engagement with continuities and discontinuities.⁴⁴ The '*Faschisierung* of the bourgeois subject' turns out to be a smoother, less drastic process than that suggested by the – by no means ubiquitous or unequivocal – anti-bourgeois rhetoric of the Nazi movement and regime.⁴⁵

The various Nazi-era discourses surrounding subjectivity were furthermore distinctive for making the boundaries between ordinariness and extraordinariness appear very fluid. There was certainly no shortage of prominent personalities, but, as in Marika Röck's case, their down-to-earthness and authenticity was frequently highlighted. In turn, propaganda provided a whole range of ways in which ordinary Germans could be seen as extraordinary. The housewives and mothers discussed by Reagin are a case in point, as are the consumers who were so often depicted as participants in a grand project, if only by drinking decaffeinated coffee or saving up for a *Volkswagen*, or the 'German' workers who were celebrated for their strength and skills.⁴⁶ While each of the relevant studies singles out one strand of the post-1933 cultural universe, it needs to be stressed that different subject positions were in actual fact juxtaposed. Readers of newspapers, arguably still the most significant of the media in German society, were simultaneously confronted with extraordinary (yet authentic) ace pilots, film stars, or outstanding scientists and with ordinary housewives, theatregoers, or commuters.⁴⁷ This allowed for a range of potential admiration and identification, all safely within the ideological framework of Nazism.

Seeing different discursive strands in conjunction allows us to appreciate another feature of the Third Reich, namely the sheer scale of redefinition, which the shorthand notion of 'propaganda' easily obscures. Advertising men and market researchers, authors writing for housekeeping journals and a whole array of other specialized periodicals, the journalists who filled the columns of Germany's daily newspapers – all of them were busy incorporating prior notions of selfhood into the post-1933 cultural universe, to whose formation

Jochen Guckes, *Konstruktionen bürgerlicher Identität: Städtische Selbstbilder in Freiburg, Dresden und Dortmund 1900–1960* (Paderborn, 2011).

⁴⁴ Hans-Ulrich Wehler, 'Deutsches Bürgertum nach 1945: Exitus oder Phönix aus der Asche?', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 27 (2001), pp. 617–34; Manfred Hettling and Bernd Ulrich, eds., *Bürgertum nach 1945* (Hamburg, 2005).

⁴⁵ Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Die Faschisierung des bürgerlichen Subjekts: Die Ideologie der gesunden Normalität und die Ausrottungspolitik in dem deutschen Faschismus* (Berlin, 1986). It is worth adding that, according to the biographies discussed above, neither in Himmler's nor in Heydrich's nor in Greiser's case was there anything resembling an ideologically charged break with their middle-class fathers. Goebbels's anti-bourgeois attitude was in the end rather inconsistent, see the conclusion in Longerich, *Goebbels*, pp. 686–7. ⁴⁶ Lüdtke, 'The "honor of labor"'.
⁴⁷ Föllmer, *Individuality and modernity in Berlin*, pp. 113–17. On the significance of daily newspapers see Karl Christian Führer, 'Die Tageszeitung als wichtigstes Massenmedium der nationalsozialistischen Gesellschaft', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 55 (2007), pp. 411–34.

they conversely contributed.⁴⁸ How effective these efforts ultimately were is a much debated question, whose answer evidently depends on what is taken as the yardstick of effectiveness. At its most demanding, Nazism amounted to an ambitious ethic that called for self-sacrifice to the greater good of the *Volk*. A great amount of energy went into promulgating this transformational notion of a subject governed by Nazi principles not out of compliance, but of his or her own volition.⁴⁹ However, it always sat uneasily with the equally important promise that pre-1933 identities and desires could unproblematically blend into Nazism as a flexible ideological framework. Where the regime attempted to impose its ideological priorities on 'Aryans', it met with a blend of submission, manipulation, and tacit resistance, as well as with pragmatic modifications by local authorities.⁵⁰

