The Joke is on Hitler:
A Study of Humour under Nazi Rule

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Introduction

"Today in Germany the proper form of grace is 'Thank God and Hitler.'"
"But suppose the Führer dies?"
"Then you just thank God."[1]

It can seem jarring to think about humour in the context of the Third Reich, which is generally (and rightly) associated above all else with fear and violence. In 1934, the new Nazi government enacted a "Law Against Treacherous Attacks on the State and Party and for the Protection of the Party Uniform," which made laughing and telling jokes about the regime a capital offence.[2] It also began a process of restructuring and regulation called *Gleichschaltung (Synchronization)* which, among other things, brought popular forms of entertainment and humour under the control of the Ministry of Propaganda and People's Enlightenment.[3] A Chamber of Culture (*Reichskulturkammer*) was established to control the work of all creative artists – including comedians – to ensure they promoted the ideology of the Party.[4] These policies seem to suggest an absence of humour under the Nazi regime, yet the fact is that Germans continued to laugh throughout the Third Reich.

This thesis seeks to explain the difference between how Jewish and "Aryan" Germans used humour. There is minimal literature that directly examines this. While there is a growing body of literature on how each group used humour, there is little that actively compares the two or examines the variance. To do so, it will look at three varieties of humour under Hitler:

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[1] John Morreall, Ph.D, "Humor in the Holocaust: Its Critical, Cohesive, and Coping Functions," paper from 1997 Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches, 5.
[2] Ibid., 3.
[3] Valerie Weinstein, *Antisemitism in Film Comedy in Nazi Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 5.
[4] Steve Lipman, *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humour During the Holocaust,* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Publishers, 1991), 117.

National Socialist sanctioned humour, "Aryan" German jokes about the Nazi regime, and Jewish humour under the regime. I suggest that the difference between these forms stems from the levels of oppression people faced. Nazi sanctioned and official humour was influenced by and responded to audience demand. After the Nazis had gained power, humour did not allow them to effectively attack their political opponents. For "Aryan" Germans who did not otherwise oppose the regime, it was not necessary to rely on humour as a form of resistance. It provided some relief, but ultimately served the regime as people continued to cooperate. It was only people who were otherwise targets of oppression who faced prosecution for humour about the regime, such as cabaret performers. For them, humour was more critical towards the regime and took on a more resistant function. Jewish people never had the option to be included in the Nazis' ideological community. From the beginning, they were enemies of the Reich, and this intensified with the onset of the Holocaust. In the absence of other forms of power, humour provided a means of cultural resistance for Jewish people, allowing them to defy the wills of the Nazis who tried to dehumanize them and take their voices.

Historical literature on humour tends to produce a dichotomy: humour is either understood as a means of political attack and an instrument of power, or as a form of resistance and protest. The concept of humour as political attack suggests that group in power uses humour to promote community integration by laughing at their enemies. It arises from Henri Bergson, who explored laughter as a way to bring together one community in order to destroy the other.[5] Jürgen Brummack contributed to this by examining the role of satire, which he described as aesthetically socialized aggression, composed of attack, norm, and indirectness.[6] Political

[5] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911).
[6] Jürgen Brummack, "Zu Begriff und Theorie der Satire," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 45, (1971), 275-377.

historiography has emphasized the role of satire as political attack from the Reformation to the Enlightenment and in the political struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[7]

Historiography on humour as resistance originated with the German philosopher Joachim Ritter, who suggested that laughter resulted from an incongruity that was opposed to every norm or order.[8] A joke is funny when there is a discrepancy between what is expected and what happens. Mikhail Bakhtin expanded on this theory in his work on early modern times, suggesting that this incongruity created an opposition to power.[9] This perspective has been widely accepted in cultural historiography.[10] The concepts of humour as political attack and resistance have been accepted as the main functions of humour in dictatorships. There is the ruling power that uses satire to ridicule, exclude, and destroy its opponents, and the public who resists the regime by laughing at it.

This dichotomy is evident in literature about humour in Nazi Germany, as historians focus on the Nazi use of satire to attack their political enemies, or the role of "whispered jokes" as a means of secret resistance to the regime. Historiography has tended to assume that satire dominated the officially sanctioned public sphere under National Socialism.[11] This idea stems from postwar anthologies of Nazi propaganda that emphasized satirical caricatures. These anthologies republished caricatures of Jews from *Der Stürmer (Storm Trooper)* and war

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[7] For example, Mary Lee Townsend, *Forbidden Laughter: Popular Humor and the Limits of Repression in Nineteenth-Century Prussia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992) and Helen Pierce, *Unseemly Pictures: Graphic Satire and Politics in Early Modern England* (London: Yale University Press, 2008).
[8] Joachim Ritter, "Über das Lachen," *Blätter für deutsche Philosophie,* 14 (1940), 1-21.
[9] Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
[10] For example Joseph Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter: People's Humor in American Culture* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1997) and Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, eds., *A Cultural History of Humour: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).
[11] Patrick Merziger, "Humour in Nazi Germany: Resistance and Propaganda? The Popular Desire for an All-Embracing Laughter," *International Review of Social History* 52, no. 3 (Dec. 2007), 277.

propaganda featured in the satirical newspapers *Kladderadatsch* and *Simplicissimus* depicting the allies and Jews as predators and beasts.[12]

Similarly, the various collections of so-called "whispered jokes" that were published in the aftermath of World War II, such as Kurt Sellin's *Geflüstertes – die Hitlerei im Volksmund (Whisperings – Hitler in the Vernacular)*, has influenced the idea that ordinary people used these to resist Nazi rule. [13] Many compilations were released in the following years, so that the sheer volume of whispered joke titles seemed to reinforce the idea that this type of humour was predominant under Hitler. [14] Historians, such as Kathleen Stokker and Steve Lipman, have stressed the importance of these jokes, which have served as proof that the average Germans opposed Nazi rule but were afraid to express themselves openly.[15]

My paper counters the idea that humour under National Socialism worked as a means of political attack or resistance, but that it increased the conformity of "Aryan" Germans with the regime. It was only a form of cultural resistance for Jews and other enemies of the Nazis, who could never be accepted by the regime and were powerless to resist more openly. Chapter One looks at examples of Nazi sanctioned humour. It was in the Party's interest to provide some sort of humour to the German people, who desired to be entertained. Initially, Nazi propagandists used a form of satire to attack their political enemies. This form of satire used humour to criticize or expose people's (supposed) stupidity or vices, usually in the form of irony, exaggeration, or

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[12] Fred Hahn, *Lieber Stürmer! Leserbriefe an das NS-Kampfblatt 1924-1945: Eine Dokumentation* (Stuttgart: Seewald, 1978) and Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997).
[13] Kurt Sellin, *Geflüstertes – die Hitlerei im Volksmund* (Heidelberg: Freiheit Verlag, 1946).
[14] Merziger, "Humour in Nazi Germany," 277.
[15] Kathleen Stokker, *Folklore Fights the Nazis: Humor in Occupied Norway 1940-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), Steve Lipman, *Laughter in Hell*.

ridicule.[16] It provided a means to criticize the Nazis' political enemies through mockery and, in contrast, praise the success of the regime. National Socialist satire was aggressive and combative, and presented harsh caricatures such as depictions of 'the Jew' from *Der Stürmer (The Storm Trooper)*, an anti-Semitic newspaper founded by Julius Streicher (Figure 1).[17] While state satire was initially well-received by the German public, as the Nazis consolidated their power, it began to lose popularity. The public resisted being satirized, as this would have meant their exclusion from the racial community idealized by the Nazis.

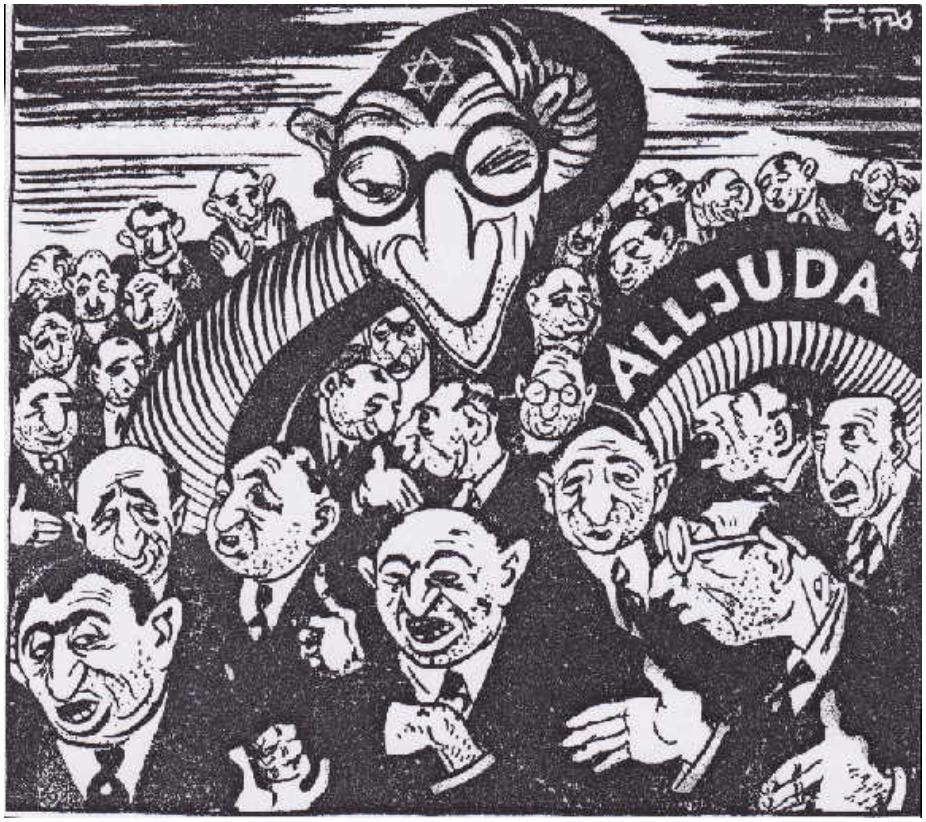

Figure 1: "Brood of Serpents." Caricature of "The Jew" from Der Stürmer, September 1934.

