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Power in a Union? German Organized Labor and the Rise of the Nazi Party
Abstract

Traditionally, many historians have viewed the German working class as being instrumental to Hitler’s seizure of power and the electoral success of the Nazi Party (NSDAP) in the 1930 and 1932 German Reichstag elections. Although some blue-collar workers did, in fact, support the NSDAP’s rise, most union members and industrial workers were mostly opposed to Hitler and his agenda. largely because of Nazi opposition to traditional trade-unionism. Hitler and his closest allies believed that unions were controlled by foreign interests and were incompatible with their vision of a centralized German state, and much of the Nazi Party’s early electoral success was owed to significant financial backing from factory-owners who opposed trade-unions for economic reasons.
On May 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1933, the SA and the SS occupied every major trade union office in Germany, seizing their assets and declaring them to now belong to the ‘National Socialist Factory Cell Organization’ (the NSBO)\textsuperscript{1}. Overnight, the largest and most powerful representatives of the German working class were dismantled and brought into the fold of the Nazi regime. Some of the loudest voices of dissent against the NSDAP and Hitler’s nascent regime were swiftly, and coercively silenced. But the Nazi war on independent, organized labor did not end with the dissolution and assimilation of the trade unions. Two weeks after the May 2\textsuperscript{nd} the occupation of union property, on the 19\textsuperscript{th} of May, the ‘Law on Trustees of Labor’ was introduced, declaring that only the Nazi state had the power to negotiate wages with employers, effectively foreclosing any purpose labor unions might have served\textsuperscript{2}. By January of 1934, the somewhat loosely organized NBSO had reformed into the ‘Labor Front’, an organization that realized the Nazi vision of a fully state-controlled system of organizing German workers\textsuperscript{3}. In less than a year, German trade unionism had been warped and co-opted into Nazi corporatism. But, while the NSDAP’s early actions against organized labor may have been radical in their decisiveness and scope (very few regimes manage to eliminate such large swaths of opposition so early in their rule), they were by no means without purpose or prelude. Since the early days of far-right German nationalism, labor unions had been demonized by figures like Anton Drexler for being (in their view) opposed to the real interests of the working class, and beholden to the desires of trade union leaders\textsuperscript{4}. In their jointly drafted ‘Twenty-Five Point Plan’, an early blueprint to Nazi ideals published in early-1920, Drexler and Hitler called for the “nationalization of all industries”, setting the stage for the abolishment of external unions and the consolidation of industry under one entity\textsuperscript{5}. To Hitler and other Nazi leaders, trade unions were superfluous in a centrally-organized state, and they undermined Nazi authority and national unity, by

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\item[2] Ibid, 54.
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diverting the loyalty and support of the German working-class away from the NSDAP and Hitler; unions represented a dual-allegiance that was a direct contradiction to the very notion of the *Fuhrerprinzip*, an idea rooted in the sole supremacy of Hitler. While some major NSDP officials (like Gregor Strasser) with distinctly more ‘socialist’ interpretations of National Socialist doctrine supported alliances with trade unions based on mutual opposition to Weimar capitalism, this was rejected by mainstream party leadership. Hitler violently opposed the “Jewish Doctrine of Marxism”, focusing much of his rhetoric on the need for Germany to rid itself of Communists and their sympathizers. In his view, trade unions were a product of Communist, and thus Jewish, infiltration into German society and had to be treated accordingly. The mere fact of Nazi opposition to trade-unionism alone, however, does not it make a topic worth dedicating much thought to. The Nazi regime either purged or reinvented nearly all sectors of society, with trade-unionism being only one of hundreds of institutions coopted and changed to fit the ideals of National Socialism. What makes Nazi opposition to trade-unionism unique is what it says about the NSDP’s path to becoming the dominant force in German politics. The Nazi Party’s suppression of trade-unionism, rooted mostly in anti-Semitism and general opposition to organizations that took control away from their leaders, demonstrates that Hitler’s rise to power was not primarily built on support from the industrial working class, but on the backing of the middle-class and non-industrial blue-collar workers.