However, that few people were actually governed by an ethic of self-sacrifice hardly meant that Nazism was not 'effective', as the biographies of some of the Third Reich's most important protagonists have already demonstrated. It was possible to treat it as a framework that imposed limitations but still allowed for selective and often very self-interested appropriation. The relationship between Jewish and Gentile Germans is a case in point for this interplay. In its pure forms, Nazism construed Jews as the polar opposite of 'Aryan' subjectivity. It denied them 'life', identified them with capitalist abstraction and alienation, or imagined them as dangerous bacteria.⁵¹ However, even after years of propaganda campaigns, many people failed to share such a view, as the more sceptical reactions to the pogrom of 9 November 1938 show.⁵² Against this backdrop, the less conspicuous discursive exclusion of Jews from legitimate subjectivity, from the realms of 'German' housekeeping, commerce, and consumption (or, one might add, medicine, scholarship, and music) was all the more important. For it allowed Gentiles to disentangle themselves smoothly from the Jewish minority, instead of identifying with ideological purism and physical brutality, and to employ anti-Semitism for their own ends. Ultimately, the regime was rather tolerant of such selective uses rather than full endorsements of anti-Semitism – as we have seen above, even Himmler's

⁴⁸ A further striking example is the integration of culture and artists into a Nazi framework, see David B. Dennis, *Inhumanities: Nazi interpretations of Western culture* (Cambridge, 2012).

⁴⁹ Sabine Behrenbeck, *Der Kult um die toten Helden: Nationalsozialistische Mythen, Riten und Symbole* (Cologne, 1996), pp. 195–446; Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi conscience* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

⁵⁰ See, for instance, Michelle Mouton, *From nurturing the nation to purifying the Volk: Weimar and Nazi family policy, 1918–1945* (New York, NY, 2007), with rich evidence from Westphalia.

⁵¹ Boaz Neumann, 'The national socialist politics of life', *New German Critique*, 85, Special Issue on Intellectuals (Winter 2002), pp. 107–30; Moishe Postone, 'Anti-Semitism and national socialism', in Anson Rabinbach and Jack Zipes, eds., *Germans and Jews since the Holocaust* (New York, NY, 1986), pp. 302–14; Jäckel, *Hitler's Weltanschauung*, ch. 3.

⁵² See Peter Longerich, '*Davon haben wir nicht gewußt!*: Die Deutschen und die Judenverfolgung, 1933–1945' (Munich, 2006), pp. 129–35.

anti-Jewish venom was a matter of personal and institutional tactics just as much as of genuine conviction.

Ideological purism and selective appropriation continued to co-exist during the Second World War, but in a drastically altered, more tension-ridden context. Nazi cinema assumed a somewhat incoherent outlook, since the widespread desire for entertainment conflicted with repeated attempts at indoctrination, and non-German themes and stars proved more difficult to integrate. In the course of the war, the quest for consumption was first satisfied then frequently frustrated, while the expanding empire opened new opportunities for housekeeping experts. Nazi ideology became more demanding, yet many soldiers drew on its features without being compelled to do so (censorship banned and persecuted dissident statements but did not force pro-Nazi ones).⁵³ Both Reagan and Wiesen could have engaged with some of the wartime correspondence between spouses (or the substantial literature dedicated to them) to demonstrate how dreams of domesticity, consumption, and individual mobility, rather than any heroic attitude, could prompt correspondents to justify 'harsh measures' in Russia or wish for a 'miracle weapon' descending on England.⁵⁴ Of course, subjective involvement in the Nazi project entailed much more than such a continuous selective appropriation. It also meant exerting power over other Europeans, brutalizing, and, in many cases, killing them. It is to the topics of participation in imperial rule, the war of extermination, and mass murder that we must now turn.

