

IX. Under the National Socialist dictatorship: persecution, resistance and exile 1933–1945

The “transfer of power” to Hitler and the NSDAP marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the trade unions. After a few months when the unions hoped to safeguard the survival of their organization with a policy that wavered between protest and compliance, they were smashed. The break-up of the unions and the construction of a authoritarian social order, termed a *Volksgemeinschaft* by the Nazis, were the logical outcome of National Socialist ideology, which was resisted by trade unionists of all persuasions both at home and abroad.

1. *Between protest and compliance: the end of the trade unions under the National Socialists*

“Organization – not demonstration: that is the slogan for today,” was how Theodor Leipart outlined trade union policy for the weeks and months ahead to the ADGB’s federal committee on 31 January 1933.¹ Like the ADGB leadership, the Christian unions’ executive also regretted Hindenburg’s “fateful decision” to confirm the “Cabinet of the Harzburg Front” headed by Hitler.² In a joint declaration, the trade unions expressed the fear that the “parties and groups that have hitherto openly advocated that manual and white-collar workers be deprived of their social rights, that democracy be destroyed and parliament cast aside” might now – in government – “seek to put their plans into effect”. Thus the vital interests of all working people were at stake. “To fight off attacks on the constitution and law effectively in an emergency requires a cool head and self-possession. Do not be misled into rash and therefore harmful individual actions.”³

Anyone waiting for an appeal for organized mass action was to be disappointed. These calls for discipline scotched the KPD’s appeals for a gen-

1 See Die Gewerkschaften und der Regierungswechsel. 13. Bundesausschußsitzung des ADGB am 31.1.1933, in Gewerkschafts-Zeitung No. 5 of 4.2.1933, p. 67 f.; on this point, see p. 67

2 See An die christliche Arbeiterschaft, in Zentralblatt No. 4 of 15.2.1933, p. 37

3 An die Mitglieder der Gewerkschaften, in Gewerkschafts-Zeitung No. 5 of 4. 2. 1933, p. 65

eral strike, though even without the non-cooperation of the unions they would probably not have been heeded more than sporadically. At any rate, the trade unions clearly dissociated themselves from the “tireless theoreticians of the general strike”. This point was emphasized by the deputy chairman of the ADGB, Peter Grassmann, at the leaders’ meeting of the Iron Front on 13 February 1933: “The general strike is a terrible weapon, not only for the adversary; one can only instigate one and be answerable for it if there is no other course open, if it is a matter of life and death for the working class.”⁴

Who could deny, looking back, that the very situation he dreaded had actually come about? But the insidious undermining of the social and political achievements of the revolution and republic, the weakening of the trade unions in the years of political and economic crisis, and probably resignation in the face of an opponent who seemed invincible and was attracting the masses in droves – all these factors contributed to the unions’ capitulation without a fight. Moreover, the labour movement was not capable of acting as one man: in addition to the split between Communists and Social Democrats, there were also tendencies towards polarization within the trade union movement. The joint statement by the trade union federations on Hitler’s take-over of the government was signed by the ADGB and the AfA-Bund, the liberal Trade Union League of German Workers’, Salaried Staffs’ and Civil Servants’ Associations and the General Association of Christian Trade Unions, but not by the DGB. In its telegram of congratulation to Hitler on 1 February 1933, the DHV pointed out that it had not been able to sign a trade union statement – and this was why the DGB had broken ranks – in which the new Cabinet was rejected as a government of “social reaction”.⁵ A few weeks later the DHV was voluntarily disbanded; thus by April 1933 the DGB was broken as a united organization.

Even though they continually warned of the consequences of a National Socialist government for the workers, it was obvious that the Free Trade Unions did not really expect the unions to be destroyed, either. Instead, they hoped that by stressing in the media the importance of the trade unions in providing “schooling in responsibility” for a people that was growing aware of its “right to national self-determination”, the movement would be spared as a sort of reward. To this end, Theodor Leipart

4 Peter Grassmann, Kampf dem Marxismus!? Rede anlässlich des Führerappells der Eisernen Front am 13. 2. 1933 (Berlin, 1933), p. 21

5 See the DHV to Hitler on 1. 2. 1933 (Bundesarchiv Koblenz, R 43 II, 531, No. 2)

recalled the “trade unions’ achievements for people and state”.⁶ And Lothar Erdmann, editor of “Arbeit” and Leipart’s confidant, was at pains to contribute to the ideological reconciliation of “nation, trade unions and socialism”⁷ by rejecting any internationalist tendencies.

The unions stuck grimly to their policy of keeping a “cool head”, as it was called, even after the Reichstag fire on 27 February 1933, which the Free Trade Unions branded “an attack on the whole parliamentary system”.⁸ True, there was much talk in union announcements at this time of “struggle” (*Kampf*) and “readiness for the struggle” (*Kampfbereitschaft*) – but this was an allusion to the electoral campaign (*Wahlkampf*) more than anything; once again, the unions – including the Christian unions – were pinning all their hopes on the electorate.