[16] Patrick Merziger, "Humour in the *Volksgemeinschaft:* The Disappearance of Destructive Satire in National Socialist Germany," in *The Politics of Humour: Laughter, Inclusion, and Exclusion in the Twentieth Century,* ed. Martina Kessel and Patrick Merziger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 133.
[17] *Der Stürmer,* September 1934.

Instead, the regime turned to what Patrick Merziger terms "German humour," which allowed the Nazis to spread their ideology in a way that was more acceptable to the German public. There were two features central to this form of humour: every protagonist was integrated into a harmonious community by the end, and anybody who was unable to be integrated, such as Jews or other minorities, simply did not exist in the text. The features of German humour are exemplified in a cartoon called *In Eintracht (In Harmony)* by Robert Högfeldt (Figure 2).[18] The caption reads, "In the bosom of the family / lulled by merry humour / a spot of bother now and then / when the waters ripple on the sea of life."[19] It depicts a happy "Aryan" family, sealed off from major conflicts and included in a united familial community. They are portrayed in a positive way, not attacked like the subjects of caricatures. Importantly, as the cartoon focuses on the family, it avoids portraying Jews or other enemies of the regime. The turn from satire to German humour represented the desire of "Aryan" Germans to conform and be accepted by the Nazi regime.

[18] Robert Högfeldt, "In Eintracht" ("In Harmony"), in Robert Högfeldt, *Das harmonische Familienleben (The Harmonious Family Life)* (Leipzig: Neff, 1938).
[19] Ibid.

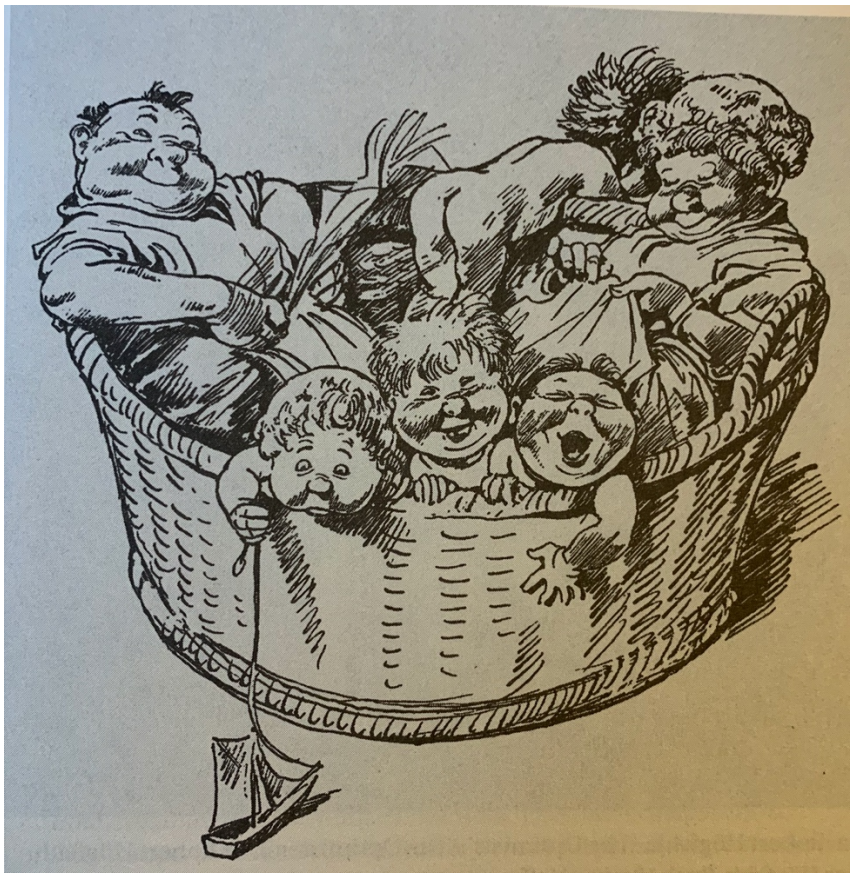

Figure 2: Robert Högfeldt's "In Eintracht (In Harmony)." (1938).

Chapter Two examines political jokes told by "Aryan" Germans during the Third Reich. It counters the idea that whispered jokes were a form of protest and resistance for ordinary Germans. Rather, they provided a way for them to release their frustration at the regime in a way that was still basically uncritical of the system. [20] Sources for these jokes include interviews with people who lived through the Third Reich, biographies of German humourists, and collections of whispered jokes released after the war. They have been collected by historians such as Rudolph Herzog and Steve Lipman.[21] Nazi leadership may have allowed anti-Nazi jokes as a type of "release," allowing the public to let off steam in a way that did not translate to more open and

[20] Rudolph Herzog, *Dead Funny: Humor in Hitler's Germany* (New York: Melville House, 2011).
[21] Herzog, *Dead Funny* and Lipman, *Laughter in Hell.*

thus more effective resistance. This suggestion is supported by examining the Nazi response to political humour. Although this type of humour was illegal, joke tellers who were denounced and brought to the People's Court usually received a mild punishment, if any.[22] Capital punishments were rarely handed out to "Aryan" Germans who otherwise supported the regime. Rather, the people who received death sentences for telling jokes were those who were already in conflict with the regime, and the joke only provided the means to persecute them under the law.

Chapter Three looks at Jewish humour under the Nazis. For Jewish Germans, humour did act as a form of resistance. This paper aligns with the framework provided by John Morreall, who proposes that Jewish humour in the Holocaust had three functions: the critical function, which allowed them to oppose and condemn the atrocities; the cohesive function, which brought people together as a group through their laughter; and the coping function, which allowed the oppressed to comprehend and endure their suffering.[23] This theory idea is corroborated by Aviva Atlani and Whitney Carpenter.[24] The Nazis fought to dehumanize Jews and take away their power. Under this persecution, laughter provided a means to symbolically gain some of this power back.

Most examples of jokes told by Jews under Hitler come from survivors of concentration camps.[25] Jewish humour in concentration camps consisted mostly of oral jokes. These jokes were remembered by their tellers or listeners and were collected through interviews by Steve Lipman,

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[22] Meike Wöhlert, *Der Politische Witz in der NS-Zeir am Beispiel ausgesuchter SD-Bericht und Gestapo-Akten* (Frankfurt: Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1997), 95.
[23] Morreall, "Humour in the Holocaust," 1.
[24] Aviva Atlani, "The Ha-Ha Holocaust: Exploring Levity Amidst the Ruins and Beyond in Testimony, Literature, and Film," *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository,* (2014) and Whitney Carpenter, "Laughter in a Time of Tragedy: Examining Humor during the Holocaust," *Denison Journal of Religion:* 9, no.3 (2010).
[25] Uğur Ümit Üngör and Valerie Amandine Verkerke, "Funny as Hell: The Functions of Humour During and After Genocide," *European Journal of Humour Research* 3 no.2/3 (2015), 84.

Rudolph Herzog, Chaya Ostrower, and others.[26] Another way these jokes survived is through memoirs written by survivors, such as Viktor Frankl's 1946 book *Man's Search for Meaning*, which chronicled his experiences as a prisoner in Nazi concentration camps.[27] Jewish survivors remembered laughing under the Nazis. Despite the horrors and atrocities they faced, they held onto this laughter and repeated it in interviews and memoirs afterwards.

For the majority of Germans, humour did not provide a means to resist Nazi rule. National Socialist sanctioned humour and political jokes told by "Aryan" Germans worked to increase complicity and cooperation. The German public resisted the regime's use of satire because to be satirized was to be excluded from the racial community. Thus, the turn to German humour showed the public's desire to be accepted under the regime. Whispered jokes told under Hitler furthered this conformity. They allowed "Aryan" Germans to express their dissent without entailing more open resistance, and were thus tolerated by the Nazis. Jews, however, had no chance of being integrated into the "Aryan" community. For them, humour provided a means of spiritual resistance against Nazi persecution. Their ability to laugh defied the Nazis, who tried to silence this laughter permanently.