From its beginnings, the NSDP had a distinctly separate view of class struggle than most other political organizations that include ‘Socialism’ in their name. While in 1922 the Nazi Party’s antecedent, the National Socialist German Workers Party, codified in its national platform that it “accept[ed] the class struggle of creative labor”, this was not necessarily the blanket proletariat versus bourgeois conflict described by Marx. Class conflict, according to the German far-right, was not an international struggle

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8 Norman Thomas, “Labor Under the Nazis,” *Foreign Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1936): 426
that pitted the working class against producers, but a domestic fight where ‘real’, ethnic Germans were attacked by coercive outsiders and ‘Jews’. It was a conflict rooted in national identity, rather than economic equality. In “The Nazi-Sozi” (an educational pamphlet published in 1927), Goebbels proclaimed that the real crime of the bourgeoisie class in Germany was “transforming the love of one’s ethnicity into a greedy love of wealth”\(^9\). According to Goebbels, the failure of the capitalist system in Germany was not based income inequality or the existence of private property (the traditional socialist view), but rather on the lack of emphasis Germans placed on their ethnic heritage. Goebbels believed that class could be transcended not through elimination of economic stratification, but through the organization of ethnic Germans into a single, leader-driven state. Goebbels explained further that “Marxism… is the exact opposite of living socialism”, because it fails to recognize the struggles of “people and race”, and that Nazi doctrine was reflective of “real” socialism because it advocated a “radical form of ethnic self-defense” to take back Germany from its perceived enemies\(^10\). Although vaguely anti-capitalist, the views on the German economy expressed by Goebbels in this pamphlet were at odds with those of the German trade-unionists, who generally advocated for the rights of industrial workers rather than the mystical unification of a German race. In Mein Kampf, Hitler expressed views on class similar to Goebbels, declaring that Germans did not have to “renounce the representation of justified class interests” in order to become members of the “national people’s community.”\(^11\) Hitler also decided that “a worker sins” against “the people’s community” by making “extortionate demands without consideration for the common welfare and… a national economy.”\(^12\) This was intended as a direct attack on trade-unionism, implying that by lobbying for a more equal legal footing and better wages, unions were directly opposing interests of the German people. To Hitler, unions sowed division along arbitrary

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\(^10\) Ibid

\(^11\) Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939), 470.

\(^12\) Ibid, 472.
class lines instead of uniting Germans under their shared ethnicity, and were, thus, in opposition to his notion of German society as great, united “higher race.”

Even so, Hitler was not opposed to the existence of unions per se, if they conformed to his vision of a unified German ethno-state. In Mein Kampf, Hitler recognized the difficulty of eliminating existing German trade unions, but decided that the creation of distinctly “Nationalist Socialist trade union[s]” was “senseless” as long as independent unions existed. But, although Hitler claimed to view altered, non-Marxist unions as a “necessity” in his new Germany, his idea of trade-unionism was far different from that of socialists and the existing organizations. Hitler believed that in a National Socialist state, unions would not be “instruments of class fight”, but tools to unite all workers under Nazi leadership; they would be the glue to cement a nationalist, ethnic bond between laborers from all economic sectors. To Hitler, this also meant the elimination of wage-negotiation and the right to strike, which essentially neutered the traditional purpose of unions. In a National Socialist system, where the state and industry were basically one, dissent against an employer meant dissent against the Nazi regime, which meant dissent against the entire German people.

The Nazi Party’s platform on organized labor was filled with contradictions, the most significant of which was the anti-Semitism inherent to the rhetoric Hitler used to decry unions. After all, how did (as Hitler contended) German Jews control both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat? In Mein Kampf, Hitler lamented that, as things stood in pre-Nazified Germany, laborers “only [had] the task of working for the future of the Jewish people.” In his view, the entire German economy (including trade unions) was controlled by a group of Jews bent on destroying the German people. Hitler believed that improvements in working conditions achieved by German unions were not a product of care for the “actual abolition of social evils”, but an attempt by Jews to control the working-class and turn them into pawns in their plot