III

In the 1990s, research on the Third Reich led to a fundamental insight: the circle of participants in the mass murder of Jews and Slavs, the mentally disabled, gypsies, and gays was much larger than had previously been assumed. The process of identifying, rounding up, deporting, and transporting those whose lives ended in the gas chambers was deeply ideological, and it involved many people. Only in part were the killings an 'industrial' and bureaucratic phenomenon. Approximately half the killings were shootings, a finding that raised difficult questions about the causes and motivations of such

⁵³ See, for instance, Klaus Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten – nationalsozialistischer Krieg? Kriegserlebnis – Kriegserfahrung, 1939–1945* (Paderborn, 1998); Sven-Oliver Müller, *Deutsche Soldaten und ihre Feinde: Nationalismus an Front und Heimatfront im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt, 2007); Frank Werner, "'Hart müssen wir hier draußen sein': Soldatische Männlichkeit im Vernichtungskrieg, 1941–1944', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 34 (2008), pp. 5–40.

⁵⁴ See Föllmer, *Individuality and modernity in Berlin*, pp. 168–73; Klaus Latzel, "'Freie Bahn dem Tüchtigen!'" Kriegserfahrung und Perspektiven für die Nachkriegszeit in Feldpostbriefen aus dem Zweiten Weltkrieg', in Gottfried Niedhart and Dieter Riesenberger, eds., *Lernen aus dem Krieg? Deutsche Nachkriegszeiten 1918 und 1945* (Munich, 1992), pp. 331–43.

direct violence.⁵⁵ The perpetrators of such shootings were by no means all die-hard SS men, and nor were they forced by the threat of reprisals. But what were they then? ‘Ordinary men’ who abruptly found themselves in an extreme social situation and were exposed to group pressure to join the killings that their unit was ordered to carry out?⁵⁶ Or ‘ordinary Germans’ so governed by anti-Semitic beliefs that they were only waiting to be unleashed and actually have the opportunity to kill Jews?⁵⁷ The historiography of the last decade and a half has moved towards ever more refined analyses of the relationship between these two dimensions. It has demonstrated how ideological convictions and social situations blended into each other, while also amalgamating with institutional contexts and prior experiences.⁵⁸ At the same time, the broader assignment of moral responsibility since the 1990s has coincided with increasingly complex understandings of agency, and a tendency to qualify the trinity of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders.⁵⁹

Against this backdrop of growing historiographical complexity, Thomas Kühne has now proposed a wide-reaching interpretation of German participation in genocide. He places it in the context of comradeship, which he sees both as a normative discourse and a social practice. Germans of different class, generational, and political backgrounds eventually formed a ‘grand brotherhood of crime’ through a quest for ‘togetherness, cohesion and belonging’.⁶⁰ While this quest predated the Third Reich, it was implemented in its camps, which amounted to an ‘anti-structure’ that bridged the gap between communal rhetoric and actual behaviour, through the creation of insiders who strengthened their mutual bond by bullying outsiders. Thus, experienced and mythicized, small-scale units enabled a widespread shift from a culture of inner guilt to one of outward shame, in which maintaining one’s place in the group overrode individual ethical responsibility. Once crimes began to be committed together, the remaining moral qualms disappeared or were transcended by appeals to mutual solidarity. The soft, emotional side of comradeship helped soldiers to cope with the pressures of prolonged genocidal warfare and their

⁵⁵ See the concise summary by Ulrich Herbert, ‘Introduction’, in Herbert, ed., *National socialist extermination policies: contemporary German perspectives and controversies* (New York, NY, 2000), pp. 1–28.

⁵⁶ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary men: reserve police battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, NY, 2002).

⁵⁷ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s willing executioners: ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, NY, 1996).

⁵⁸ See the reflections by Mark Roseman, ‘Beyond conviction? Perpetrators, ideas, and actions in the Holocaust in historiographical perspective’, in Frank Biess, Mark Roseman, and Hanna Schissler, eds., *Conflict, catastrophe and continuity: essays on modern German history* (New York, NY, 2007), pp. 83–103.

⁵⁹ Compare Harald Welzer, *Täter: Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt, 2005), or Donald Bloxham and Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust: critical historical approaches* (Manchester, 2005), with Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, victims, bystanders: the Jewish catastrophe, 1933–1945* (New York, NY, 1992).