[26] Herzog, *Dead Funny*, Lipman, *Laughter in Hell,* and Chaya Ostrower, "Humor as a Defense Mechanism during the Holocaust," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 69, no.2 (March 2015).
[27] Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning,* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959).

Chapter 1: National Socialist Sanctioned Humour

"Who is Germany's greatest electrician? Adolf Hitler. He connected Austria, cut off Russia, electrified the entire world, and is still the one flicking the switches."[28]

The widespread image of Germany under the National Socialists is of a humourless regime that sought to stifle all forms of pleasure and subdue its people. Yet the public desired entertainment, particularly laughter, and the Nazis could not ignore this. In the later years of the Weimar Republic and the first years of the Third Reich, Nazi propaganda used satire as its main form of humour. It used satire to ridicule and demean its opponents in an effort to destroy them. As the Nazis consolidated power and promoted their ideal of a united racial community, or *Volksgemeinschaft,* the public began to resist their use of satire as comedy. "Aryan" Germans could not allow themselves to be satirized, as this meant being excluded from this community. Furthermore, satire did not 'annihilate' its targets outside of the *Volksgemeinschaft* as intended, but focused attention on them and alluded to the real annihilation of Jews and other minorities. Sales of satirical magazines declined, and critics protested against humour in this form.

Instead, the German public turned to a new form of humour called "German humour" in popular culture venues such as books and theatre. The term was used to differentiate between benign comical products, that did not attack anyone and focused on mild conflicts, and satirical or ironic texts. German humour avoided the problems of satire. It did not attack anyone, nor focus attention on the Nazis' political enemies. This kind of humour was compatible with the National Socialist *Volksgemeinschaft*, an exclusive community of "Aryan" Germans that eliminated any trace of "the other". When the Nazis realized how well this type of humour fit into their ideology, they stopped resisting its popularity and adopted it themselves. While the

[28] Herzog, *Dead Funny,* 101.

Nazis initially used satire to oppose their enemies, their use of humour was responsive to public demands, and in the years following 1934 they shifted towards a more inclusive form of German humour. Satire's disappearance in popular culture and the rise of German humour did not indicate the public's resistance to Nazi ideology, but rather their desire for conformity and integration into a united "Aryan" community.

Satire, particularly in the form of caricature, is generally considered the classic genre of the National Socialist regime, and it is the first form of humour propagandists adopted. Satire had been a popular form of entertainment in the Weimar Republic, and the NSDAP incorporated it into their propaganda campaigns even before they gained power in 1933. [29] It provided a means to integrate propaganda with entertainment. *Der Angriff (The Attack)*, a daily newspaper published by Joseph Goebbels, who would later become the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, published caricatures and satirical sketches. [30] In 1931, three satirical books were published based on these drawings. The purpose of these books was to ridicule and mock the opposition, and in doing so discredit them. *Der Kesse Orje (The Breezy Orje)* is a good example of this, showing how the Nazis depicted "the Jew" as overweight, smelly, extremely short, with a large nose (Figure 3).[31] In the same year, the satirical magazines *Die Zeitlupe (The Slow Motion)* and *Die Brennessel (The Stinging Nettle)* were founded, both of which were linked to the Party.[32] These magazines sought to attract a wider audience in order to further spread the message of National Socialism. This is evidenced in the way that they imitated the layout and cover of *Simplicissimus*, which had established itself as a conservative middle-class satirical magazine in

[29] Patrick Merziger, "'German Humour' in Books: The Attractiveness and Political Significance of Laughter during the Nazi Era," in *Pleasure and Power in Nazi Germany,* ed. Pamela E. Swett, Corey Ross, and Fabrice d'Almeida (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 108.
[30] Merziger, "Humour in Nazi Germany," 281.
[31] *Der kesse Orje: Spaziergänge eines Berliner Jungen durch das System,* ed. Karl Martin Friedrich, (München: Eher, 1931), 22.
[32] Merziger, "Humour in Nazi Germany," 282.

the Weimar Republic.[33] Furthermore, while the authors of these magazines still focused on 'the Jew' as their main target of ridicule, they expanded their repertoire and also addressed the culture and politics of the Weimar Republic. [34] In this way, they sought to reach the demographic of white-collar workers and independent professionals who were sympathetic towards attacks on the Weimar Republic. The editors seem to have been successful in distributing these magazines beyond the core supporters of the Party: *Die Brennessel* sold around 40,000 copies a week in 1932, compared to *Simplicissimus*' 30,000.[35]

Figure 3: Depiction of "The Jew" from Der Kesse Orje (1931).

[33] Ibid.
[34] Merziger, "Humour in the *Volksgemeinschaft,* 135.
[35] Patrick Merziger, "'Totalitarian Humour'? National Socialist Propaganda and Active Audiences in Entertainment," *History Workshop Journal* 79, (Spring 2015), 184.

These satirical magazines aimed to establish a contrast between the Nazis, who represented what was good in society, with their enemies. A cartoon published in *Die Brennessel* on 16 January 1934 demonstrates this idea (Figure 4).[36] Captioned "Then and Now," the cartoon is split in half. The first panel shows a giant man, meant to represent a Jewish banker, with his hand on a farmhouse reading a deed, while the German-looking family runs away outside. In the second panel, a giant police officer hits the banker's hand with his baton, causing him to drop the deed and let go of the farmhouse. The family is back at the farm working. The image is meant to represent a Jewish banker stealing a farm from a German farmer but being stopped by the Nazi law. Typical anti-Semitic features are invoked: the Jewish man is greedy, ugly, and has a big nose. He is the object of ridicule, and the reader is meant laugh at his unhappiness when he is stopped. In contrast, the policeman is strong and respectable. He protects the German family from the evil Jewish enemy. Humour directed against the Jews targeted their power and status in society in this manner.

[36] *Brennessel,* 16 January 1934.

Figure 4: "Then and Now." Caricature from Die Brennessel (1934).

Other focuses of National Socialist satire included the English and German emigrants. A caricature of Churchill published on 18 December 1934 claims that the British were exaggerating German armaments production (Figure 5).[37] The caption is "Churchill juggles the figures," and caricaturizes Churchill as a juggler saying: "Add another zero to the German figures. It won't make any difference." The aim is to mock Churchill, as he appears ridiculous and incompetent. A cartoon published on 30 November 1934 focuses on "The Emigré Press": German journalists who left Germany after 1933 and founded German-language newspapers abroad (Figure 6).[38] It

[37] *Brennessel*, 18 December 1934.
[38] *Brennessel*, 30 November 1934.

caricaturizes a Jewish journalist selling newspapers to a man, but secretly injecting lies. In this way, satire distorted its target to show them in a way that, according to the author, existed but was not otherwise apparent. By mocking its opponents, the Nazi regime asserted its superiority in contrast. These cartoons exemplify how Nazi humour attacked its political enemies through ridicule.

Figure 5: "Churchill Juggles the Figures." Caricature from Die Brennessel (1934).

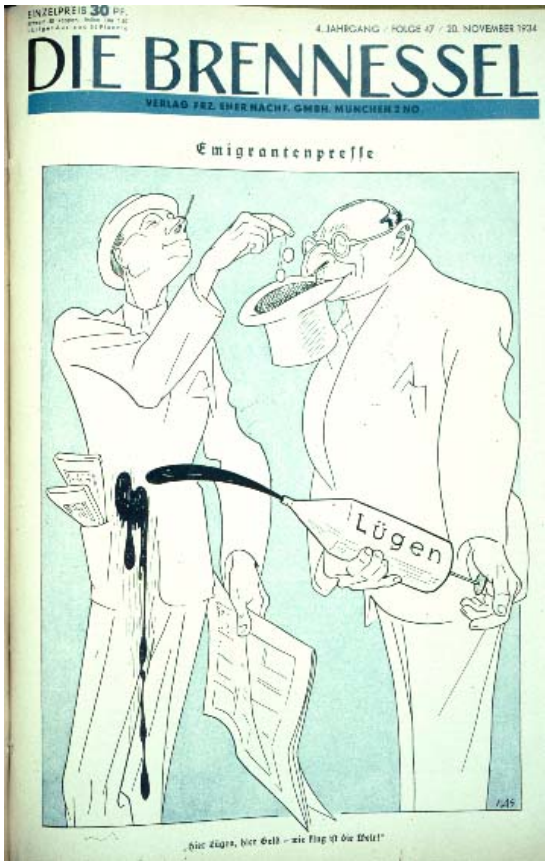

Figure 6: "The Emigré Press." Caricature from Die Brennessel (1934).

