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The "Deproletarianization" of German
Society: Vocational Training
in the Third Reich

by

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The "Deproletarianization" of German Society:
Vocational Training in the Third Reich*

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Social historians of the Third Reich have been sleeping on the job for too long. Although the first signs of fitful arousal can now be discerned,¹ we know little more of importance about group and class in Nazi Germany today than when Tim Mason published his seminal article, "Labor in the Third Reich" and David Schoenbaum his original and provocative book, Hitler's Social Revolution.² Mason argued that contrary to propaganda claims, which historical scholarship had passively accepted up to then, Hitler did not destroy the class basis of German society; on the contrary, workers remained a distinct group, continued to be faithful to old political loyalties, and set limits to Hitler's power. This insight might, by inspiring comparative studies, have resulted in a new understanding of the pluralistic character of the Third Reich. Mason and his disciples set off instead to document worker sabotage of the production process, or at least find some indication that proletarian opposition had impaired the execution of Hitlerian policy. Even after many years of conscientious digging no such proof has ever been uncovered.³ The evidence points to a different conclusion, that working men and women, while by no means particularly enthusiastic about the regime, did not actively oppose it. They merely did what was expected of them: worked hard for little compensation. Why, one would like to know, did workers go along with system?

Repression doubtless provides part of the answer, but there were clearly limits to the extent that this could be effective. Jobs are also important, but full employment does not always bring stability. Schoenbaum's book may lead to a more complete explanation. He suggests that beneath the official veneer of public life in the Third Reich a modernization process took place which, while shaped by the peculiar institutions to national socialism, had long been underway and would continue well after the thirteen year orgy was

over. While Schoenbaum focuses mainly on elites, he assigns considerable importance to social mobility as a stabilizing force within the political system. It is difficult to test this thesis: social mobility in the Third Reich has never been measured, its mechanisms analyzed, or its impacts studied.⁴ Yet beginnings must be made if historians are to learn how to distinguish clearly the Leistungsgesellschaft ("achievement-oriented society") that is Bonn from the Klassengesellschaft (class society) that was Weimar.

Vocational training provides a possible point of departure. Although certain similarities can be found elsewhere, the German system of labor education is unique. Its central feature is instruction in the workplace. Masters teach Apprentices who, after three years of work-study, are articulated. The Chambers-of-Commerce administer the program through participating firms. This system is a substitute for, rather than a supplement to, secondary education. In the late 1920's reactionary employers introduced industrial apprenticeships, which have an obvious precedent in the traditions of German artisanship (Handwerk), as a weapon in the struggle against socialism. The tactic worked. Today no less than one-half of West-German grammar school-leavers (Volksschulabgänger) embark on three-year courses of work-study leading to articles. The decisive phase in the development of the vocational training system falls between 1933 and 1945. It was then that it was put into practice, then too that it began to modify German society.

The Führer came to power without plans for handling the working class and, after the failure of tentative efforts to generate social policy from within Party ranks fell back on the solutions offered by employers. Albert Vogler, the arch-conservative director of Verinigte Stahlwerke, was the most influential corporate sponsor of the labor-training idea. But it was a man named Carl (after 1933 a more germanic Karl) Arnhold who actually discovered

how vocational training could be used as a weapon to destroy "class consciousness." He was the father of modern German labor education (Arbeitspädagogik). In 1925 he founded The German Institute for Technical Labor Training, or DINTA (Deutsches Institut für technische Arbeitsschulung) which, by means of newly-recruited Labor Engineers outfitted in white coats and stop-watches, put his ideas into practice in Ruhr industry during the late 1920's. In 1933 DINTA entered the German Labor Front (DAF)+ as the Office for Factory Leadership and Vocational Education (ABB)++. It soon became the most important labor relations component of this otherwise ramshackle and ineffective outfit. But while Hitler quickly grasped the importance of apprenticeships as a propaganda measure, it was only in late 1936 after the armaments boom had begun to create severe shortages of skilled labor that his deputies vested business with the powers necessary to establish a national system of vocational education. The number of apprenticeships soon multiplied. Within eighteen months all but the smallest firms had set up training programs, including instruction for jobs in offices and farms as well as factories. Between 1937 and the end of the war nearly all male grammar school leavers, as well as increasing numbers of females, entered apprenticeships. Although created to serve as handmaiden to the war economy, vocational education soon outgrew this role. It trained excessive numbers of skilled workers, many of them in non-strategic fields, turned out too few of the semi-skilled operators needed for the numerous mass production jobs opening up in the armaments industries, and aggravated shortages of unskilled laborers such that the regime felt obliged to adopt drastic expedients. The

+ Deutsche Arbeitsfront

++Amt für Betriebsführung und Berufserziehung

vocational training program had become a sacred cow - too popular to attack head on. Otherwise, it would have been abolished or cut back to accord with the needs of a nation waging total war.