After the elections of 5 March 1933, in which the NSDAP gained an absolute majority, the unions began to adjust to the fact that Hitler’s government was not going to be just a brief interlude. But even in the Free Trade Unions the hope obviously prevailed that things would not be that “bad” – in any event, no worse than under the Socialist Law.

In March 1933 the bloody terror against the trade unions reached an initial climax. On 13 March alone, the ADGB executive received alarming reports from more than twenty places.⁹ But the attacks and acts of violence failed to bring about any fundamental change in union policy. It is not possible to view the protests against these violent attacks, which were largely the work of the SA, as acts of resistance. The unions’ complaints to Hindenburg, for example, were more in the nature of reproachful protestations of innocence, accompanied by assurances of their readiness to cooperate with the government, if only it would keep the “rank and file” of its movement under control.

The unions’ willingness to fall into line went to the very brink of surrender. A statement by the ADGB executive of 21 March 1933 finally recognized the “right of the state to intervene in conflicts between organized labour and the employers if the common good required it”. “State supervision” of the “common work of the free organization of the economy

6 Theodor Leipart, Leistungen der Gewerkschaften für Volk und Staat, in *Soziale Praxis* No. 8 of 23. 2. 1933, columns 225–231

7 Lothar Erdmann, Nation, Gewerkschaften und Sozialismus, in *Die Arbeit* No. 3, March 1933, pp. 129–61

8 See Brand im Reichstag, Bundesausschußsitzung des Allgemeinen Gewerkschaftsbundes, in *Gewerkschafts-Zeitung* No. 9 of 4. 3. 1933, p. 129

9 Henryk Skrzypczak, Die Ausschaltung der Freien Gewerkschaften im Jahre 1933, in Matthias and Schönhoven (eds.), *Solidarität und Menschenwürde*, pp. 255–70; this information p. 261

might actually be beneficial, enhance its value and facilitate its execution". Even the form of organization was left open, as "championing the interests of labour takes precedence over the form of organization".¹⁰

While there is no mistaking the Free Trade Unions' attempts to adapt to the situation, the Christian-national unions appear to have succumbed to the emotionalism of the "revolution": "That which was rotten is gone. And a wave of young strength has swept over Germany." That was how they hailed this "revolution". At the executive and committee meetings of 16 and 17 March 1933, the Christian unions proclaimed their readiness to co-operate with the "new state"; and in adopting the "Essen Programme"¹¹ for the construction of a social order based on professional groups it was placing itself – according to Otte – "consciously in the service of the great cause".¹²

Saving their own organization was their guiding principle. Accordingly, the Christian unions dissociated themselves from the Free Trade Unions, and both federations distanced themselves from their former political allies, so as not to share the fate of parties that the regime obviously disliked. So the ADGB federal executive soon copied the step taken by the Christian unions at the Essen conference and brought its policy into line. On 9 April it declared its willingness "to place the autonomous organization of labour, created by the trade unions over the decades, in the service of the new state". The ADGB recommended that the trade union movement should be placed under a *Reichskommissar*. And on 13 April Leipart, Grassmann and Wilhelm Leuschner discussed the future organizational form of the union movement with representatives of the NSBO. Only when the NSBO men opined, by way of an ultimatum, that Leipart should hand over his post to a National Socialist, was the limit of union compliance finally reached: Leipart insisted that the leadership of the trade unions should be decided by the delegates.¹³

The result of the Reichstag elections, the terror of March 1933 and the vote on the "Enabling Act" (*Ermächtigungsgesetz*), whereby the German parliament – against the votes of the SPD – gave up its powers, had worn

10 Erklärung des Allgemeinen Deutschen Gewerkschaftsbundes. in *Gewerkschaftszeitung* No. 12 of 25. 3. 1933, p. 177

11 See *Richtlinien der christlich-nationalen Gewerkschaften*. in *Zentralblatt* No. 7 of 1. 4. 1933, p. 87 ff.

12 Quot. *Tagungen der Christlichen Gewerkschaften*. in *Gewerkschaftszeitung* No. 12 of 25. 3. 1933, p. 178

13 See Manfred Scharrer, *Anpassung bis zum bitteren Ende. Die freien Gewerkschaften 1933*, in Scharrer (ed.), *Kampflose Kapitulation. Arbeiterbewegung 1933* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1984), pp. 73–120; on this point p. 107 ff.



May Day 1933: celebrating "National Labour Day" in Berlin

down trade unionists. Only the spring works council elections brought a faint ray of hope, but the National Socialist regime broke off the elections as they were not producing the desired results. After the election of a good 9,000 works councils it was apparent that at the end of April there was still a great deal of loyalty to the trade unions, hard pressed though they were. The Free Trade Unions received 73.4 per cent of the vote, the Christian unions 7.6, the Hirsch-Duncker unions 0.6 and the RGO 4.9 per cent; the NSBO "only" managed 11.7 per cent.¹⁴ On the other hand, the National Socialist leadership may have concluded from this result that in order to put into effect their plan for a new social order they would have to smash the unions once and for all.