Jews and other political enemies were not the only targets of satire. Nazi humour also attacked "Aryan" Germans who lacked full confidence in the regime, such as in a cartoon published in *Die Brennessel* on 23 October 1934 (Figure 7).[39] Captioned "Those who don't want to see will have to feel," it was part of a propaganda campaign by Goebbels against Germans who complained about shortages, corruption, or inefficiency.[40] In the first frame, one man is complaining to another that nothing is happening in Germany, not seeing two men who are working in the background. The two workers are annoyed, so in the second frame one of them hits the speaker with his shovel handle. In the last frame, the complainers walk away, the speaker

[39] *Brennessel*, 23 October 1934.
[40] Randall L. Bytwerk, "The Dolt Laughs: Satirical Publications under Hitler and Honecker," *Journalism Quarterly* 69, no.4 (1992): 1032.

rubbing his jaw and commenting, “Well, something happened after all…”. The caricature establishes the difference between good and bad responses to the regime. The message is that to complain is to be disloyal. In comparison to the strong, handsome workers, the complainers are overweight, ugly, and dressed in outlandishly pompous clothing. This particular cartoon quite literally hits them over the head with the message, making them the object of ridicule. The cartoon counters any criticism of the regime and conveys that the Nazi Party is working hard to improve Germany and serve its people.

Figure 7: “Those who can’t see will feel it…” Caricature from Die Brennessel (1934).

In the first two years of the Nazi regime, satire captured new markets, including Germany’s airwaves. In the Weimar Republic, radio had to take a position above all party lines,

and so it had been impossible to broadcast political satire.[41] Following the Nazi takeover in January 1933, Nazi producers introduced satirical broadcasts on the radio, including a satirical musical. It aired between propaganda speeches on 1 May 1933, the newly established "Day of German Labour".[42] National Socialist satire also gained prominence in many professional theatres. The satirical play *Konjunktur (Boom Time)* by Diedrich Loder was one of the most frequently performed plays in the 1933/34 season.[43] It ridiculed those in German politics who attempted to enhance their public image by inventing a National Socialist background and exaggerating their commitment to the new ideology. Authors writing for the mass market began to publish satirical books mocking the enemies of the new regime.[44] High-level Party members continued to praise satire and humourists expected it to remain the dominant form of humour in Germany.[45]

In one unexpected example from 1933, a compilation of anti-Hitler caricatures was published in Germany, called *Hitler in der Karikatur der Welt (Hitler in the Caricature of the World)*.[46] Strangely enough, this was not done in opposition to the Nazi regime, but rather to support it. The editor of this volume was Ernst "Putzi" Hanfstaengl, who was the member of the Nazi Party in charge of corresponding with the foreign press. In the introduction to the book, he writes:

> The mocking, distorted images used by a degenerate press to depict Adolf Hitler as he fulfills his historic mission are reminiscent of cacophonous jazz music. The naysayers and defamers are shamefully unmasked by their own work… The value of this compilation of caricatures of the Führer resides in the fact that they, more than any other opposing voices, argue for him. Every image reveals how wrongly the world has seen and judged Adolf Hitler. Those who study the book attentively will get a good laugh at every

[41] Merziger, "Humour in the *Volksgemeinschaft,*" 136.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., 137.
[44] Merziger, "'Totalitarian Humour?'," 184.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Herzog, *Dead Funny,* 56.

> picture, not because the caricaturists are so witty, but because they have gotten things so obviously wrong.[47]

Thus, the purpose of this collection was not just to fight back against the negative images of Hitler, but to provide laughter in a way the Nazis could control. In his book on humour in Nazi Germany, Rudolph Herzog suggests that the Nazis were concerned about being viewed as "thickheaded thugs with no sense of humor."[48] This book counteracts this portrayal by attempting to prove that Party leaders did indeed have a sense of humour. This book was possible in light of their success in coming to power, as it appeared they had triumphed over these insults.

In addition to his introduction explicitly stating that the images were false, Hanfstaengl added propagandistic glosses to the cartoons. In one image from the American magazine *The Nation,* Hitler was rendered as a grim reaper with an army of skeletons (Figure 8).[49] He holds two scythes in the shape of a swastika, with blood on the blades. On the following page, Hanfstaengl explains how readers should interpret the image:

> The press: The image suggests Hitler is a warmonger.
> The facts: On July 15, 1933, Hitler authorized the German ambassador in Rome to sign the Four Powers' Pact, through which England, France, Italy, and Germany ensured peace in Europe for the next ten years.[50]

At first glance, these cartoons seem to subvert the function of satire, as it is the images of Hitler that are unflattering. With the propagandistic glosses, however, the book works in the same way. Just like the cartoons in *Die Brennessel*, the book establishes a contrast between Hitler and his enemies. It quite clearly focuses on Hitler's accomplishments in order to present him as strong

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[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

and powerful, and by portraying his enemies as incompetent and wrong, it makes them an object of ridicule. The original cartoonists' ideas are so far off from Hanfstaengl's "correct" interpretations of events, they seem ridiculous and inept. The book was fairly popular, we can assume, given that 40,000 copies were printed.[51]

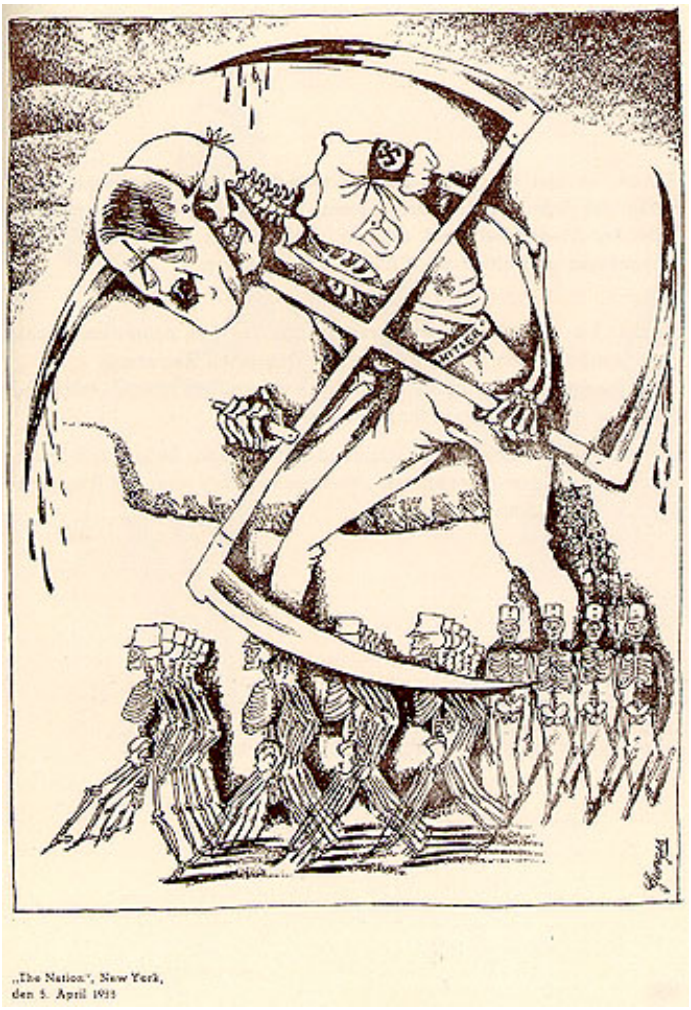

Figure 8: A cartoon from "The Nation" reprinted in Hitler in der Karikatur der Welt (1933).

Yet despite its success in the early years of the Nazi regime, satire ran into difficulties after 1934, as the public began to express their disapproval towards its negativity and aggressiveness. Commentators pointed out that the National Socialist Party claimed to be

[51] Randall Bytwerk, "Hitler in Caricature," *German Propaganda Archive* (Calvin University, 2001).

building a "better Germany," stating that the cutting humour of satire was no longer appropriate.[52] People did not want to be reminded of the on-going exclusion of minorities when they desired laughter and entertainment; they preferred the promise of harmony and security. The conditions for humorous entertainment had changed, and writing satires was becoming problematic. Germans did not want to be the aim of mockery, but satires aimed externally were counterproductive and seemed too negative in focusing too much on the alleged enemies of the regime.[53] The first signs that satire was losing its popularity can be seen as early as 1934. The *Illustrierter Beobachter (Illustrated Observer)*, a popular National Socialist illustrated magazine, stopped publishing satirical caricatures in this year.[54] *Die Brennessel* did not retain its readership either, and at the end of 1938 it had to close down due to low sales. It likely did not sell more than 5,000 copies a year by that time.[55] *Simplicissimus* and *Kladderadatsch* stayed in circulation until 1944, likely because they were more established, but they also experienced a rapid decline in sales. In 1938, both journals sold only 11,000 copies compared with 30,000 and 40,000 in the early 1930s.[56] In 1944, even Goebbels admitted that satire did not contribute to shaping public opinion under Nazi rule.[57] The disappearance of satire thus did not stem from National Socialist propagandists, but rather responded to audience demand.