The demand for increased vocational training originated on the political left. It was a major concern at the 1919 annual meeting of the Free Trade Unions at Nürnberg, where numerous delegates rode to protest against employers hiring artisans (Handwerker) to do skilled jobs in industry, a practice which while cost-effective deprived unskilled laborers of a chance for promotion. The congress called for a comprehensive national program of factory apprenticeships, which it proposed to administer jointly with industry.⁵

But it was the political right which acted first. In 1925 Arnhold persuaded Vögler to fund DINTA. It soon featured a heavy industry campaign aimed at destroying the existing pattern of labor relations and replacing it with an authoritarian scheme whose centerpiece was the idea of "factory community" (Werksgemeinschaft). According to Gerald Feldman, the 1927 employer offensive "...while waged ostensibly over wage and hours-of-work questions [had] the broader object of breaking the system of compulsory arbitration and the political and social policies with which it was connected."⁶ The campaign resulted in the worst labor conflict in the history of the Weimar Republic, the Fall 1928 Great Lockout of 250,000 Ruhr workers. DINTA provided the "carrots" that accompanied the stick. Between 1925 and 1930 Arnhold and his Labor Engineers set up training programs at several Ruhr concerns. Thanks to this effort, the number of apprenticeships available doubled from 15,094 to over twice this amount.⁷ The unions, while aware of the political effectiveness of the new program were powerless to do anything about it. Belatedly, they discovered that they had been outflanked.

The new apprenticeship programs offered a strange combination of

practical training and political indoctrination. All Arnhold-inspired curricula were anchored in the following principles. The first phase of instruction ("Eisen erzieht! --- "Iron is the teacher!") was to inculcate discipline. By working blocks of cold, hard, unforgiving steel apprentices (including those in non-manufacturing courses of study) were supposed to learn the virtues of exactness, patience, and obedience. Basic education (Grundschulung) was also essential: the apprentice was to be exposed to all aspects of his subject so that he could someday rise to Instruction-Master (Lehrmeister). Moreover factory instruction was to be integrated as closely as possible into the production process to encourage appreciation of management's point of view. Arnhold insisted above all the training encompass the "whole man," that is influence his entire way of life. In a seemingly endless stream of books, tracts, articles, speeches, and private conversations he argued that once the workshop (Lehrwerkstatt) had replaced the school, the factory would replace the union as the nucleus of social and political organization, and the employer the political leader as moral guide. His addresses usually terminated with rhapsodic exclamation that his methods would elevate labor to the supreme human value: it would no longer be despised but come to be appreciated for what the German worker knew it at bottom to be --- the source of human creativity and identity, a pleasure, and a national responsibility.⁸

Although Arnhold's career always remained closely linked to industry he devised much of Nazi labor ideology and many of the peculiar institutions set up to promote it. DAF's "gospel of productive achievement" (Leistungsideologie) held forth work as the measure of all things: political acceptability, social worth, and individual merit. In 1931 Arnhold met Hitler, or rather was introduced to him by Robert Ley, who after 1933 would

head the Labor Front (DAF). Ley had become a convert to DINTA methods while working as a plant manager for IG Farben. From then on Arnhold worked closely with the Party. His first contribution to Nazi labor policy in fact antedates Hitler's seizure of power. This was the idea of creating a Labor Service (Reichsarbeitsdienst). This RAD, as he explained to Ruhr industry leaders on 11 July 1932, should not be a mere "make-work organization" to absorb unemployment but serve as a school for citizenship. It should teach discipline, increase familiarity with work situations, promote a sense of responsibility to the community, instill both pride in workmanship and a healthy spirit of nationalism and, finally, prepare youths for apprenticeships.⁹