⁶⁰ Kühne, *Belonging and genocide*, pp. 5, 4.

doubts about Germany's military prospects. This experience, together with the consciousness that Germany had turned itself into a pariah nation that could expect revenge in case of defeat, only reinforced the bonds between them. In this, the soldiers were backed and even incited by women, who expected their men to abide by the ethic of comradeship and even adopted it themselves. The continuous sense and experience of belonging thus explains not just the popularity of Nazis and the Holocaust but also Germans' dogged determination to keep fighting the war long after it had been militarily lost.

Whereas Kühne proposes an overarching interpretation of Germany's war and genocide, we are back to the mode of the specific monograph with Elissa Mailänder Koslov's study of female SS guards in the concentration and extermination camp Majdanek.⁶¹ Mainly on the basis of testimonies recorded in several post-war trials and former inmates' accounts, Mailänder Koslov endeavours to explore the microdynamics of physical violence, paying equal attention to the framework set by the Third Reich's politics of extermination, the social context of the camp, and the guards' interests, experiences, and desires. For this, she applies the notion of *Eigen-Sinn* (which literally translates as 'stubbornness'), coined in the 1980s by her doctoral adviser Alf Lüdtke,⁶² and draws on Michel Foucault's reflections on the productive character of power as well as on anthropological theorizations of violence. The female guards, who had previously struggled to secure employment beyond assembly line work or domestic labour, first found job security and social mobility in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Once arrived in Majdanek, they began to take part in Germany's imperial experience 'in the East', defined by racist demarcation, unprecedented power, material gain, and harsh living conditions. They were operating within a tightly controlled environment and were themselves subjected to strong disciplinary pressures. Yet, they proved able to make this environment their own through *Eigen-Sinn*, i.e. by frequently circumventing the rules and thus putting a personal touch on the violence they exerted. This often meant going beyond the prescribed severity and administering additional whippings, kicks, or slaps. Significantly, the twenty-eight female guards constituted a tiny minority amidst the 1,200 SS men working in the camp, a highly gendered configuration that fluctuated between subordination and attraction. Their violence did not just aim to destroy the inmates but also encompassed a communication of power to colleagues, pride in hard and expertly conducted work, and self-enhancement

⁶¹ Elissa Mailänder Koslov, *Gewalt im Dienstalltag: Die SS-Aufseherinnen des Konzentrations- und Vernichtungslagers Majdanek* (Hamburg, 2009).

⁶² Alf Lüdtke, 'Cash, coffee breaks, horseplay: *Eigensinn* and politics among factory workers in Germany circa 1900', in Michael Hanagan and Charles Stephenson, eds., *Confrontation, class consciousness, and the labor process: studies in proletarian class formation* (New York, NY, 1986), pp. 65–95.

through acts of deliberate cruelty that subjected their recipients to excruciating bodily pain.

Compared to the SS guards in Majdanek, the involvement of female *Wehrmacht* 'helpers' in Nazi Germany's imperial and genocidal project appears minor. But Franka Maubach compellingly argues that the gendered notion of 'help', with its charitable connotations, obscures what was actually crucial participation by around half a million women (in addition to the 'helpers' in concentration camps, SS units, and the Red Cross).⁶³ Female 'helpers', some of whom Maubach interviewed, strove for independence from defeated (and all the more authoritarian) fathers, and mothers who remained confined to a purely domestic role. This independence they found in the League for German Girls, then in the Labour Service for young women.⁶⁴ From 1939, they were mobilized into a wartime context that offered them manifold new experiences. The women, who were mostly employed in the news service, were especially attracted by the charms of Paris, as well as by the unprecedented living standards available in former mansions, hotels, or monasteries. The lifestyle attractions of Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe, by contrast, appeared rather limited, which only increased the importance of feeling culturally and racially superior. Far from being exclusively focused on masculine models, the 'helpers' developed gender-specific forms of agency and belonging, and invested concepts such as comradeship or service with a meaning of their own. And they exerted power over others, not least by occupying spaces that had been cleared of their previous inhabitants. From 1943, 'help' assumed a more defensive meaning, entailing the challenge of coping with one's fear and isolation. As defeat became imminent, the women frequently experienced sexist slurs ('helper whore') that excluded them from the *Volksgemeinschaft* of which they felt so strongly a part.