Not only did the public stop reading and listening to satire, but they also protested against it. Letter writers insulted the Nazi editors of *Die Brennessel,* calling them "Jews, pimps, perverts, and scum."[58] In reaction to these complaints, satirical books began publishing an apology in the

[52] Merziger, "'Totalitarian Humour?'," 186.
[53] Merziger, "Humour in the *Volksgemeinschaft,*" 137.
[54] Merziger, "'Totalitarian Humour?'," 184.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.

first chapter, anticipating and attempting to forestall the backlash.[59] Even the official magazine of the SS, the *Schwarzes Korps (Black Corps)*, was affected, and on several occasions published formal excuses to explain the necessity of satire to its readers. [60] The problem with satire stemmed from the Nazis' monopoly of power, which made them unable to find an effective target. In a democratic society where conflicting positions hold equal power, victims of satire have a voice to argue against their portrayal, or release satire themselves. This means satire is less effective and remains humorous, as the people being ridiculed still hold their standing in society. Under the Nazi regime, however, such ridicule could seem to result in exclusion from society, as its desire for a unified community did not allow for any alternate viewpoints.[61] Thus, the German public was unwilling to be the object of satire. The public's dislike of satire indicated their desire to be integrated into the exclusive *Volksgemeinschaft.* Satirizing the declared enemies of the regime, such as Jewish people, emigrants, or the English, also posed a problem. Critics complained about satires that mocked people outside of Germany: the targets could not defend themselves, so it was pointless and unfunny.[62] Furthermore, it became clear that satire was no longer having the desired effect on its victims. In order to satirize their enemies, the Nazis directed more attention to them, giving them representation in the media when in reality they had been silenced, either forced to comply with Nazi regulations, forced to emigrate, or sent to concentration camps.[63] Thus, the disappearance of satire contributed to the total exclusion of opponents from the German community. Although propagandists sustained that satire was a way

[59] Ibid., 185.
[60] Merziger, "Humour in the *Volksgemeinschaft,"* 138.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.

to make their message entertaining, it could not recover its popular appeal during the Third Reich.[64]

Where satire failed, another genre of humour, called "German humour," gained popularity in response to audience demand.[65] Two features were integral to this type of humour. First, whereas satire strove to destroy its objects by laughing at them, German humour aimed to portray a harmonious community. Thus, no matter how ridiculous the protagonists of these comedies were at the beginning, they were all assimilated into this community by the end. Secondly, anyone who could not be assimilated, such as Jews or other minorities, was simply not addressed in the text. In this way, German humour avoided the two main problems that satire ran into: it neither attacked anyone nor dealt with any problematic topics. This explains the reason for the popularity of this comedic form. People sought out entertainment in order to have fun, not to be reminded of the ongoing exclusion of minorities under the new regime. Clearly, this form of humour fit well with the Nazi ideology of a close-knit, exclusive community: every acceptable German was integrated, while anyone unacceptable was left out.

Initially, however, the Nazis opposed the distribution of German humour, such as the 1930 comedic play *Krach um Jolanthe (Ruckus about Jolanthe)*, written by August Hinrichs.[66] The plot centres around attempts to hide a pig called Jolanthe from the local authorities, who want to repossess it as a down payment for outstanding taxes. The whole village is involved, and in the end all the characters reconcile for a party. Thus, the play invokes the harmonious community that is central to German humour. *Krach um Jolanthe* did not resonate with Weimar audiences. In 1932, it premiered on a professional stage in Dresden but was quickly dropped.[67]

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[64] Ibid.
[65] Merziger, "'Totalitarian Humour?'," 187.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid., 188.

Before 1933, the Nazis also opposed this play, writing in their party newspaper the *NS-Kurier* in 1932 that:

> In our view, the fate of the peasant is much too serious to turn him into a boozy, bawling clown. By writing a comedy, Hinrichs has chosen simply the wrong form of confrontation with reality. It is clearly a product of the "Bolshevism" that exists in German culture.[68]

After the Nazis gained power, however, it was adapted to film in 1934 and became a best-seller. Its popularity indicates the public's desire for a new form of humour.

By comparing the film version to the original play, we can see how the features of German humour developed under Nazi rule. The 1930 play depicted two outcast characters, a teacher and a Jew.[69] The teacher had studied in the city and been sent to the small village involuntarily. In the play, the villagers constantly make fun of him because he does not fit into the community. The film corrects this, however, by adding a female character who explains the local customs to the teacher. At the end of the film, the teacher attends the party, demonstrating his integration into the community. The Jewish character is portrayed as a money-grabbing cattle trader that tries to cheat the villagers. He appears ridiculous in his attempts, as the villagers always manage to outwit him. The original play satirized the Jew in a similar manner to Nazi propaganda. Yet the Jewish character was completely omitted from the 1934 film version, as he could not be reconciled into the community. The alteration of these characters in the film show how German humour provided a solution to the problems of satire under a Nazi dictatorship.

When Nazi propagandists realized that German humour conformed with their ideology, they began to incorporate it. While they had previously opposed the distribution of products that

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[68] Württ. "Die Metzelsuppe," *NS-Kurier,* 17 October 1932, quoted in Merziger, "'Totalitarian Humour?'," 188.
[69] Merziger, "'Totalitarian Humour?'," 188.

contained these comedic elements, they now stopped interfering.[70] Nazi propaganda itself began to imitate the features of German humour in theatres, cinemas, and print. The National Socialist film *Altes Herz wird wieder jung (Old Heart Becomes Young Again)* exemplifies these attempts. The second most successful film of 1943, it tells the story of Brigitte and her unknown grandfather Friedrich as they reunite.[71] Although the viewer is aware that of their familial relationship, Friedrich's family suspect them of having an affair and endangering their inheritance. This misunderstanding creates the humorous moments in the film. At the end of the film, the conflict is resolved, and the family warmly welcomes Brigitte, representing the ideal German community joining together. The shift in Nazi policies towards German humour was not a top-down process, but rather a reaction to the audience demand. Changing trends forced them to admit that people preferred entertainment and light humour to satirical propaganda.

Although Nazi humour remained political and propagandistic, it was forced to comply with the desires of the German people. In the early years of the regime, satire was an acceptable way to condemn its enemies because it was possible to be ridiculed and remain part of society. As it spread the ideals of one united community, however, people resisted this type of humour as it would have meant their exclusion. A new form of humour thus gained popularity, German humour. No less political, it spread the Nazi ideology in a more subtle way, by integrating all the characters into the community by the end and removing all traces of undesirable characters such as Jews. The public's desire for a more harmonious, inclusive form of humour demonstrates their willingness to conform to the regime and be part of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Similarly, jokes directed at the Nazis by "Aryan" Germans demonstrated this desire for conformity. The Nazis

[70] Ibid., 190.
[71] Ibid.

used humour to exclude their enemies and promote their ideology; however, Hitler and the regime were not immune to humour being used against them.

Chapter 2: "Aryan" German Political Humour in the Third Reich

"Whaddaya got for new jokes?
"Three months in Dachau."[72]

Despite it being against the law, Germans continued to make fun of Hitler and the Nazi regime throughout the twelve years of the Third Reich. Political jokes provided a way for people to express their discontent and release their pent-up frustration at aspects of life in Nazi Germany such as food shortages, unjust laws, and arrogant party leaders. One such joke points out the irony in Germany having a legal system controlled by the central government:

> A high-ranking Nazi official visiting Switzerland asks what a certain public building is for. "That's our Navy Ministry," his Swiss host explains. The Nazi laughs and says: "Why does Switzerland need a ministry of the navy? You've only got two or three ships." The Swiss answers, "Why not? Germany has a ministry of justice."[73]

Rather than being a form of resistance, however, these so-called "whispered jokes" ironically served the regime by acting as a release, and thus were tolerated by it. By analyzing the Nazi response to these jokes, it becomes clear that the people who were punished for telling jokes were those who were already perceived as a threat. One group that did directly criticize the Nazis, and were at risk because of it, were cabaret performers. Although the perception is that humour provided a means for Germans to resist Hitler and the Nazi regime in secret, the response of the government shows that "whispered jokes" were neither critical nor dangerous, and rather worked to maintain compliance with the regime.

While the notion that Germans used humour as a means to secretly resist Nazi rule is comforting, recent research has revealed that it is little more than a historical myth, possibly influenced by wishful thinking.[74] This notion stems from the publication of numerous joke

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[72] Herzog, *Dead Funny,* 65.
[73] Ibid., 50.
[74] Ibid., 2.

anthologies after the war, but there is a problem with the sources of jokes in many of these anthologies. In most cases, they were either unclear or unverified, making it difficult to properly analyze them, while in some cases the editors admitted the jokes were written after 1945.[75] In examples where editors described the selection process for the anthology, it became obvious that they only published those that seemed to be critical of the regime.[76] Because of this, they cannot be relied on to provide a full understanding of the real-life practice of telling jokes in this period. In later years following the release of the first few collections, many new compilations were created based on their contents.[77] Thus, the apparently vast number of whispered joke titles came to strengthen the belief that this form of humour was prevalent under the Nazi regime.

In fact, the focus on these jokes as a form of resistance may exemplify a specific political agenda. These collections serve the interest of self-exoneration by separating "the German people" and German comedians from the Nazis and their crimes, and claiming a greater level of opposition than was generally the case.[78] One example that demonstrates this problem is Josef Ludwig Müller's collection *Flüsterwitze aus brauner Zeit* (*Whispered Jokes from Brown Times*) published in 1944. With this publication, he sought to establish a German people who laughed in order to bear the suffering they experienced under Nazi oppression.[79] What this ignores, however, is that Müller had acclaimed the Nazi government in 1933 in his book *Amtsreden zu nationalen Anlässen* (*Official Speeches for Public Occasions*). By focusing on examples of dissent, he relieves the German people of any responsibility for their crimes.