After DINTA joined the Labor Front in 1933 Arnhold set up several other "characteristic" Nazi labor institutions. His Program to Encourage Productive Labor (Leistungsertüchtigungswerk), for instance, sponsored night school training courses in towns and villages throughout Germany. The annual skills competitions (Reichsberufswettkämpfe), which he organized in 1937, involved hundreds of thousands of entrants. Contests began at the local level, proceeding to district and region until the final selection of some 400 Reich Victors (Reichssieger). Arnhold also introduced the Model Factory Program (Musterbetriebe), which put employers under heavy pressure to recognize DAF's competence to impose health and safety standards. Successful firms were "...entitled to raise the golden flag of the Labor Front proudly in front of their factories."¹⁰

Although DAF's diverse activities were not always popular with industry, they did not threaten employer domination of labor relations. The 20 January 1935 Law for the Regulation of National Work (Gesetz zur Ordnung der nationalen Arbeit) is often referred to as the Nazi labor charter. It of

course presupposed the absence of all "factory-foreign influences"---from unions, parties, even churches. According to one commentator, "Every rational man who reads it should be happy. The law gives [the employer] a free hand in all matters relating to the factory. Even more [it] requires employees (Gefolgschaft) to be expressly loyal and not to disturb the peace of the factory lest they want to appear before a social honor court. It is their obligation to preserve the honor of the boss (Betriebsführer)."¹¹ Employers also controlled the machinery for labor control outside of the factory. In May 1934 the new office of Labor Trustee (Treuhänder der Arbeit) was established. Trustees set wages, heard grievances, made appointments to factory councils (Vertrauensräte) and supervised working conditions. With a single exception all trustees were former legal experts of employer associations. Business influence was also paramount at the Labor Ministry and the regional Labor Offices (Arbeitsämter) subordinate to it.

The national labor training program instituted to implement preparations for war was also business-run. On 10 December 1936 all metalworking and construction firms employing more than ten persons were ordered to set up apprenticeship programs. The Chambers-of-Commerce (Industrie- und Handelskammern), which traditionally had kept records on apprenticeships, were assigned new responsibilities of accrediting training programs, administering examinations, and certifying the results. Two years later an agency of the Labor Ministry (Reichsanstalt für Arbeitsvermittlung und Arbeitsversicherung) was set up to centralize this activity. It set targets for each profession and each region on the basis of national priorities, industrial requirements, instructional facilities, and the number of school leavers. The 1938 school law completed the process of creating a "total" (lückenlos) national labor training program; it made industrial training compulsory for all

school-leavers.¹²

The placement process was geared to directing the fourteen year olds into those jobs required by the war economy. Orientation began with the "softening up" of prospective apprentices by Hitler Youth propagandists who in the course of home visits (Heimabenden) were to discourage them from entering "fad professions" (Modeberufen) and encourage consideration of fields "where shortages prevail or which are of special national interest." To influence this decision, factory visits could be arranged. The Labor Office would also, if necessary, give batteries of psychological, mental, and physical examinations in order to direct prospective apprentices into appropriate fields. The parents and the supervising firm signed the apprenticeship contract (Lehrvertrag) on behalf of the candidate. His name would then be inscribed on a roll (Lehrlingsrolle) maintained by the Chambers-of-Commerce. He next would be issued a work book, where progress would be meticulously noted. Violations of the work contract (Vertragsbruch) incurred liability before the civil courts.¹³

But the existence of such controls did not mean that the apprenticeship system worked as intended. This was in part due to a miscalculation: the shortages of skilled metal workers, which had been acute in World War I, disappeared in 1938 because of the success of "crash" training measures, an increase in the number of those completing apprenticeships and a gradual shift to serial production. Wartime labor training policy (Nachwuchsplanung) had four main goals and it fell short of meeting each of them. The first, about which industry and business were in complete agreement, was to reduce the number of apprenticeships in the metalworking industries. After 1941 they were classified as "fad professions."¹⁴ It was, according to one industry spokesman, "unconscionable" to continue training more skilled workers than

could be productively engaged in the post-war future which, he predicted, would demand either mass produced goods or luxury articles requiring manufacturing expertise beyond that of even the German skilled worker (Facharbeiter).¹⁵ The labor training programs of 1942 and 1943 called for reductions in the number of beginning three-year metal-working apprenticeships from 130,000 to 105,000 per year. But in 1943 some 149,000 entered the field, and the number had fallen by only ten percent by 1945. Until the final months of the war the average number of metal-working apprentices was between 450,000 and 480,000.¹⁶