Again, the focus here is on the conclusions that can be drawn when reading several studies in conjunction. The books by Kühne, Mailänder Koslov, and Maubach are less concerned with ascertaining widespread involvement in the Nazi project (which would no longer be original) than with its interpretation. They converge in stressing the crucial role of gender identities, which provided men with a drastically heightened sense of self-worth while also opening up new realms of female agency. Furthermore, they place great emphasis on the Nazi Empire as a vast space that allowed individuals to experience such self-worth, agency, and empowerment at the expense of subjugated populations.⁶⁵ Shopping in Paris, fighting rearguard battles on Soviet territory, or guarding inmates in Majdanek were evidently not the same

⁶³ Franka Maubach, *Die Stellung halten: Kriegserfahrungen und Lebensgeschichten von Wehrmachthelferinnen* (Göttingen, 2009).

⁶⁴ See also Dagmar Reese, *Growing up female in Nazi Germany* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2006).

⁶⁵ See Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi rule in occupied Europe* (London, 2008); Harvey, *Women and the Nazi east*; Dieter Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht: Deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion, 1941–1944* (Munich, 2008).

thing, yet all formed part of an imperial experience that entailed unprecedented brutality and the blaming of all setbacks on partisans and Jews. All three books are attentive to both ideology and social practice, though with differences that largely depend on the empirical vantage point taken by their authors. A focus on contemporary normative discourse will always suggest a greater role for ideology than a source basis consisting of post-1945 court records, which primarily lends itself to a careful reconstruction of microsocial dynamics.

That said, the subjects who emerged from these books were clearly influenced by ideology. ‘Influence’ should be not equated with direct motivation, but stemmed from being exposed to norms in the shape of regulations, or drawing on features of the prevailing discourse to justify one’s own actions. Post-1933, the subjects at issue underwent a period of formation in specific social settings, first and foremost in camps that served both inclusionary and exclusionary purposes.⁶⁶ There, they learnt to relate to each other in novel ways, as ‘comrades’, while also retaining and in many ways even expanding their autonomy and agency. Thus prepared, they became subjects of the Nazi Empire with relative ease, along the way appropriating new objects, spaces, and tasks, empowering themselves, and becoming complicit in genocidal warfare. When the war turned into an increasingly desperate struggle against defeat, they remained loyal to a project they had come to see as a German rather than just a ‘Nazi’ one. While there is thus much that is uncontroversial between the three authors, Kühne’s arguments are the most wide-reaching. Beyond the evident genre differences between an interpretive long essay and a monograph on a specific topic, there is the larger issue of whether the ‘comrade’ really overrode all other identities to the point of underpinning Germans’ quest for national belonging and its genocidal realization. Both Mailänder Koslov and Maubach, who after all foreground groups especially involved in the Nazi project, emphasize motivational and discursive mixes, which were no less ‘effective’ for their complexity – witness the violent consequences of the competition between the Majdanek guards. Interestingly, Maubach insists on the specificity of female comradeship which, she argues, never blended into a male-dominated model as unproblematically as suggested by Kühne.⁶⁷

Kühne’s essay is most convincing when analysing the normative discourse about comradeship, the social environment of the post-1933 camps and the wartime SS units, as well as the ways in which soldiers bonded to cope with the strains of fighting on the Eastern Front. But he overstretches his arguments by applying them to Germans as a whole. As one reviewer has argued, for all their importance the camps cannot be taken as representative of a society that

⁶⁶ See also Kiran Klaus Patel, ‘“Auslese” und “Ausmerze”: Das Janusgesicht der nationalsozialistischen Lager’, *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 54 (2006), pp. 339–65.