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13 Ibid, 392.
14 Ibid, 877.
15 Ibid, 869
16 Ibid, 440
for world domination. Although it may have been true that unions had earned workers shorter hours and higher wages, from Hitler’s perspective this was all part of a nefarious plot to dupe and exploit German workers. By creating small changes within the system, the Jewish “masters” lessened the desire for real institutional overhaul, and thus solidified their power in complacency, according to Hitler. Therefore, Hitler concluded, it was up to “the [Nazi] State” to deal with the alleged Jewish infiltration of the German labor movement and reclaim the German economy from corrupt trade-unionism. Almost a decade before he attained power, Hitler was already planning the dismantling of unions in very unambiguous term. Hitler firmly believed that the Nazi Party was the only force powerful enough to rid the country of undue, ‘un-German’ influence, and he had every intention of accomplishing this when he gained power. It is difficult to believe that this sort of racialized, conspiracy-oriented rhetoric would have had much appeal to the working-class, though. Members of trade unions would have seen first-hand the products of their advocacy and collective-bargaining efforts, and likely would have been hard to convince that their achievements were not legitimate. If anything, this ‘Jewish blaming’ was an attempt to gain support from Germany’s deteriorating middle-class, and the throngs of unemployed who could not find work in factories. For outsiders from the labor union system, it would have been much easier to buy into the narrative of the labor movement being a complex, wholly un-German institution. News of strikes and lock-outs filled the German press throughout the 1920s, already contributing to a popular perception of unions and the laborers they represented as ‘greedy,’ and overly demanding in a period of immense economic crisis. When Germany was in such dire need, should anyone have been worried solely about their own livelihood? In Hitler’s view, and to many unemployed Germans, the answer was ‘no’. To the unemployed, increased workplace safety and higher wages in factories simply did not matter; if they had no jobs, and no opportunity was going to open up, they could never benefit from these increased

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17 Ibid, 444
18 Ibid, 445
protections. Labor unions were just another vestige of the bourgeoise. And, by 1930 these masses had gained real political force; that year almost 6 million workers had declared themselves as unemployed.\(^{20}\) Similarly, the middle-class and civil servants suffered as wages stagnated and inflation rose. By 1932, 17.5 million Germans (employed or otherwise) relied on some kind of government assistance to survive.\(^{21}\) Racist scapegoating like Hitler’s denunciation of Germans labor unions offered some kind of blame and relief that these people were searching for; it gave a ridiculous, and melodramatic answer to one of Germany’s biggest problems. What Hitler offered to disenfranchised Germans was much more a spiritual, rather than an economic, vision of labor organization; buried within the fire-and-brimstone of Hitler’s anti-Semitism, was a hopeful vision for a future that was to include all ethnic Germans in some vast plan to regain prosperity. And it was this idea of ‘all ethnic Germans’ being included in a fully-employed economy, an idea that from the beginning was idealistic propaganda, that garnered the Nazis support from the destitute and optionless.

In the 1930 Reichstag elections NDSP won 107 seats and 19% of the total vote, proving that Hitler and his party had definite support from the middle-class.\(^{22}\) The Nazi Party performed best in rural and heavily middle-class districts in Berlin, winning 25.8% of the vote in Steglitz, a predominantly middle-class area, and 17.7% of the vote in Zehlendorf, a large neighborhood in Berlin again comprised mostly of middle-class voters.\(^{23}\) In stark contrast, the Nazis received merely 8.9% of the vote in Wedding, a mostly working-class neighborhood filled with union members.\(^{24}\) While this was by no means an insignificant share of the vote, but it was lower than what the Nazis received from other segments of society, especially given the size of the working-class population in Berlin. It seems largely reflective of the expected response to the brand of rhetoric that the Nazis were employing. Union members were not as

\(^{22}\) Ibid, 175
\(^{23}\) Ibid, 176
\(^{24}\) Ibid
attracted to a party that did not directly support unions, and often directly opposed them, as long as pro-labor parties like the KPD and the SPD existed. A broad coalition may have been the key to electoral success for the Nazi Party, but that coalition only needed marginal support from working-class trade unionists.

Beyond Hitler and the NSDAP’s ideological views on trade-unionism, though, it is impossible to ignore the financial considerations the Nazi Party made in their opposition to organized labor. This too represented a massive contradiction. With Germany in the midst of the Great Depression, and already struggling from debts owed under the Versailles Treaty, Hitler and the Nazi Party needed a more creative way to fund their ambitious plans for reform and their expensive political campaigns. In February of 1933, Hitler and Goering secretly met with leaders of Germany’s top industrial corporations (including IG Farben and Krupp), promising friendly economic policy, rearmament, and “no more elections” in exchange for almost three million Reichsmarks. Although the complete contents of this meeting are unknown, it is almost unquestionable that the ‘problem’ of unions was discussed. Just a few months after the meeting, in May of 1933, the NSDAP eliminated all non-state-controlled unions from Germany. Then, only a month after dissolving the unions, Hitler passed an order requiring all of German industry to pay a small percentage of their yearly wages to the NSDAP, as a gesture of gratitude for the of ending trade-unionism. Hitler used the political favor of removing unions, a move he was already very much in favor of making, in order to enrich the treasuries of the Nazi regime. So, at its core, Nazi anti-unionism was a position at least partially rooted in a principle-less desire to gain wealth. Even before ascending to the Chancellorship, Hitler relied on the support of wealthy Bavarian industrialists to support the Nazi Party, contradicting his views expressed in Mein Kampf. While professing to be a ‘party of the people’ and representative of all German workers, the NSDAP was largely propped up by the very same businesses that the working-class was in constant conflict with, the same businesses that Hitler had