The second goal was to reduce the number of apprenticeships in non-essential fields. The Labor Training Plan of 1938-1939, which was to introduce a stage-by-stage phase out, cut back in three main areas: the food and fancy food industries (from 28,000 to 18,000), office-work (from 70,000 to 60,000) and barbers, who were to be eliminated altogether. Yet in 1945 some 19,000 persons expected to enter training as butchers, bakers, and pastry cooks, and another 59,000 persons to enroll in secretarial courses. Barber apprentices actually increased in number from 4000 in 1939 to 5200 in 1941. 3600 were to be admitted to the field in 1945.¹⁷

The third goal, eventually dropped as unrealizable, was to step up recruitment into the coal mines. Shortages of manpower existed at every professional level in this war-essential field and were universally recognized as threatening both the production effort and long-term national interests. Nonetheless, the manpower shortfall increased every year after 1938. In 1938, the industry needed some 20,000 new entries and received 15,000. Despite the high priority assigned it, recruitment of school-leavers declined to 7000 by 1941, 5150 by 1942, and 2690 by 1943. By then estimated requirements had increased to the rate of 30,000 per year.¹⁸

The fourth and most important goal was to increase the number of school-leavers entering jobs, especially in metalworking, requiring semi-(angelernte) and unskilled (ungelernte) labor. As early as 1937 the crash programs to train Facharbeiter had begun to produce severe shortages of workers at the lower ranks. A directive of March 1937 therefore ordered the Labor Offices to "exercise the same care in selecting youths for these jobs as exercised with regard to skilled apprenticeships."¹⁹ At the same time, the DINTA-affiliate DATSCH+ was directed to revise and improve instructional material for semi-skilled trainees. But the effort to enlist more male school-leavers into semi-skilled apprenticeships never really got off the ground. In 1938-1939 they entered at only one-half the desired levels. In spite of strenuous propaganda efforts, the situation worsened thereafter. The Youth Labor Training Plan of 1942 noted that it had become completely impossible for the textile industry to recruit semi-skilled workers, indicated an overall reduction of those entering semi-skilled apprenticeships from 18,000 in 1938 to 15,000, and advised giving up the effort in increase apprenticeships of this type.²⁰

Shortages of young male unskilled workers were even greater. Fewer and fewer were willing to do this kind of work. In 1934, some 200,000 male school-leavers entered industry as unskilled laborers, in 1938, 150,000, and in 1939, 30,000.²¹ But this underestimates the full extent of the decrease. In 1938, approximately forty-five per cent of those initially entering the ranks of the unskilled did so only to gain a "breathing space" before choosing skilled apprenticeships. By 1939 the Labor Offices had concluded that reserves of teachable unskilled labor had been eliminated by the numerous

+ Deutscher Ausschub für technisches Schulwesen

training programs set up during the armaments boom. Not surprisingly, employers warned that shortages of unskilled labor threatened to be even more serious than those for semi-skilled workers.²² Official accounts describe the pool of unskilled labor as all but dried up, those left being little more than useless misfits. The Labor Training Plan of 1942 commented that an "Upgrading of unskilled workers to semi-skilled cannot be considered since those youths doing such work lack the aptitude to advance."²³ Psychological testing confirmed this opinion. The Labor Training Plan for 1943 no longer even included the designation "unskilled labor" (Hilfsarbeiter), substituting for it something called "vagrant labor" (Hilfsarbeiter wechselnder Art). To this group "...[were] to be referred only the leftovers who cannot or will not accept simple instructions. In no case should a youngster be consigned to it simply to meet a quota."²⁴

Manpower reserves were all but eliminated early in the war. State Secretary Landfried of the Labor Ministry estimated that 513,500 workers were retrained in the twelve months after 1938, including 225,000 artisans, 180,000 industrial workers, 36,000 aircraft workers, 46,000 persons from different fields who learned welding, 21,000 persons instructed by the "DAF Working Group Iron and Metal", as well as a further 5500 men trained in SA camps. Industry retrained an additional 500,000 individuals as semi-skilled workers on its own. Another 223,133 persons received retraining in 1949.²⁵ This exhausted the reserves of adult male German labor. A reduction of one year in the Reich's 1,142,903 apprenticeships for youths would have increased the industrial labor force by five percent. However, this option was never considered.²⁶ There remained only two possibilities: German women and foreigners.