⁶⁷ Maubach, *Die Stellung halten*, pp. 22, 41.

remained, and became, much more complex than that.⁶⁸ And as another reviewer has pointed out, Kühne himself tacitly acknowledges a broader scale of motivations and beliefs as he approaches the end of his book.⁶⁹ If, as he himself writes, “organized guilt” fueled the cohesion of the *Volksgemeinschaft*⁷⁰ then this is difficult to reconcile with his claim that Germany had long moved from a culture of guilt to one of shame. Other scholars who have recently foregrounded the quest for a *Volksgemeinschaft* stress that this quest created new differences not just between ‘Aryans’ and stigmatized minorities, but also among ‘Aryans’ themselves, and that nationalism and racism amalgamated with other identities.⁷¹ Not even the Nazi party qualifies as an ‘anti-structure’ in opposition to modern society, for it was a complex organization in which the ‘comrade’ and the charismatic leader co-existed with the member and the functionary.⁷² Kühne’s stark opposition between the individual on the one hand and the group and *Volk* on the other is not universally shared either. Thus, Michael Geyer has pointed to overlaps between ‘aggressive individualism and communitarian ideology’, while others have stressed a ‘Nazi version of cultivating individuality’ in the leisure organization Strength through Joy or ‘an emphasis on individual performance and efficiency’ in occupied Eastern Europe.⁷³

Whereas the ways in which wartime Germans defined themselves thus remain open to debate, the significance of their demarcation from cultural and racial others is not in doubt. Notions of comradeship rested on the existence of Russian non-comrades who thus did not merit any respect for their lives.⁷⁴ Many Majdanek guards enhanced themselves by inflicting extreme bodily pain on inmates. The *Wehrmacht* ‘helpers’, by contrast, left the Western Europeans in whose occupation they partook the chance to be ‘nice’. But that entailed defining the limits of their acceptable agency – as soon as they turned out to be ‘malicious’, i.e. refused to accept their subordinate position, they would

⁶⁸ Frank Bajohr, ‘Mass murder and community building’, *German History*, 30 (2012), pp. 120–6, at pp. 122–4.

⁶⁹ Mark Roseman in *Social History*, 36 (2011), pp. 372–4.

⁷⁰ Kühne, *Belonging and genocide*, p. 157.

⁷¹ Bajohr and Wildt, eds., *Volksgemeinschaft*.

⁷² Armin Nolzen, ‘Inklusion und Exklusion im “Dritten Reich”: Das Beispiel der NSDAP’, in Bajohr and Wildt, eds., *Volksgemeinschaft*, pp. 60–77; Nolzen, ‘Charismatic legitimation and bureaucratic rule: the NSDAP in the Third Reich, 1933–1945’, *German History*, 23 (2005), pp. 498–518. See also important recent work on financial bureaucrats’ contribution to the Holocaust or on the managerial side of the SS: Aly, *Hitler’s beneficiaries*, part III; Michael Thad Allen, *The Business of genocide: the SS, slave labor, and the concentration camps* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002).

⁷³ Michael Geyer, ‘Aggressiver Individualismus und Gemeinschaftsideologie’, *Zeithistorische Forschungen*, 1 (2004), pp. 87–91; Shelley Baranowski, *Strength through joy: consumerism and mass tourism in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 43; Harvey, *Women and the Nazi east*, p. 15; see Föllmer, *Individuality and modernity*, part II.

⁷⁴ See the title of the path-breaking study by Christian Streit, *Keine Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen, 1941–1945* (Bonn, 1978).

be reined in through threats.⁷⁵ The shorthand label of ‘depersonalization’ tends to obscure what was actually a whole process of individuals reducing the subjectivities of the captive, incarcerated, or occupied Europeans and conversely expanding their own. Reducing subjectivities also comprised triggering new forms of agency, such as the struggle for food and survival among half-starved ghetto residents or concentration camp inmates.⁷⁶ In his brilliant account of the little-known Starachowiche slave-labour camp in Central Poland, largely based on survivor testimonies, Christopher Browning has demonstrated how this environment was designed to offer ‘choiceless choices’.⁷⁷ Yet, he also shows how the Jewish camp inmates, against a backdrop of shifting political priorities, worked to prove their economic worth, organized food in a wholesale underground economy, took care of family members when they were sick, and tried to save them from being killed after deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau. This was agency in an extreme moral universe, often at the expense of less close inmates, even if it entailed occasional sacrifice and solidarity beyond the circle of the family. Yet, it amounted to challenging and transcending the drastically reduced subjectivity that Nazism envisioned for Jews.