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25 Frei, National Socialist Rule, 50 (see footnote 1).
26 Ibid, 55
consistently denounced as being ‘run by Jews’. In this way, the rise of Hitler’s political success was built much more by capitalist industrialists, than it was by union members and working-class voters.

Regardless of the Nazi Party’s motivations to oppose trade-unionism, it is understandable why Hitler was so concerned by the political threat posed by the unions during his rise to power. Before the First World War, German trade union membership had peaked at about two-million, but by 1923 membership had skyrocketed to over eight-million. In the same span of time, the number of labor agreements between unions and employers rose from just 7,819 representing 107,503 individual factories, to 10,768 agreements representing over 800,000 factories. By 1930, most unions had also created their own Workers Councils to oversee arbitration with employers, and the National Economic Advisory Council had been established to give workers the chance to discuss policy with industrial leaders and politicians. Unions had quickly become some of the largest political and social clubs in Germany, serving not only as centers of social life for members of the working-class, but as forces for real change. To the Nazis, this was unacceptable; the only social club in a Nazi state, would be the party itself. In the early Depression years, economic conditions in Germany were certainly shaky, but the working-class managed to weather the storm better than both the droves of unemployed and many civil servants. Partly because they fared better economically than other groups in Germany, and had less to benefit from Nazi policy, factory workers were less likely to support right-wing nationalism than other German social groups. That is not to say that the Nazi Party received no support from the working-class, in 1933 about 750,000 members of the Nazi Party also belonged to a trade union. The reality was that by 1932, wages for skilled factory workers were 20% less than their 1928 levels and real net wages across the economy were in sharp decline. Clearly for many members of the working-class, faring better did

27 Goldschmidt, “The Labor Problem in Germany,” in The Fate of Trade Unions, 16.
28 Ibid
29 Thomas, “Labor Under the Nazis,” 424 (see footnote 8).
30 Schoenbaum, Hitler’s Social Revolution, 74.
not mean faring well enough. However, it is also evident that much of the support the Nazi Party received from union members during this period was coerced, and achieved only through campaigns of voter intimidation and harassment. In 1930, for instance, the election to Workers Councils in the city of Thalburg was won by Socialist union candidates with nearly 90% of the vote.\textsuperscript{32} The local Nazi Party could not abide by this sort of electoral landslide. Members of the Nazi Party infiltrated the Thalburg Railroad Office, which was represented by one of the largest unions in the city, and began to fire all railroad workers who refused to join the NSDAP. Members of the SPD were either immediately terminated or released from their tenure, and forced to take an hourly wage, if they did not accept membership into the Nazi-organized railroad union. After the many firings, the local Nazi Party announced that they would be hiring over one-thousand new workers for the facility, drumming up support from the unemployed.\textsuperscript{33} The Nazis won the subsequent Council election with four out of six seats, and ended up hiring only 30 new workers.\textsuperscript{34} This kind of voter coercion was repeated in Thalburg in April of 1933, this time at a sugar refinery, where the Nazi Party intimidated workers into giving the NDSP two-thirds of its votes for Council representation with a threat of reprisal.\textsuperscript{35} These two incidents, which were by no means isolated, demonstrate both that the Nazi Party was willing and able to corrupt the democratic process, and that the Nazis had to resort to this kind of corruption in order to overcome the electoral power of trade unions. While the Nazis certainly did have some legitimate support from the working-class, a fair amount of their support came, instead, from forcing union members to choose between their livelihoods and their political affiliation. So, while some union members may have ended up voting directly against their own long-term interests, this was in many cases more an act of desperation than an endorsement of Nazi policy. Also, importantly, much of the support working-class support for the Nazi Party did not come from industrial laborers and union members, but from craftsmen and blue-collar