Recruitment from abroad was the first choice. It soon became obvious, however, that this was too difficult. By mid-1941 only 644,028 foreign volunteers were at work in the Reich. The Sauckel labor drafts, which began in Spring 1942 and ran until the end of Spring 1944, increased total foreign employment to 2,367,000 by 30 June 1944. In spite of low productivity, the employment of foreign slaves gradually reduced shortages of unskilled labor.²⁷

But to handle the numerous semi-skilled jobs opening up in the armaments industry the regime had no alternative to stepping up female employment.

This resource could have been tapped earlier and much more effectively. Contrary to official policy, which consigned them to hearth and home, German women wanted to work.²⁸ The demand of girl grammar school leavers for apprenticeships increased from 359,000 in 1934-1935, to 741,000 in 1938-1939, and 1,256,000 in 1942-43. Unlike the case for boys, apprenticeships for girls, although increasing, fell progressively behind demand. In 1934-1935 there were 84,300 places, in 1938-1939 221,111 and in 1942-1943 357,000.²⁹ Two thirds of these, however, were in the fields of secretarial and office-work. Many women denied the opportunity of a three year apprenticeship leading to skilled worker status eventually entered semi-skilled production jobs. Female employment in industry increased by about 500,000 during the war. On the whole this occurred without official pressure and was concentrated in components assemble, where employment of women (as of 31 May of each year) increased from 207,411 in 1939, to 279,307 in 1940, 347,416 in 1941, 416,560 in 1942, 554,147 in 1943, and 619,845 in 1944.³⁰ To the extent that the Third Reich generated a new proletariat from domestic sources, it was female. Whether this shift to the factories resulted in a significant role change remains to be determined.

But males enjoyed a huge overall improvement in status. In 1933 about

forty-five percent of industrial workers were skilled, another twenty percent semi-skilled, and thirty-five percent unskilled. After 1938 about ninety percent of all boys leaving grammar school together with increasing numbers of those who had left earlier entered three years apprenticeships in industry, artisanship (Handwerk), commerce, or agriculture. What had been set in motion amounted to a phase-out of the proletariat.³¹ The Third Reich prepared the ground for the skilled industrial economy of the Federal Republic.

Do the Nazis deserve historical credit for this fact? Two points seem obvious. The first is that the present national system of labor training derives from the Third Reich. (A new generation of Arbeitspädagogen is in fact calling for its reexamination for this reason.)³² It is also true that in the years of economic mobilization and war more skilled workers were trained than could have been had either the market had been allowed to work or an efficient system of labor allocation been adopted. Yet this result was unintended: employers, labor bureaucrats, and Nazi social theorists agreed upon the undesirability of "overtraining" the labor force.³³ A lengthy article in the 1940-1941 yearbook of the Labor Science Institute of DAF (Arbeitswissenschaftliches Institut) was devoted to this problem. Referring to such pseudoscientific psychopedagogical evidence as studies of brain weight differentials, the results of IQ tests administered to US servicemen during World War I, and a hodge-podge of employer complaints, its author concluded that the post-1933 changes in working class composition were not grounded in biological law and therefore should be repealed. In order to restore balance he recommended replacing three year apprenticeships with one year basic training courses.³⁴

This might have been a risky course. The vocational education program was a successful response to rising expectations within the working class,

that is, for skills, status, and the prospect of advancement. Without it, the laboring men and women of Hitler's Germany might have been far more restive than they were.

Notes

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24. BA R12I/301 "Erläuterungen zum Berufsnachwuchsplan ..."
25. BA R11/1225 "Umschulungsmassnahmen, 1.1.39-31.12.39"; BA R11/1226 "Umschulung im Jahre 1939, 2.12.39"; BA R11/1226 "Ergebnis der Umschulungsmaßnahmen" n.d.; BA R11/1227 "Zusätzliche Gewinnung von Metallarbeitern im Wege der Umschulung im Jahre 1940/41."
26. BA R12I/301 "Nachwuchsplan 1945"; Rolf Wagenfuhr, Die deutsche Industrie im Krieg (Berlin, 1963), p. 139; Statistisches Jahrbuch 59, 1941/2, op.cit., p. 413.