[75] Merziger, "'German Humour' in Books," 108.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Merziger, "Humour in Nazi Germany," 277.
[79] Ibid.

Similarly, the Nazi reaction to such whispered jokes has been misunderstood. After taking power in Germany in 1933, the Nazis quickly moved to remove opposition to the party. In 1934, they enacted the "Law against Treacherous Attacks on the State and Party and for the Protection of the Party Uniform," known as the *Heimtückegesetz (Malicious Gossip Law)*.[80] Under this law, it was considered an act of treason to tell or listen to anti-Nazi jokes, subject to the death penalty. While this appears to imply a high degree of opposition to humour on the part of the Nazis, in actuality the vast majority of the joke tellers who were denounced and brought before the "People's Court" for treason received a mild punishment, if any.[81] Historian Meike Wöhlert analyzed these judgements in five cities, finding that in 61 percent of official cases, joke-tellers were let off with a warning.[82] Even for those found guilty, fines were rarely handed down and only 22 percent of cases were sentenced to any jail time. The whispered jokes may have even been welcomed and encouraged by the regime. In 1934, Hans Schwarz von Berk, a leading Nazi publicist, told readers of *Der Angriff* that they could continue to make jokes without concern.[83] This is a good indication of how the Party felt, as *Der Angriff* was a daily newspaper published by the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda, and served as the government's mouthpiece.[84]

Additionally, short stories and cartoons helped to propagate this viewpoint. A cartoon that appeared in *Schwarze Korps*, the weekly publication of the SS, exemplifies this (Figure 9).[85] The cartoon depicts someone telling a joke about Hermann Göring, who was the Minister of the German Air Force and Prime Minister of Prussia at the time. The joke-teller is holding a hand in front of his mouth, obviously trying to be secretive due to the fear of being caught. The joke is

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[80] Morreall, "Humor in the Holocaust," 3.
[81] Herzog, *Dead Funny*, 3.
[82] Wöhlert, *Der Politische Witz,* 95.
[83] Herzog, *Dead Funny*, 279.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Waldl (i.e. Walter Hoffmann), ''Pst! – Kennen Sie schon den Witz'', *Das Schwarze Korps* 2 no.26, (1936), reprinted in Waldl, *Lacht ihn tot! Ein tendenzio* (Dresden, Bilderbuch: 1937), 7.

passed on to others, each time becoming more exaggerated, going from "he says indignantly" to "he says devilishly," until it finally reaches Hermann Göring, Hitler's second in command and head of the Luftwaffe, himself. Rather than be offended, however, he responds, "My God, that's an old one! Come up with something new!" This joke was published in 1936, meaning that telling jokes about Göring were technically illegal under the Malicious Gossip Law. Yet by depicting Göring being tolerant of such jokes, this cartoon suggests that this could be permitted in daily life. *Schwarze Korps* was highly successful, and reached a readership of over 500,000 by 1937, two years after it was founded.[86] As the press organ for the SS, one of the most important organizations in the Nazi movement, it also suggests that the National Socialists allowed political jokes.

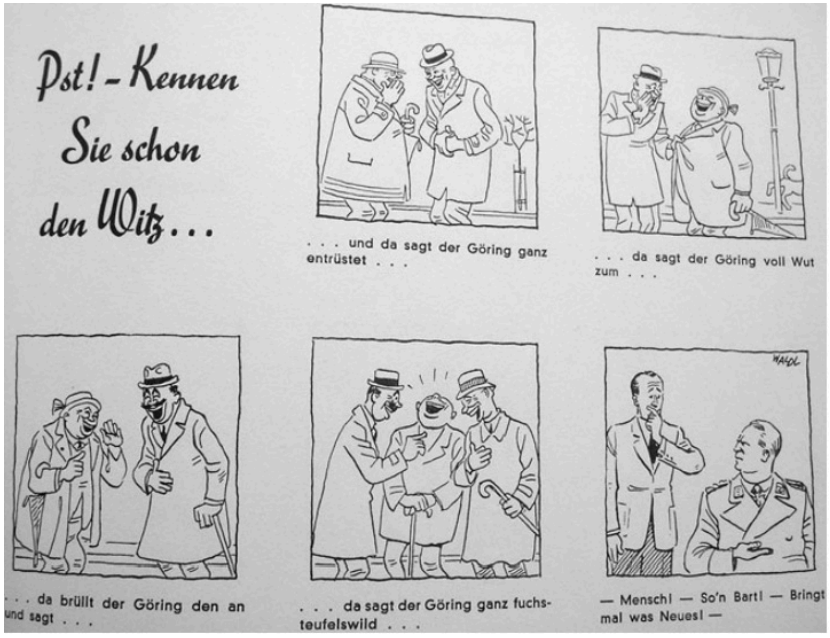

Figure 9: "Pst! – Do you already know the joke…" Cartoon published in the Schwarze Korps (1936).

The reason for the regime's apparent acceptance of anti-Nazi jokes is related to the actual function of German political humour in this period. The vast majority of political jokes during

[86] Merziger, "Humour in Nazi Germany," 279.

Hitler's reign were fairly uncritical of the system itself. They tended to point out the personal faults of Nazi leaders rather than the crimes they were committing. This did not translate to any legitimate challenge to the Nazi leadership, and in fact may have worked to increase the popularity of those joked about.[87] For example, a joke about Göring mocks his vanity and obsession with glamour and medals: "Göring recently added an arrow to the many medals on his chest. It's there as a directional sign: 'To be continued on my back.'"[88] The tone of this joke is affectionate and familial, portraying Göring as pompous yet endearing. By pointing out these weaknesses, the humour humanizes him, and may have worked to make him more accessible to the public. Importantly, it does not criticize his qualities as a leader or any actions he took.

Although telling jokes about Hitler and the Nazis rarely translated into open resistance, they did allow Germans to voice their dissent about aspects of the regime. One joke criticized the early rationing measures as Germany prepared for war: "The Führer always keeps his promises. He promised us that we'd always have enough bread to eat, but he didn't mention butter."[89] This refers to Hitler's campaign promise of "bread and work," appealing to Germans affected by the Great Depression. It also alludes to the well-known slogan, "guns not butter," which represented the Nazis' economic prioritization of armaments over food supplies. Now faced with a butter shortage, Germans expressed their dissatisfaction. This joke could hardly be seen as an act of resistance, however, as it still supports Hitler for his response to the economic crisis. Jokes such as this allowed Germans to let out some of their frustrations while maintaining their overall satisfaction with the regime. Another example suggests that Germans had little power to affect

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[87] Ibid., 277.
[88] Herzog, *Dead Funny*, 3.
[89] F.K.M. Hillenbrand, *Underground Humour in Nazi Germany, 1933-1945* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 182. Although this is an example of one of the anthologies criticized earlier, it has been used in sources from credible historians such as Steve Lipman. Unlike authors of other compilations, Hillenbrand cited his sources for his jokes so they could be verified.

decisions made by their rulers. It parodies the Nazi slogan "The Führer leads and we follow" as "The Führer takes the lead and we take what follows."[90] It is critical without being dangerous to the regime, as it delivers the message that there was nothing anyone could do about it. It does not reject Nazi rule entirely or advocate for change, thus allowing Germans to criticize the system while ultimately stabilizing it.[91]

The Nazis allowed jokes to be told as long as it served them; however, these jokes could only be permitted to those Germans who supported the regime. German citizens who otherwise showed a hostile tendency towards the regime could be severely punished for humour. The case of Joseph Müller, a Catholic priest, shows this. He told the following story:

> A fatally wounded German soldier asked his chaplain to grant one final wish. "Place a picture of Hitler on one side of me, and a picture of Göring on the other side. That way I can die like Jesus, between two thieves.[92]

A Gestapo and special-court file from 1933 determined the telling of this joke to be a misdemeanor, yet when Müller told the same joke in 1944, he was tried by the People's Court and sentenced to death. [93] Clearly, it was not the content of the joke that was problematic for the Nazis, but the characteristics of the teller and the time period in which it was told. Müller was denounced in 1944, towards the end of the Second World War. By 1942, it was clear that the war was turning against Germany. In this year, 1192 death sentences were handed down by the People's Court, an increase of over ten-fold from 102 the previous year.[94] Following 1942, this number continued to grow, indicating a correlation between the number of death sentences given

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[90] Herzog, *Dead Funny*, 4.
[91] For works that discuss humour as a means of increasing conformity, see Leslie M. Janes and James M. Olson, "Jeer Pressure: The Behavioral Effects of Observing Ridicule of Others," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 24, no. 4 (April 2000): 474-485 and Robert M. Khoury, "Norm Formation, Social Conformity, and the Confederating Function of Humor," *Social Behavior and Personality* 13, no.2 (1985), 159-165.
[92] Morreall, "Humour in the Holocaust," 8.
[93] Herzog, *Dead Funny*, 173.
[94] Atlani, "The Ha-Ha Holocaust," 30.

out and the shape of the war effort. In 1944, the year that Müller was executed, 2079 people were sentenced to death, up from 1662 in 1943.