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 111.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 217
The vast majority of working-class votes for the NSDAP in the 1930 election and the elections of 1932, came from these ‘non-industrial’ groups, forming an essential plank in the Nazi electoral coalition. Conversely, even in late 1932 the socialist trade unions claimed over 6 million members, while the Nazi-operated NSBO had only 300,000 supporters, showing a general lack of support for Nazi labor politics from the industrial working-class. Even though the Nazi party managed to make in-roads with a large portion of the working-class, this support never transformed into broader enthusiasm from union members.

When the NSDAP seized sixty-million Reichsmarks worth of trade union property in May of 1933, the die had been cast. Coming immediately after the declaration of a ‘Day of National Labor’ on May 1st (May Day to the rest of the world), an event which trade union leaders “enthusiastically co-operated with”, Hitler’s dissolution of the unions officially clarified his stance on organized labor. Trade union leaders had been hopeful that the Nazi Party would leave their organizations alone if they stayed quiet, a pipedream that was supported by Hitler’s declaration that Germany must “honor work and respect the worker” during his speech on May 1st, delivered before 100,000 union members. This hope was crushed the next day, during the Nazi takeover and asset confiscation. The fact that the SS and the SA took care to expropriate the money held by the dissolved unions, speaks more broadly to the Nazi strategy of funding its operations. Although by no means its primary aim, the dissolution of the trade unions injected a cash-strapped Nazi Party with a massive amount of desperately needed money. Partially funded by this influx of expediently-acquired Reichsmarks, Hitler’s vision of a “National Socialist trade union” was finally able to be realized. Three weeks after the dissolution of the unions, Hitler introduced the ‘Law on Trustees of Labor’, which eliminated the right to collectively bargain, and required all wage

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36 Childers, *The Nazi Voter*, 253
37 Ibid
38 Ibid, 255
39 Ibid
41 Ibid
negotiation between workers and employers to be arbitrated by the government. This was followed in January of 1934, by the passage of the ‘Law on the Regulation of National Labor,’ which put an end to any kind of employee participation in wage negotiation. To Hitler, wage negotiation implied a lack of fairness and a class struggle that was antithetical to the national unity that he was trying to create; work was about a struggle for a common, national cause, and not a struggle for better pay. Hitler also converted the NBSO, a Nazi proto-union led by the increasingly distrusted Strasser, into the Labor Front (a blanket union that all Germans were a member of) and the Labor Service, a program based on the principle of work-for-welfare. The Labor Service was a deeply aligned with Hitler’s view of organized labor as an institution that should be beneficial to the people of a nation as a whole, rather than to a specific group of workers; above all, labor was about the sacrifice of an individual made for the larger German cause. Indicative of the unpopularity of these policies, only 15% of the members of the Labor Service were factory workers until Hitler made membership mandatory in June 1935. Then again, working-class resentment over Nazi labor policy was largely irrelevant to Hitler. With the end of German democracy in 1933, Hitler no longer needed to rely on a broad coalition for support that included labor for support, instead using terror and repression to quell dissent and maintain authority.

Writing in early-1934, one doctoral student in Munich concluded that the Nazi policy on union organization was “not altogether easy to define,” severely understating the complexity of the situation. Still, it is safe to say that Nazi opposition to trade unions was built on three main components: an appeal to anti-Semitic populism to gain electoral support, a belief that trade unions were incompatible with the Nazi state, and a need to serve the interests of industrialist supporters. Even harder to define than Hitler’s relationship with trade-unionism, though, is his early relationship with the German working class. Even though much of the Nazi Party’s platform, and many of its policies, directly conflicted with the interests

42 Frei, National Socialist Rule, 53.
43 Ibid, 54.
44 Schoenbaum, Hitler’s Social Revolution, 79.
of organized labor, many workers still voted for NSDAP in the 1932 and 1933 Reichstag elections. That being said, the tendency for industrial workers and union members to support the Nazi Party during its rise to power was minimal compared to most other groups in Germany. This is because the Nazi Party’s attempts to woo union members were mostly hollow, and a sizeable part of the Nazi platform undermined the progress that unions had made towards securing rights for German workers.
Bibliography


