

PREPARATION MATERIALS FOR A VISIT TO THE BUCHENWALD MEMORIAL

To prepare for your visit to the Buchenwald Memorial, we recommend the following text on the subject of the National Socialist “Volksgemeinschaft”. After reading the text, one can use the following questions to identify key topics. This learning process helps students evaluate the history of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp and draw historical connections.

QUESTIONS

What do you think?

Why were many Germans attracted by the Nazi worldview? Why did they support the concept of the “Volksgemeinschaft”?

How do you see this?

What aspects of Nazi ideology are important in the context of the history of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp?

It is worthwhile to look at **historical continuities** when preparing a visit to the memorial.

Do you have any idea?

What structures or situations in the Weimar Republic enabled or facilitated the rise of National Socialism?

When you think about the time after 1945 and the present ...

Do you see aspects of the National Socialist “Volksgemeinschaft” in contemporary societies of Europe or other regions of the world?

SPECIAL TOPIC: THE NAZI „VOLKSGEMEINSCHAFT“

The term „**Volksgemeinschaft**“ played a central role in political discourse long before the Nazi period. Especially during the era of the Weimar Republic (1918–1933), which preceded National Socialist rule, all active political parties made use of this term. Most parties understood this to mean the equal standing of all „Volksgenossen“ (members of the people/nation). The fundamentally problematic notion of a „people’s community“ had great appeal for a large portion of society in the initial years after the defeat of World War I. This period was defined by political crises, poverty, and general insecurity.

The **NSDAP** led by **Adolf Hitler** was particularly successful in utilizing the term for their propaganda. The Nazis were thus able to play into existing ways of thinking and desires among members of the German population: anti-Semitism and social Darwinism, a desire for revenge for the defeat in World War I, a rejection of democracy, a longing for strong, authoritarian national rule, and a traditional concept of the family. Economic uncertainties and prevailing fears for the future often had a reinforcing effect.

The **Nazi ideology of the „Volksgemeinschaft“** was also an answer to the class society of the Weimar Republic and the conflicts that resulted. Workers, unions, Communists, and Social Democrats called out class differences, fought for a more just society and in part for the abolishment of a society based on class. In contrast, the National Socialists wished to end class conflict by emphasizing the existence of a uniform German people. They either ignored social differences, or portrayed them as natural, and fought

against the workers’ movement and its organizations in order to manifest the „Volksgemeinschaft“. The creation of the „Deutsche Arbeitsfront“ (German Labour Front) was conceived to balance out economic extremes within this community. The National Socialists aimed to intensification of a meritocracy and a competitive society. In this sense, the Nazi idea of „Volksgemeinschaft“ also meant performance-based affiliation.

From the very beginning, these promises were not addressed to all the people in the German Reich. The Nazis defined who was not supposed to be a member of this community. For example, the first party manifesto of the NSDAP from 1920 described Jews as not being „Volksgenossen“ (members of the people/nation), and therefore they were incapable of being part of the „Volksgemeinschaft“ (people’s community). Instead, the National Socialists considered Jews and anything supposedly „Jewish“ as the eternal enemy of the „Volksgemeinschaft.“

The National Socialists’ understanding of „Volksgemeinschaft“ primarily referred to what they described as the „**gesunder Volkskörper**“ (healthy people’s body). In other words, it was not the individual who was important but the whole, the (supposed) community. „Du bist nichts, Dein Volk ist alles“ (You are nothing. Your people is everything.) was a core saying in Nazi propaganda. As indicated by the word „Körper“ (body), the Nazis looked at the „people“ in biological terms, and they wished to reorganize society from a social Darwinist point of view.

The National Socialist leadership claimed that certain people were harming this „healthy body“ of the people. They counted Jews, the unemployed, people with disabilities, supposed criminals, political opponents, and also homosexuals among such threats. These people were excluded from the community. They were labelled „Gemeinschaftsfremde“ (strangers to the community) and persecuted. Many were arrested and deported to concentration camps, where they were murdered or destroyed. These acts of ostracism and disenfranchisement along with massive propaganda campaigns against all those who were considered not to belong became part of everyday life after 1933. The notion of „Volksgemeinschaft,“ racism and anti-Semitism were taught in schools and disseminated through the press. Violent actions against such individuals on the street became increasingly normal.

Core elements of the Nazi „Volksgemeinschaft“ consisted of ostracizing people, brutal persecution, and ultimately also killing many people. The Nazis' concept of humanity was defined by who was or was not valuable and useful in their eyes.

And what about the people who were not ostracized? The majority of the German population could feel a part of the „Volksgemeinschaft.“ Many found careers in the NSDAP or its numerous subsidiary organizations; they were respected, and they profited from the policies of the Nazi government. The regime additionally tried to strengthen a common sense of „us“ and infuse it with meaning through propaganda and staged mass events.

Thus, although many people were ostracized and violently persecuted, the majority of the population experienced a period of satisfaction and recognition well into World War II. This enabled the National Socialist leadership to enjoy widespread support. The actual abolition of the civil parliamentary democracy and the establishment of a National Socialist dictatorship, war preparations (which ensured many jobs), and crimes of massive scale committed against ostracized members of society all unfolded without noteworthy opposition.