At the same time as the unions were declaring their readiness to adapt and negotiating on *Gleichschaltung* (falling into line) with the NSBO, they were making last-minute efforts to unite the trade union movement. The fact that talks between the representatives of the federations were supposed to lead to a "*Gleichschaltung* from below", to prevent reorgani-

¹⁴ Figures from *Neuwahl der Betriebsräte 1933*, in *Gewerkschafts-Zeitung* No. 17/18, 29. 4. 1933, p. 270



2 May 1933: the SA occupies the trade union building in Berlin on the Engelstraße

zation as a compulsory state-run trade union, shows how little scope for action the union leaders now saw. At the end of April 1933 the “United Trade Union Leaders’ Group” was set up – certainly no alliance for action; instead, the talks were an effort to ensure at least the survival of the organizations, albeit in a new, non-political form. The programme of this merger between the Free, Christian and Hirsch-Duncker unions worked out at the end of April was characterized by readiness to take an active part in the reorganization of economic and social life.¹⁶ For the rest, this draft programme was more of a makeshift roof than a solid foundation for a united union movement. To forge a true union it was first necessary to endure the shared experience of dissolution and annihilation, persecution and resistance

The unions’ policy of compliance reached its climax and its finale with their appeals on May Day 1933, which the government – hijacking the tra-

¹⁵ See Erkelenz to Stegerwald on 1. 4. 1933 (Stegerwald-Archiv, Nachtragsband No. 19)

¹⁶ Reprinted in Gerhard Beier, *Zur Entwicklung des Funerikreises der Vereinigten Gewerkschaften Ende April 1933*, in *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* XV (1975), p. 389 ff.

dition of the international labour movement – had declared “National Labour Day”. The ADGB’s federal executive welcomed the May Day arrangements on 15 April, recalling that on May Day “the declared belief of the German worker, filled with a passionate desire for culture, flared up, seeking to snatch the working man away from a dull life of toil and give him a place in the community of the people as a free, confident personality”.¹⁷ Whereas the federal executive left participation in the state May Day celebrations up to members, on 19 April the ADGB’s federal committee finally called on workers to take part.¹⁸ May Day was even welcomed by the executive of the Christian trade unions, (which had not exactly shown much enthusiasm for May Day before) as a sign “that the Hitler government professes its faith in the social German heritage (*Volks-tum*)”.¹⁹

Many trade unionists deluded themselves that their organizations had a newly defined but firm place in the “national popular community”. A day later, the trade unions were brought up sharp by reality. On the morning of 2 May all the important buildings of the ADGB and the individual unions were occupied by SA and SS troops. The Nazis vented their hatred of the Free Trade Unions in a spree of arrests, torture and murder. On 3 May the other federations meekly submitted to the “Action Committee for the Protection of German Labour”. That was the end of the trade union movement. The policy of appeasing the new dictators to the very limits of self-respect, even the trade unions’ political suicide, had not been able to prevent their break-up – though they may have made it easier.

2. *The social order of the “Führer state”*

Anyone who had imagined that, given their anti-union propaganda, the National Socialists might certainly obstruct the trade unions but stop short of destroying them was deceived. The assumption that an industrialized country could not do without trade unions to represent and integrate working people proved an illusion. Very quickly the National Socialist rulers were trying to construct a social order in tune with their ideology, and in this order there was no room for the independent, self-determined representation of workers’ interests. Does it need emphasizing that the NSDAP was anything but a socialist party?



17 Gewerkschafts-Zeitung No. 16 of 22. 4. 1933, p. 241

18 *ibid.*

19 An die christliche Arbeiterschaft, in Zentralblatt No. 9 of 1. 5. 1933, p. 105

In April 1933 the rights of the works councils were cut back with the Law on Company Representation. After the dissolution or “bringing into line” of the trade unions, free collective bargaining was abolished in May 1933 by the Law on the Trustees of Labour. In the same year a general wage freeze was decreed, with a resulting boost to company profits in the economic upturn that got off to a hesitant start but picked up speed as rearmament got underway. In May 1934 farmworkers were forbidden to change jobs without official permission. In February 1935 the “work book” for manual and white-collar workers was introduced, regulating the labour market but, most importantly, keeping a check on job changes, too.