A number of Müller's characteristics made him a threat to the regime. Members of the Clergy were watched closely, and frequently denounced and arrested.[95] Müller's brother Oskar later reported that it became clear at the trial that the Nazis had kept him under observation because they opposed his work with parish youth.[96] Müller gave as many as 17 hours of religious instruction a week, mainly to youth. This was a problem for the Nazis, as children were meant to be involved with the Hitler Youth and the League of German Maidens, rather than in Sunday school. As a clergyman, Müller was critical of the Party and warned his religious students against extreme political positions.[97] Additionally, he publicly asserted that Germany would never be able to win the war and opened his house and yard to Polish forced labourers so that they could take part in Mass, both of which were against the law. While he had never officially been brought in by the authorities, this brought him into conflict with his neighbours who were thoroughly indoctrinated in the regime, one of whom denounced him for telling this joke. Müller was not executed just for telling a political joke, but for a belief system that contradicted National Socialism.

The discrepancy between acceptable and unacceptable humour is further evidenced by how the Nazis reacted to cabaret performers. Cabaret shows consisted of short numbers from several different genres, such as songs, comic monologues, and skits, presented on a small stage in a relatively small and intimate hall.[98] Performers dealt with topical issues, and used satire and

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[95] Martina Cucchiara, "The Bonds That Shame: Reconsidering the Foreign Exchange Trials of 1935-36 Against the Catholic Church in Nazi Germany," *European History Quarterly* 45, no.4 (October 2015).
[96] Herzog, *Dead Funny*, 176.
[97] Ibid., 174.
[98] Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1996), 2.

political humour to mock and question the prevailing social and political order. Many of the performers fled following the Nazi takeover in 1933, as they were Jewish, leftist, or liberal.[99] The remaining performers had either to pretend to subscribe to Nazi ideals or run the risk of being shut down. Karl Valentin chose to run the risk, challenging Hitler in one of his skits. He targeted the Nazi salute, raising his arm and shouting "Heil – Dammit, now I've forgotten the name!"[100] By corrupting the salute, which was a symbol of acceptance, he rejected the regime. The cabarets were in conflict with the *Reichskulturkammer* (Chamber of Culture), which was created to control the work of creative artists and ensure it coincided with the values of the Party.[101] This allowed the Nazis to prosecute their enemies legally. One of the most popular comedians, Werner Finck, got so used to having Nazi "cultural monitors" at his shows that he was able to recognize them and integrate them into the act. He would interrupt his performance and address them directly as they wrote down what he said: "Do you want me to talk slower? Are you keeping up? Or should I wait for you?"[102] A performer from Munich, Weiss Ferdl, would bring out large photographs of Hitler, Göring, and other Nazi leaders. He would then ask his audience, "Now should I hang them, or line them up against the wall?"[103] As shown in these examples, jokes from the cabaret performances tended to be much more directly critical of the regime, and thus were considered more dangerous.

Most of the cabaret venues were eventually closed due to their refusal to comply with Nazi law, and many of the performers were sent to concentration camps, where surprisingly they continued to perform. In Dachau, a play written by Rudolf Kalmar satirizing the Nazis was

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[99] Ibid., 228.
[100] Atlani, "The Ha-Ha Holocaust," 37.
[101] Lipman, *Laughter in Hell,* 117.
[102] B.D. Shaw, ed., *Is Hitler Dead? And Best Anti-Nazi Humor* (New York: Alcaeus House, 1939), 10. Although this is an example of one of the anthologies criticized earlier, it has been used in sources from credible historians such as Rudolph Herzog.
[103] Morreall, "Humour in the Holocaust," 8.

shown for six weeks in 1943.[104] The lead character was meant to represent Hitler, and the SS were seated at the front as "honoured guests." These shows were controversial, as some inmates saw them as part of a larger manipulation strategy that ensured the proper functioning of the camps.[105] Viktor Frankl suggests that cabaret was used in the camps as a distraction, to keep the prisoners from revolting.[106] SS officers may have allowed the shows to continue because, similar to the whispered jokes and other officially sanctioned forms of humour, they allowed prisoners to vent their frustrations in a way that did not actually entail more open resistance. Nevertheless, these performances did provide a temporary diversion and a coping mechanism for some attendees. One survivor describes the impact that Kalmar's play had on the prisoners:

> Many of them, who sat behind the rows of the SS each night and laughed with a full heart, didn't experience the day of freedom. But most among them took from this demonstration strength to endure their situation… [.]They had the certainty, as they lay that night on their wooden bunks: We have done something that gives strength to our comrades. We have made the Nazis look ridiculous.[107]

Cabaret humour was more critical, and therefore much riskier, as performers could have their shows shut down, be arrested, or sent to concentration camps. With this risk, however, came strength from resisting. By ridiculing those in power, they created solidarity and hope amongst those who resisted.

Yet, not all cabaret performers were considered dangerous by the regime. While the Nazis persecuted Jewish comedians and performers who opposed them, they tolerated cabaret as long as it toed the party line. Rudi Godden's fascist cabaret troupe *Die acht Entfesselten (The*

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[104] Ibid.
[105] Lynn Rapaport, "Laughter and Heartache: The Functions of Humor in Holocaust Tragedy," in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*, ed. Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 257.
[106] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning,* 63.
[107] Morreall, "Humour in the Holocaust," 8.

Eight Unleashed) focused its humour on "degenerate" modern art.[108] This supported Hitler's public opposition to modernist art, and so was allowed to continue. The cabaret troupe *Tatzelwurm (Lizard),* which took over the stage previously used by the banned Catacomb, performed only parodies of previous or current cabaret stories.[109] A police report to the Gestapo confirmed that they were unobjectionable from a political standpoint, as they did not oppose the Nazis in any way. Thus, they were allowed to stay open. Hitler and Goebbels themselves made frequent public appearances to cabaret shows they deemed acceptable, and popular performers were exempted from military service by means of a "Führer's List" personally drawn up by Hitler.[110] These examples show that the Nazis only resisted humour they considered a threat to the movement, and tolerated and even encouraged humour that supported the regime.

While some cabaret performers may have used humour to resist the Nazi regime, most other jokes told by "Aryan" Germans under Hitler worked to stabilize rather than reject its rule. They allowed Germans to vent about features of the system they were unhappy with, without being too critical of the regime itself and thus maintaining conformity. Analysis of the Nazi response to this type of humour shows that it was permitted and even encouraged as long as the joke-tellers otherwise supported the regime. It was only those who otherwise defied the Nazi leadership who were at risk of persecution. In the case of Jews, they defied the regime by their very existence.

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[108] Herzog, *Dead Funny,* 103.
[109] Jalavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, 246.
[110] Herzog, *Dead Funny,* 103.

Chapter 3: Jewish Humour Under Hitler

As Hitler's armies faced more and more setbacks, he asked his astrologer, "Am I going to lose the war?"
"Yes," the astrologer said.
"Then, am I going to die?" Hitler asked.
"Yes."
"When am I going to die?"
"On a Jewish holiday."
"But on what holiday?"
"Any day you die will be a Jewish holiday."[111]

The Holocaust was not the first time that Jewish people turned to humour to alleviate their suffering, as humour has a long tradition in the Jewish religion. According to a tale in the Talmud, the comprehensive written version of the Jewish oral law, the prophet Elijah declared that those who bring laughter to others will be rewarded in the next world.[112] The story of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac is proof of laughter in the Hebrew scripture. Abraham and Sarah are described in Genesis 18 as being advanced in age, thus Sarah laughs when she overhears three visitors tell Abraham that she will bear a son, finding this far-fetched.[113] Sarah denies her laughter when God questions it, but when she gives birth to Isaac in Genesis 21, she gives him a name that resonates with her initial reaction. Isaac's name means, "He who laughs."[114] Sarah then announces, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me."[115] Ultimately, Isaac's life contained both irony and laughter.

[111] Morreall, "Humor in the Holocaust," 4.
[112] Ibid.," 5.
[113] Carpenter, "Laughter in a Time of Tragedy," 20.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid.

In Genesis 22, in an episode called "The Akedah" in Hebrew, God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac to prove his devotion.[116] As he is about to do so, however, God stops him. Elie Wiesel, a famous survivor of the Holocaust, suggests his interpretation of this incident:

> Isaac, after this horrible experience… should have committed suicide. Isaac, the survivor of the Holocaust, always remembers having seen his father, knife in hand, and the voice of God ordering his father to commence killing his son… [.]And in spite of everything, Isaac was capable of laughter.[117]

For Wiesel and other Jewish victims of the Holocaust, Isaac offers a paradigm for survival.[118] Isaac's ability to laugh represents tremendous perseverance and defiance. Similarly, for Jewish people under Hitler, laughter provided the means to do the same. The Holocaust was a period of oppression never before experienced by the Jewish people, in which the Nazis did everything in their power to dehumanize and exterminate them. Even so, they continued to laugh during the Holocaust, in the ghettos and the concentration and death camps. In a world in which their power was stripped away, humour became a unique weapon that allowed them to resist.

