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This volume documents the first of a series of conferences held by the newly established Lower Saxon Research Group »Nationalsozialistische »Volksgemeinschaft«? Konstruktion, gesellschaftliche Wirkungsmacht und Erinnerung vor Ort« (Was there a National Socialist »People’s Community«? Construction, Social Impact, and Remembrance in Local Perspectives). As its subtitle indicates, the volume is not yet to present the regional case studies pursued by the Research Group but rather to engage in the ongoing controversy on the Nazi Volksgemeinschaft, and to further stimulate this debate. This controversy revolves around the question whether or not, and if so, in which ways the Nazis kept their promise to establish a truly united nation, the Volksgemeinschaft.

Detlef Schmiechen-Ackermann surveys this debate comprehensively in an extremely knowledgeable and inspiring introduction that catches on even most recent publications. For three reasons, this debate continues to keep historians busy. First, because the Nazis themselves left largely open what exactly they were aiming at when they propagated the idea of the Volksgemeinschaft. The second reason is a major shift in »Third Reich« history. While »Third Reich« historians for a long time focused on the social, political, and cultural condition of the German homelands, the Altreich, they have since about 1990 explored more deliberately Nazi Germany’s destructive and eventually genocidal dynamic, and its social basis, beyond the borders of the Altreich, especially in East Europe. The third reason is that the debate on the social reality of the Nazi Volksgemeinschaft propaganda does not only cater to academic interests but is embedded in the public memorialization of the »Third Reich« in Germany as well. Unrevealing that the Volksgemeinschaft was not just a propaganda lie but social reality means to admit that the »Third Reich« was not simply a dictatorship based on coercion, but rather relied on substantial consensus of ordinary Germans. The quest for the reality of the Volksgemeinschaft therefore is also one for the responsibility and guilt of ordinary Germans (and not only the Nazi leadership) during the Holocaust.

Different types of contributions to this debate are gathered in this book – short think pieces, regional case studies, and comparative essays. In a think piece, one of the doyens of German »Third Reich« history, Hans-Ulrich Thamer, repeats an older view on the Volksgemeinschaft, which focuses on the Nazi promise of overcoming class gaps, the legacy of liberalism, and of spreading a »new social solidarity« (p. 289).
That the »Third Reich« failed to neutralize class gaps, is established wisdom since Tim Mason's inquiry into the German working class under Nazi rule and Martin Broszat's Bayern project. In this volume, Rüdiger Hachtmann ties in with this research by analyzing the activities of the Deutsche Arbeitsfront (DAF), or German Work Front and its impact on the working class. Hans-Martin Niemann surveys recent studies on consumerism in Nazi Germany and stresses the gaps between far reaching promises and poor reality. Although the regime subsidized certain popular commodities including the »people’s radio«, it was not the lower but the upper classes that profited from it (p. 108). A number of chapters analyze the Volksgemeinschaft propaganda and symbolic as well as ritual representations. So does Markus Urban in a chapter on the staging of community in the NSDAP party rallies; Rudolf Oswald illustrates the construction of community through soccer games; and Adelheid von Saldern scrutinizes how the Volksgemeinschaft was »mediatized« in and through the radio.

The Nazi Volksgemeinschaft promise, however, would be misunderstood if isolated from its violent, martial, and especially from its racist context. The Nazi Volksgemeinschaft was not only to overcome traditional class gaps but aimed at uniting the Aryan German people specifically by excluding, i.e. terrorizing, containing, and killing alleged domestic enemies, above all the Jews. The construction of the Volksgemeinschaft was inherently linked to the destruction of the Jews and other fantasied enemies. While Thamer acknowledges the bellicose dynamic the Volksgemeinschaft idea and propaganda developed since 1939 and even more since 1943, he yet probes its reality only by looking at socially dissolving and »atomizing« tendencies within the German home front at the end of the war. This view not only ignores opposite developments among German soldiers but also obfuscates the racist framework of the Nazi idea of a Volksgemeinschaft.

As numerous recent studies have shown, it was the widespread knowledge of the Holocaust and other Nazi mass crimes, the equally widespread awareness of Germany’s (that is, also ordinary Germans’) responsibility for them, and the fear of revenge by Germany’s enemies in East and West that made Germans stick to the regime and actually »realized« the vision of a united Volksgemeinschaft, although in a very special way. In this volume, this complex working of the Nazi Volksgemeinschaft politics is explored in an excellent contribution of Elizabeth Harvey on the experience of community and coercion among women, in a concise account of Armin Nolzen on anti-Semitic violence in pre-1939 Germany, and in an inspiring position paper by Richard Bessel, another doyen of »Third Reich« history, who represents the antipode to Thamer.

Overall, however, the racist and bellicose dimension of the Volksgemeinschaft, which materialized not least »outside« of the borders of the Altreich of 1937, is underrepresented in this volume. In part, this may be the result of the volume’s effort to cover a broad, maybe too broad, range of related topics and approaches at least exemplarily. Kurt Bauer, for instance, sheds comparative light on the Volksgemeinschaft ideology in Austria in the 1930s, Merit Peterson compares Nazi and Mormon
community concepts, and Nicole Kramer, Malte Thiessen, Lu Seegers, and Frank Bajohr discuss various aspects of the aftereffects and the memorialization of the Nazi Volksgemeinschaft in post-1945 Germany. The fact that the volume does not shed much light on the construction of the Volksgemeinschaft through terror, war, and genocide is, however, also a result of the Research Group’s regional design and bottom-up focus, its major strength. The potential of this approach is intriguingly demonstrated in Kerstin Thieler’s examination of the »political evaluations« solicited by local NSDAP agencies in order to scrutinize the ideological conformity of the Volksgenossen. Generating a climate of permanent uncertainty about one’s own social status, this ideological x-raying mobilized Germans on behalf of the Volksgemeinschaft (p. 218).

Schmiechen-Ackermann’s volume represents an impressive take-off of the Lower Saxon Research Group on the Nazi Volksgemeinschaft. It would gain even more innovative momentum if it rendered account to the violent and excluding dynamic of the Volksgemeinschaft reality, which could, within the Group’s framework, be tested by regional case studies inquiring in social and generational differences of the social acceptance of Nazi racist, anti-Jewish, and anti-Slav politics or the perception of the conquest in the East in the German homelands.