The cornerstones of National Socialist labour legislation were the “Law on the Organization of National Labour”, passed on 20 January 1934, and the “Law in Preparation for the Organic Construction of the German Economy” of 27 February 1934. These laws were based on the underlying idea of a harmony of interests between employers and wage earners, expressed in the notion of the popular and corporate community as a “productive community”. Thus, Article 1 of the Law on the Organization of National Labour stated: “Within the company the entrepreneur, as the leader of the company, and the staff and workers, as the workforce*, shall work together to promote company objectives and for the common benefit of people and state.’ The “leader of the company” was required – in Article 2 – to “ensure the welfare of the workforce. The latter must observe the loyalty to him that is founded in the corporate community”. Industrial peace was characterized as the workforce’s natural “duty of loyalty” to the leader. Both employers and employees had to bow to the aims of the National Socialist state, which were, however, clearly in line with the ideas of many employers, when it came to crushing the labour movement. This may have consoled them for the loss of their own federations, which fell victim to the “class-based construction” (*ständischer Aufbau*) of the German economy. This meant that the entire economy and labour market were subjected to state regimentation, but the system of private property and opportunities for profits were retained.

By stressing the community principle – from the works community to the popular community – the abstractions of Nazi ideology only superficially concealed the actual consolidation of capitalist power structures, which were reinforced by giving the “leader principle” legal status in the economy and crushing the labour movement. The arguments over collective agreements were replaced by state decrees by the trustees of labour;

* Translator’s note: The German word used here is *Gefolgschaft* (retinue, entourage, followers), a deliberate archaism that formed part of National Socialist jargon.

the place of the works councils was taken by “representative councils”, which were “elected” by the staff from a list put forward by the employer and whose chairman was the “company leader”. Presumably because of these peculiar regulations, the turn-out by the workers in the first elections for these new councils in March 1934 was not as good as the regime had hoped, so that no extensive list of results was ever published. Only for mining were there any faintly reliable figures, showing that in the pits about two-thirds to three-quarters of the valid votes had been cast for the official lists.

The place of the trade unions was to be taken by the German Labour Front (Deutsche Arbeitsfront – DAF), though it initially saw its position threatened by the National Socialist Company Cell Organization (NSBO). Formed on the model of the Communist RGO, since 1928 the NSBO had spread from Berlin throughout the large industrial regions of Germany; by 1932 the National Socialist company cells had roughly 170,000 members. NSBO members often remained in the trade unions too, so as to be covered financially in the event of a strike. Following the National Socialist seizure of power the number of NSBO members soared to some 700,000 by May 1933. This encouraged the NSBO leadership to believe that it would become the heir of the trade unions; for this reason, the NSBO, as a populist grass-roots movement with plenty of mass support, was at first a serious rival to the DAF. But soon the DAF took over the NSBO’s major tasks. Not all NSBO officials were content to act simply as “recruiting officers” for the DAF and some repeatedly tried to formulate their own wage earner policy. Consequently, after an initial “general purge” in autumn 1933, the NSBO was politically brought to heel in the summer of 1934.

According to the announcements of May 1933, the DAF was supposed to act as a substitute union, but in its November 1933 form it organized all those who were gainfully employed, irrespective of their economic or social position (both workers and employers), clearly bearing the stamp of the *Volksgemeinschaft* ideology. In addition, the DAF was a National Socialist organization, which meant – to quote Robert Ley, the DAF chairman – that it was “solely dependent on the will and leadership of the NSDAP”.²⁰ The DAF was an organization with considerable financial resources: not only did it take over the trade unions’ capital, but wage earners (for whom membership was compulsory) also had to pay 1.5 per

20 According to Hans-Gerd Schumann, *Nationalsozialismus und Gewerkschaftsbewegung. Die Vernichtung der deutschen Gewerkschaften und der Aufbau der “Deutschen Arbeitsfront”* (Frankfurt, 1958), p. 101

cent of their wages in dues. With roughly 30 million members in 1939 – some 10 per cent of employees were able to avoid membership – the DAF amassed a considerable sum, and having no negotiating functions to fulfil, it was able to spend the money on its company social policy and the leisure organization, *Kraft durch Freude (Strength through joy)*. Robert Ley repeatedly tried to extend the DAF's sphere of influence, for example by putting forward proposals for the reorganization of social insurance and by intervening in internal company disputes; but the DAF remained principally a source of publicity for the National Socialist state, which could thus advertise its high regard for the “workers of brain and muscle”.

Seldom has a regime fostered such a cult of labour and the working people – and at the same time deprived the working class so completely of political power. The National Socialist state intimidated the workers, deprived them of political and trade union representation – but surrounded them with an almost mythological enhancement of the picture of the worker in art and political propaganda. There could be no doubt about the ends to which this was all devoted. Under the programmatic title “We are all helping the Führer”, Robert Ley made it quite clear in 1937: “What is good for Germany is right; what is harmful to Germany is wrong.” A year later the wage earners were confirmed in the role as “soldiers of labour”: “When you are asleep, it is your private business, but as soon as you wake up and come into contact with another person, you must bear in mind that you are one of Adolf Hitler's soldiers and you must live and conduct yourself in accordance with a set of rules.”²¹

The militarization of work, giving the “work effort” of the “soldier of labour” a place in the “battle of labour” was not just so much rhetorical verbiage; with the progressive “taming of the working class”,²² from deprivation of political rights to the introduction of compulsory labour (1938), propaganda was simultaneously preparing for war, which was Hitler's main aim from the outset.