IV

This review began by introducing the subjective dimension of Nazism as one perspective which can be used to transcend the particularly marked specialization of the historiography on the Third Reich and to draw connections between differently focused studies. These studies include, first, biographies, which elucidate this subjective dimension inasmuch as they do not merely reconstruct the lives and careers of their protagonists but also analyse their respective ways of understanding and fashioning themselves (in the case of Longerich’s studies of Himmler and Goebbels with the help of carefully applied psychological categories). Other books discuss key figures of modernity, such as the consumer or the star and (if indeed ‘modernity’ includes nineteenth-century bourgeois continuities) the businessman or the housewife. In the vein of much recent cultural and gender history, they show how those figures were constructed, a process in which film directors and advertisement experts, activists, and popular journalists played a crucial role. While the first two approaches are not confined to the analysis of the Third Reich, the third

⁷⁵ Maubach, *Die Stellung halten*, pp. 123–7.

⁷⁶ Gustavo Corni, *Hitler’s ghettos: voices from a beleaguered society, 1939–1944* (London, 2002), pp. 135–7, 155; Herbert Obenaus, ‘Der Kampf um das tägliche Brot’, in Ulrich Herbert, Karin Orth, and Christoph Dieckmann, eds., *Die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager: Entwicklung und Struktur* (Frankfurt, 2002), pp. 841–73.

⁷⁷ Christopher R. Browning, *Remembering survival: inside a Nazi slave-labor camp* (New York, NY, 2010). The notion of ‘choiceless choices’ has been coined by Lawrence Langer in *Versions of survival: the Holocaust and the human spirit* (Albany, NY, 1982).

emerged from the more specific issue of Germans' participation in imperial rule and mass murder (although it is now increasingly being extended to the comparative study of twentieth-century genocides).⁷⁸ Those analyses of this participation that engage with its subjective dimension explore transformations of individual and collective morality, demonstrate how norms and rules were appropriated in often very personal ways, and trace logics of self-empowerment within the contexts created by the Nazi Empire. For this, they draw on a variety of methodological and conceptual influences, including *Alltagsgeschichte* and oral history, discourse analysis and gender studies, Foucault's emphasis on the microdynamics of power, as well as anthropological theorizations of cruelty or shame.

As a whole, these studies represent a healthy conceptual and methodological pluralism. They do not amount to one clearly defined 'Nazi subject' nor, *pace* Kühne, to one predominant type congenial to Nazism such as the 'comrade'. But they bring us closer to understanding how Hitler's movement and regime connected different, shifting subject positions through both cohesion and competition, creating a dynamic that kept producing new exclusions and violent acts. This process began with the high ambitions of the post-1918 period for masculine greatness and heroism, as in the case of Goebbels or Himmler, as well as for female autonomy, as in the case of the girls who later became concentration camp guards or *Wehrmacht* 'helpers'. Weimar Germany, which was widely perceived as both stiflingly rigid and dangerously volatile, tended to disappoint such expectations (and the same could be said about the Austrian Republic). Yet, its contingency, its openness to sudden and drastic transformation, also proved attractive to ambitious, highly self-centred men with an extreme-right sensibility, especially once Hitler's movement was under way. The years after 1933 can be seen as a learning process. Crucial figures of modern society such as film actors, consumers, or businessmen now had to be 'Aryan'. Largely through Hitler's preferences, extreme and anti-Semitic attitudes allowed for stellar careers, a logic that Himmler and Heydrich understood early and Greiser came around to grasping. Post-1933 society was cohesive in novel ways, as the Nazi organizations and camps show, while also being intensely competitive, which provided room for stardom (and its parasite Goebbels), prompted the SS apparatus to radicalize more and more, stimulated housewives to keep improving their skills, and bridged the gap to the world of business (not least through the 'Aryanization' of Jewish companies).