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While large numbers of workers may have been sceptical about the fine phrases of Hitler's propaganda, the improved standard of living that accompanied the economic upturn may have been some consolation for

²¹ According to H. Grebing, *op. cit.*, p. 212

²² See Tim Mason, *Die Bändigung der Arbeiterklasse im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland*, in Carola Sachse et al., *Angst, Belohnung, Zucht und Ordnung. Herrschaftsmechanismen im Nationalsozialismus* (Opladen, 1982), pp. 11–53

their loss of political rights. Was it not thanks to National Socialist policies, many people may have asked themselves, that the number of unemployed fell from 5.6 m in 1932 to 4.8 m in 1933? Who could see through the way in which propaganda dressed up the unemployment statistics? The extension of voluntary labour service, which was soon made compulsory, and the accumulation of emergency work led to a further drop in the unemployment figures, although the number of persons in gainful employment did not rise, but actually fell from 18.7 m (1932) to 18.5 m (1933). The situation eased as the war generation, which was relatively small, came on to the labour market. On the other hand, the job creation programme, which was proclaimed with a great deal of propaganda, was not particularly successful. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that the creation of jobs, which aroused the admiration of many observers (and not only contemporary ones) was clearly designed to further the goal of "restoring the German people's fighting capability", to quote Hitler's words in February 1933.²³ And we should recollect that only with the rearmament programmes from 1934–35 onwards was unemployment cured. In 1936 arms spending was twice as high as investment for civilian purposes. It was not only the large concerns like the Hermann-Göring-Werke that profited, but also a multitude of small suppliers. The consumer goods industry also benefited from the higher demand resulting from greater purchasing power.

From 1937 on, there was a lack of skilled workers in crucial areas of the arms industry, particularly in engineering; about this time it is probably accurate to speak of full employment. This resulted in a sharp increase in the number of working women, who were pilloried in National Socialist propaganda. "Moral" pressure, but also social and economic measures, had caused a drop in the proportion of women in the working population, but when rearmament pushed the economy into an upward trend and manpower became scarce as a result, state and industry called up the "reserve army" of women, as has repeatedly happened throughout history.

The late 1930s brought an improvement in the material standard of living for large sections of wage earners. Despite the wage freeze decreed in 1933, full employment was a major factor in enabling wage earners to

²³ Dietmar Petzina, *Hauptprobleme der deutschen Wirtschaftspolitik 1932/33*, in *Vierteljahrhefte für Zeitgeschichte* 15 (1967), pp. 18–55; this quot. p. 43

achieve individual wage rises through a “wage policy off their own bat”.²⁴ In 1937 real wages again reached the pre-war level (Table 3b).

The other side of this accelerated run-up to war was an extension of working hours. Because of the Depression, working hours had fallen to an average 40 hours per week in 1932; in the period prior to the war they went up to 48 hours (1939), and during the war they rose again, to 60 hours per week (Table 4b), thus pushing to the very limits the rules on working hours laid down in 1938. According to these rules, which are still in force today, regular working hours must not exceed eight hours per day or 48 hours per week. But this may be extended to up to ten hours per day by collective agreement, with a set overtime bonus of time and a quarter.

A few months later – on 1 September 1939 – the legal provisions governing industrial safety and limits on working hours were suspended by the “Decree modifying and complementing regulations in the field of industrial law” for the duration of the war. But then, immediately before the attack on France, they were brought back into force, except for bonuses for the ninth and tenth hours worked, to avert any resentment that might have jeopardized arms production.

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On the outbreak of war, living conditions changed astonishingly little, apart from conscription and the ever-growing number of casualties. The experience of the First World War had shown that the successful waging of war largely depended (or so it seemed) on social peace on the “home front”. One of the aims of war policy was therefore to ensure a high standard of living for the civilian population. Providing for the families of soldiers at the front and productivity incentives in the form of bonuses and leisure activities were intended to guarantee the smooth running of war production. This calculation was based on the assumption that the “Blitzkrieg” strategy would permit the immediate plundering of the countries subjugated.

At first things seem to be working out as planned. After the victories of 1940–41, the occupied countries were not only forced to provide raw materials for German armaments but also food supplies for the population. In order to maintain German output without drastically increasing

²⁴ See Detlef J. K. Peukert, *Die Lage der Arbeiter und der gewerkschaftliche Widerstand im Dritten Reich*, in Ulrich Borsdorf unter Mitarbeit von Gabriele Weiden (ed.), *Geschichte der deutschen Gewerkschaften von den Anfängen bis 1945* (Cologne, 1987), pp. 447–98; this quot. p. 470

the number of working women, civilians were deported to Germany, where they, along with prisoners of war and the inmates of concentration camps, were put to work for the large German concerns. Owing to the high proportion of foreigners in production. German workers were often able to leave the “shitty jobs” to them and, as members of the *Herrenvolk*, step into supervisory (“leadership”) roles.

It was only with the retreat of the German troops on all fronts after the Battle of Stalingrad in January 1943, that the effects of the war began to be felt with increasing harshness in Germany. Although nominal wages continued to rise, supplies became scarce, and food and fuel rationing became part of everyday life, as did hours spent chasing goods in short supply. But this still did not give rise to the explosive atmosphere caused by the First World War food shortages. Both the ubiquitous informer and the sense of helplessness in the face of the catastrophe signalled by the nightly bombing raids fostered a climate of passivity, characterized by hope and fear, grumbling and subjection. Of course, a number of actions by young people did stand out, though the markedly maladjusted behaviour of groups of tearaways such as the “Edelweiss pirates” cannot be considered political resistance as such. And even during the war itself, go-slows, absenteeism for sickness and the insolence of many workers cannot, despite the growing risks of such conduct, be considered opposition, or resistance, although it should be borne in mind that these were the only ways of putting a dissident political attitude into practice. And these forms of individual protests certainly were risky – from telling political jokes and “belly-aching” to minor misdemeanours at work, which counted as sabotage.

3. *Trade unionists in the resistance and in exile*

By smashing the labour movement, the regime deprived the workers of their only chance of putting up any organized resistance. And with the machinery of the police and persecution pervading every area of life, every germ of collective resistance was destroyed. The only way of gathering oppositional elements together, if at all, was in the strictest secrecy – illegally, of course. For the unions, accustomed to mass support and operating in public, this posed problems with which their structure was not able to cope. The majority of trade union leaders were scarcely in a position to start indulging in conspiratorial methods of struggle, especially as they themselves, when not under arrest, were subject to special police surveillance. In the conditions of terror and persecution, surveillance and

denunciation, there was simply no question of building up a trade union mass organization under ground.

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What form did trade union resistance take in practice? Despite the complete power of the National Socialist state to subjugate and punish its subjects, not every form of maladjusted behaviour can be classified as resistance. Reserving the term resistance for practical action to harrass or destroy key areas of the National Socialist dictatorship, the mere refusal to knuckle down and co-operate with the regime, or criticism of individual measures – however brave and whatever sacrifices they may have entailed – cannot be labelled resistance. Nor can the concept of trade union resistance be applied to the continuation of traditional union work, as the unions had been suppressed, along with the political role they had played. Certainly, in the conditions described, attempts to organize trade union activities, even to the point of striking, command respect. What is meant by trade union resistance, however, is the attempt by individual trade unionists to engage in political work directed against the National Socialist regime itself.

Trade union resistance was, firstly, trying to maintain personal solidarity between oppositional trade unionists. It was trying to illegally gather and pass on information on the situation in industry. It was trying to counter the propaganda tirades with political education. It was trying to maintain contact between resistance groups at home and in exile, and between German and foreign trade unionists. And it was trying to make preparations for “afterwards”.

With these perhaps rather modest-sounding tasks and objectives the trade union resistance groups reacted to the situation in which they found themselves. Any large-scale resistance operations were out of the question in view of the terror immediately imposed and the indulgent, “wait-and-see” attitude evinced by growing sections of the population towards the regime. Even the attempt to build up a broadly based illegal organization was doomed to failure. This was demonstrated by the KPD’s attempts to cling on to the RGO’s cell plan, which led to mass arrests in 1933–4. The beginnings of underground trade union work within the DAF, employing “Trojan horse” tactics, were also fruitless; and because of the – alleged – collaboration of the Communists in the DAF it confused the working class.

The first precondition for mounting trade union resistance was to keep in touch, so as to strengthen one’s own political convictions against the

growing pressure of National Socialist propaganda and to exchange information. Thanks to skilful camouflage, some well-known trade union leaders even managed to carry out this task, for example, Alwin Brandes of the engineering workers, Fritz Husemann of the miners and Jakob Kaiser of the Christian trade unions. Kaiser had taken on the job of championing the pension and benefit claims of the Christian-national trade unionists dismissed in 1933, which enabled him to pay many “legal” visits to former union officials. The profession of commercial traveller also provided good opportunities for secret contacts – Bernhard Göring travelled in cigars, Hans Gottfurcht as an insurance agent. Any job to do with transport was also a good cover, so it is not surprising that the railway workers under Hans Jahn and transport workers under Adolph Kummernuss played a large part in the resistance work of the 1930s, especially as they had the backing of the International Transport Workers’ Federation under Edo Fimmen. According to Jahn, in March 1936 his organization had 137 area centres, with 284 area centre leaders and 1,320 officials. The engineering workers also had a good network of contacts, with organizers such as Alwin Brandes, Heinrich Schliestedt, Max Urich, Richard Teichgräber, Hans Böckler and Walter Freitag.