In spite of the frequent ideological emphasis on self-transformation, the subjects who prevailed in the Third Reich were not 'new' men or women. They mostly remained rooted in pre-1933 experiences and identities but they operated within a very different ideological, institutional, and

⁷⁸ Welzer, *Täter*, pp. 220–45; Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: a genocide* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 261–99.

social framework. This made them simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary, stimulated rather than stifled by gaps between norms and experiences, both solidary with and resentful of others. Soon after the Second World War began, the Nazi Empire provided them with ample opportunity for material enrichment, expansive agency, and power over other Europeans, a dimension that is evident in the case of Heydrich or Greiser as well as that of the *Wehrmacht* ‘helpers’ or the Majdanek guards. After just a few years, however, it had to be defended in what soon turned out to be a drawn-out rearguard battle. Now, tropes of heroism and sacrifice co-existed with a defensive focus on the personal realm, comradesly experiences and desires for the elimination of real or perceived enemies with a quest for seemingly unpolitical entertainment and restored domesticity. In most cases, such complex motivational mixes remained compatible with a basic loyalty to Nazism and war. But they also gave room for a renewed drive for ideological purity, led by Himmler and Goebbels whose power was enhanced, not reduced, in the second half of the war. This made pre-1939 style ordinariness appear ever more elusive, conditional upon the ‘miracle’ evoked in Zarah Leander’s popular wartime song *Ich weiß es wird einmal ein Wunder gescheh’n* (‘I know a miracle will happen some day’). However, when this ‘miracle’ failed to materialize and their country suffered a devastating defeat, most Germans, important repercussions notwithstanding,⁷⁹ proved able to leave behind the pre-1945 framework with surprising ease. Because Nazism had always been compatible with a range of twentieth-century subject positions, they could return to being businessmen, housewives, or consumers without having to reinvent themselves.

What, in the end, was specifically ‘Nazi’ about the subjective dimension of the Third Reich? On the one hand, the claim of remaking mankind was one of the features Hitler’s regime had in common with Stalin’s, while the blend between radical self-transformation and national renewal can plausibly be labelled Fascist.⁸⁰ On the other, Nazism capitalized on a dynamically modern society and has, with respect to its capacity to ‘release individual ambition from constraints of profession, class, religion and gender’, been likened to the ‘liberal pursuit of happiness’.⁸¹ For all its comparability in several directions, the importance of racism and war was so all-pervasive as to make Nazism specific. In conjunction with manifold personal desires, interests, and sheer

⁷⁹ See, for instance, Daniel Fulda et al., eds., *Demokratie im Schatten der Gewalt: Geschichten des Privaten im deutschen Nachkrieg* (Göttingen, 2010); Svenja Goltermann, *Die Gesellschaft der Überlebenden: Kriegsheimkehrer und ihre Gewalterfahrungen im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Munich, 2009).

⁸⁰ 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* (New York, NY, 2009), pp. 302–41; Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: the sense of a beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke, 2007).

⁸¹ Michael Geyer, ‘Restorative elites, German society and the Nazi pursuit of war’, in Bessel, ed., *Fascist Italy*, pp. 134–64, at p. 160.

idionsyncrasies, this led to a plethora of redefinitions and transformations. The whole process not only had a subjective dimension but was dependent on it to become widely acceptable, translate ideology into practice, and produce extremely violent outcomes. To conceive of life through the prism of an increasingly existential struggle while pursuing an individual agenda in an equally 'unconditional' fashion – this combination was inextricably linked to racism and war. Hence, the destructiveness and eventual self-destructiveness of the Third Reich, but also the ease with which many were able to distance themselves from it in the wake of its defeat.