Such contacts and groups may be regarded as resistance if they carried out operations against the regime – such as the transport and exchange of secret articles and information bulletins and – of course – the printing and distribution of leaflets. But neither meetings disguised as visits by commercial travellers (when communication was by word of mouth only) nor the groups that sprang up as a result were safe from the Gestapo. Heinrich Schliestedt and Hans Gottfurcht had to flee abroad, and Hermann Schlimme was arrested in 1937. The network of railwaymen’s centres built up by Hans Jahn was almost entirely smashed by mass arrests in 1937, and the illegal circle around Alfred Fitz of the Federation of Food and Beverage Workers suffered the same fate.

It should be pointed out that there were also sporadic joint actions by Social Democratic and Communist trade unionists. The best known were the groups of textile and engineering workers formed at company level in the Wuppertal area, which had several hundred members in autumn 1934. They printed and distributed leaflets and ran their own newspapers. In January 1935 the groups were smashed by mass arrests. The accused in the “Wuppertal trials”, which were the subject of a tremendous propaganda campaign, received a great deal of support from abroad, particularly the Dutch “Wuppertal Committee”.

At about the same time, the SPD and KPD resistance groups were broken up, so that by 1936–7 there was scarcely any organized resistance by

the labour movement at all. Only the leftwing splinter groups that had prepared for illegality were partially able to survive and carry on their work under ground. In the years that followed, trade union resistance was basically limited to the "Illegal National Leadership of the German Trade Unions", that is to say, the contact groups of former top officials, who met to discuss plans for "afterwards".²⁵ The union leaders cannot have had any contact with the masses but they did have a secret information network that made them particularly valuable as contacts for those colleagues who had fled abroad.

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In view of the persecution and threats to which trade unionists were subjected, attempts were made at an early stage to set up emergency reception centres in neighbouring countries. Until it was annexed by Germany in 1935, the Saar district offered a refuge to exiled trade unionists. Then Czechoslovakia (until 1938) and the border regions of Holland, Belgium, France and Denmark assumed this function, until they, too, were overrun. But it was not simply a matter of setting up reception centres for trade unionists forced to leave Germany; the main task was to co-ordinate work from these regional centres.

In autumn 1934 the German trade unions' foreign legation was founded in Czechoslovakia at a conference in Reichenberg. After Schliestedt's death in 1938 it moved its seat to Copenhagen, where Fritz Tarnow was in charge, though not all foreign representatives recognized him as leader. The foreign legation received financial assistance from the International Trade Union Federation – by no means a matter of course, in view of the dismay engendered by the ADGB's policy of "compliance" in spring 1933 and particularly its withdrawal from the ITUF on 22 April 1933.

Abroad, too, there were sporadic instances of co-operation between Social Democratic and Communist trade unionists. But in the final analysis the United Front slogan launched by the Communist International in 1935 did not have much of an impact. Although the "Co-ordinating Committee of German Trade Unionists" was set up in France, as a parallel to Heinrich Mann's Popular Front initiative, the failure of the Popular Front experiment and, above all, the Moscow purges had killed off the co-ordinating committee by 1937–8. Mention should also be made of the working

²⁵ Gerhard Beier, *Die illegale Reichsleitung der Gewerkschaften 1933–1945* (Cologne 1981)

party of Free Trade Union Miners, which was set up at a meeting of the executive committee of the Miners' International in Paris. This saw, among others, Franz Vogt, Richard Kirn and Hans Mugrauer of the (Social Democratic) Old Union working alongside the Communist Wilhelm Knöchel. Vogt committed suicide following the German invasion of the Netherlands; Knöchel, who played a leading role in the reorganization of the Communist resistance in Germany in the years that followed, was arrested in 1943.

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At the outbreak of the Second World War, many of the trade unionists who had fled Germany had to find a new home, Sweden, England and Switzerland being the major host countries.

In Sweden and England, groups of German trade unionists were set up with the primary aims of helping refugees secure the basic necessities and aiding the resistance in Germany by collecting and disseminating information. They also sought to influence the Allies' policy towards Germany, particularly by working with the unions of their adopted countries, through their own publicity work and by working with the Allied information services. The last course frequently followed the realization that the National Socialist dictatorship could only be destroyed from outside. Finally, the national groups drew up plans and programmes for building up the trade unions and reconstructing the labour market and the entire political system of the "post-Hitler era".²⁶

One of the principal instances of this was the programme submitted by Fritz Tarnow in December 1941 to the "Stockholm Association of German Social Democrats", which was based on the assumption that, in rebuilding the unions after the war, it would be possible to take over the organizational structure and principles of the DAF. This idea failed to secure strong backing in Stockholm or in London, so in 1944-5 the national group of German trade unions in Sweden put forward "proposals with regard to the problems of reconstruction in Germany", based on disbanding the DAF and setting up democratic and independent trade union organizations. In 1945, the national group of German trade unionists in London, which collaborated closely with the exiled leadership of the SPD in London, drew up a plan for "The new German trade union move-

²⁶ Reprinted in Ulrich Borsdorf, Hans O. Hemmer and Martin Martiny (eds), *Grundlagen der Einheitsgewerkschaft. Historische Dokumente und Materialien* (Cologne and Frankfurt, 1977), p. 248 ff.

ment".²⁷ co-written by Walter Auerbach, Willi Eichler, Hans Gottfurcht, Wilhelm Heidorn (= Werner Hansen), Hans Jahn, Ludwig Rosenberg, Erwin Schöttle and others. It proposed the setting-up of industrial unions, based on the principles of voluntary membership and political independence. In Switzerland and France, too, emigrants discussed plans for the reconstruction of the unions, though those drawn up by the London group proved to be the most influential.

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The work of the German trade unionists in England was important preparation for the re-establishment of the trade unions after the war. But there was nothing it could do to end the war or bring down the dictatorship. This was, however, the aim of individual trade unionists, such as Wilhelm Leuschner of the Free Trade Unions and Jakob Kaiser of the Christian unions, who were in contact with the resistance groups of 22 July 1944 inside Germany. Their involvement accorded with the interests of conservative resistance groups, which sought to include the (formerly) organized workers in the planned revolt, linking them with the new state apparatus from the start and preventing the development of any revolutionary or communist movements. On the other hand, the trade unionists were well aware that they would hardly be able to put an effective end to the National Socialist regime without the backing of the armed forces, and certainly not in the face of their opposition. Despite these misgivings and the intermittent distrust of political co-operation between such disparate groups as the aristocracy, the labour movement, industry, the Church and the armed forces, they were bound together by their common grounding in Christian morality and their belief in the rule of law and social reform. It enabled them to agree on a governmental alliance for the post-coup period. In addition to Ludwig Beck and Carl Friedrich Goerdeler, other names discussed were Wilhelm Leuschner and Julius Leber (SPD) as chancellor and vice-chancellor or interior minister respectively. According to a final draft of a list of ministers dated July 1944, the Christian labour movement was to be represented in the Cabinet by Bernhard Letterhaus.

Even though representatives of the old trade union federations – Leuschner of the Free Trade Unions, Kaiser of the Christian unions and Max Habermann of the German National Union of Clerical Assistants –

²⁷ Die neue deutsche Gewerkschaftsbewegung. Programmvorschlage fur einen einheitlichen deutschen Gewerkschaftsbund (London, 1945), especially p. 5 ff.

took part in the deliberations of resistance circles, this did not mean that they had succeeded in pushing through the plan for a united trade union agreed in spring 1933. Goerdeler's plan for constructing a "German Trade Union" was too closely based on the reality of the DAF, and the plans of the Kreisau circle envisaged the "works community" sort of industrial harmony.

The groups that planned the attempt on Hitler's life on 20 July 1944 were united not by a common programme but by the desire to end the violent rule of the National Socialists. The attempt failed, and the people behind it had to expect the most brutal persecution. Jakob Kaiser managed to go underground and remain in hiding to the end of the war. But Wilhelm Leuschner was arrested and sentenced to death, bequeathing to posterity the much-quoted injunction, "Create unity!"²⁸

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Of course, we must always remember that the National Socialist dictatorship was not overthrown by the actions of any of the resistance groups. The Third Reich perished when Germany lost the war and was occupied by the Allied troops. But the fact that there had been some resistance was tremendously important when it came to making a fresh start. And the price of resistance had been high. Thousands of men and women had been sentenced to imprisonment and hard labour, deported to concentration camps, tortured, murdered and executed. In 1936 alone, 11,687 people were detained for illegal socialist activity. At the outbreak of war there were roughly 25,000 people interned in concentration camps for political reasons; by 1942 this had risen to almost 100,000. According to official statistics at least 25,000 people were sentenced to death as political dissidents, among them trade unionists of all tendencies.²⁹ These sacrifices lent some credibility to the fresh start in 1945, and the resistance put up by trade unionists and the labour movement, after the impotent policy combining protest and compliance in 1933, helped justify and underline their claim to political participation in post-war German politics.

28 According to G. Beier, *op. cit.*, p. 83

29 Figures from Manfred Funke, *Gewerkschaften und Widerstand. Zwischen Ausnahmen und Orientierung auf die Zukunft*, in *Widerstand und Exil 1933-1945* (Bonn, 1985), pp. 60-75; see especially p. 66



Wilhelm Leuschner before the "People's Court"