National Socialist sanctioned humour and "Aryan" German jokes about the regime ultimately increased conformity in a united racial community, one built on the exclusion and eventual extermination of Jews. Whereas "Aryan" Germans used political humour mainly as a release, jokes told by Jews under Hitler spoke to their desire to survive against all odds. John Morreall suggests that humour served three main functions for Jewish people under Hitler: criticism, cohesion, and coping.[119] The critical function focused attention on the oppression and resisted it, the cohesive function created solidarity in those laughing together, and the coping function helped them dispel the pain. One example of a joke from the final years of the Second

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[116] Ibid.
[117] Jacqueline Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo,* (New York and London: T.&T. Clark International, 2007), 61.
[118] Carpenter, "Laughter in a Time of Tragedy," 20.
[119] Morreall, "Humor in the Holocaust," 1.

World War demonstrates the defiance that Jewish humour expressed, despite the terrors Jews experienced:

> Two Jews are waiting to face a firing squad, when the news arrives that they are to be hanged instead. One turns to the other and says: "You see – they've run out of ammunition!"[120]

While the situation may be hopeless for these two, the joke reveals that Jews held onto their spirit as they waited for the Nazi regime to collapse. Although spiritual resistance did not directly save lives, it enabled Jews to maintain identity and courage in the midst of tragedy.[121] For Jewish people during the Holocaust, the very act of staying alive and holding onto their humanity resisted the desires and policies of Nazi rule. By helping them do this, humour acted as a means of cultural resistance.

The critical function of humour provided a means for Jewish victims of the Holocaust to condemn the Nazi regime and the persecution they faced. Unlike "Aryan" German political humour, Jewish humour directly criticized the Nazis and their crimes. It was an expression of aggression and resistance against the oppressor.[122] An example of humour criticizing the Nazis is as follows:

> A little Jew in Hitler's Germany brushes by a Nazi officer, knocking him off balance. "Schwein!" roars the Nazi, clicking his heels imperiously. To which the Jew, undaunted, makes a low bow and replies, "Cohen. Pleased to meet you."[123]

Although the Jew in this example is "little" and powerless against the Nazi officer, he uses his wit to defeat him. He turns the Nazi's insult against him, mocking him while maintaining his composure and politeness. Not only does the Nazi get called a "*schwein* (pig)," but he also

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[120] Herzog, *Dead Funny,* 6.
[121] Glass, *Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust,* 104.
[122] Anna Pawełczyńska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz: A Sociological Analysis*, trans. Catherine S. Leach (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 129.
[123] Atlani, "The Ha-Ha Holocaust," 44.

appears as an unintelligent brute. Humour thus rendered the oppressor less frightening, while also acting to establish the Jew as superior. It subverts the situation and turns the oppressor into the victim, diminishing their authority and giving the Jews a chance to laugh. Hitler's theories of a master "Aryan" race directly led to the extermination of Jews under his regime, yet Jews attacked these ideas with humour. They mocked the disparity between the ideal "Aryan," tall, blonde, and muscular, and the actual physiques of Nazi leaders like Hitler, Goebbels, and Göring.[124] They referred to Hitler's famous book *Mein Kampf* as "Mein Krampf (My Cramp)".[125] Another joke mocked the idea of the "Aryan" race, claiming: "There are two kinds of "Aryans": non-Aryans and barb-Aryans."[126] Thus, Jews used humour to draw attention to the injustice, and criticize it. They had very little control under Nazi rule, but they could rely on humour to spiritually undermine the power of their oppressors.

The Nazis oppressed the Jews through any means necessary, including their own use of anti-Semitic humour. Yet Jewish people continued to resist, and even mocked their oppression. They used self-mockery and self-directed humour to laugh at their own weaknesses, thus subverting the power that these jokes would otherwise have over them.[127] This "self-criticism" has been highlighted as a unique quality of Jewish humour by literary critics, sociologists, and artists, originating with Sigmund Freud.[128] This quality allowed the Jews to overcome the ordeals that plagued them historically, and maintain hope for the future.[129] The jokes were no longer a weapon used to laugh at the Jews, but rather a way for them to laugh at themselves and

[124] Morreall, "Humour in the Holocaust," 4.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed,* 139.
[128] Dan Ben-Amos, "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor," *Western Folklore,* 32, no.2 (Apr. 1973), 113.
[129] Ibid., 115.

destabilize the oppressive situation. The following example sarcastically critiques the Jews' alleged fatalistic attitude:

> Two Jews are about to enter the gas chamber in Auschwitz. One of them turns to the SS guard to make a last request for a glass of water. "Shah, Moshe," says his friend. "Do not make trouble."[130]

This joke mocks the perception that Jews are always accommodating and conforming, even when facing death. By joking about it, however, Jews challenged this perception. A further example comes from the Warsaw Ghetto:

> A Jew alternately laughs and yells in his sleep. His wife wakes him up. He is mad at her. "I was dreaming someone had scribbled on a wall: 'Beat the Jews! Down with ritual slaughter!'" Wife: "So what were you so happy about?" Husband: "Don't you understand? That means the good old days have come back! The Poles are running things again!"[131]

This joke mocks the anti-Semitism experienced by Polish Jews under Nazi occupation and before 1939. By laughing at themselves, the tellers of this joke symbolically took away the power of their oppressors to laugh at them. This joke also provides a means to criticize their oppressors: by highlighting the cruel treatment they experienced and making fun of it, they also succeeded in condemning it.

In its cohesive function, humour worked to produce solidarity amongst the people laughing. In interviews with historian Chaya Ostrower, Holocaust survivors pointed out that prisoners who had friends in the camps, either by making friends there or arriving with friends or acquaintances, had an easier time adjusting.[132] Humour helped with this, as it eases social interaction by intensifying group cohesion, reducing tension, and creating a positive

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[130] Lipman, *Laughter in Hell,* 193.
[131] Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum,* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 79.
[132] Ostrower, "Humour as a Defense Mechanism during the Holocaust," 190.

atmosphere.[133] In this way, laughter could help bring people together in the camps, where there was a wide variety of people sharing the same horrific conditions. One survivor recounted how she made friends in the camps through humour:

> Always, whenever they beat us we had to run. I always asked this friend: "Do you know how many meters we ran?" She asked: "Why is it important to you?" I said: "Important, important. I know there is a hundred meters, two hundred meters, I want to know how much I ran, I need to know my achievements." So, there were those who said: "She is out of her mind, she's nuts," but some laughed, sure there were some. I had friends, they joked also, not only was I the clown, but everyone took part, and contributed, and it made life a lot easier, a lot easier. I made fun only with those who wanted to hear. Not everyone wanted to hear."[134]

One way that humour helped bring people together was by creating an in-group and an out-group. By laughing at the Nazis, Jews set up distinctions between victor and victim, them and us.[135] Thus, they created a bond amongst each other, as those who laughed together.

The social function of humour could also offer an education of sorts to newer prisoners in the camps. The humour and jokes that were commonly told in the camps were unlike those in the prisoners' previous lives, and for many it took a period of adjustment to be able to join in the laughter.[136] A situation that veteran prisoners found funny might have been frightening and disturbing to new prisoners who had not yet adapted to the brutality of the camps. By paying attention to the stories and jokes told by the long-term prisoners, new prisoners could extract information on how to survive, the social norms in the camps, and how to relate to their new lives.[137] Holocaust survivor Elie Cohen points to this when describing concentration camp behaviour. He suggests that humour was a form of sharing information that also facilitated bonds

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[133] Ibid.
[134] Ibid., 193.
[135] Atlani, "The Ha-Ha Holocaust," 58.
[136] Ostrower, "Humour as a Defense Mechanism during the Holocaust," 193.
[137] Ibid.

between fellow inmates.[138] Since the SS guards typically did not enter the areas of the latrine in the camps, this became a social meeting place for prisoners, where they could talk, gossip, and joke more openly. This was conveyed to other inmates through humour: the latrines were referred to as "*Radia Tuches Agentur* (Radio Backside Agency)".[139] A successful joke could relay information better and more efficiently than a long explanation with numerous details.

Finally, humour had a coping function. In the camps, laughter could provide a sense of momentary relief from the stress and fear that was the prisoners' reality. As one survivor of Auschwitz, philosopher Emil Fackenheim, explains, "We kept our morale through humour."[140] One woman remembered how she used laughter to hold onto her humanity in Auschwitz:

> When they cut our hair in Auschwitz, that was something terrible… After they cut my hair off… suddenly I saw some girlfriends of mine that I've known for a very long time.. Many cried. They cried after long hair and then I started laughing and they asked, "What, are you out of your mind, what are you laughing about?" I said: "This I never had before, a hairdo for free? Never in my whole life,"… And I still remember, they looked at me as if I was crazy. I started asking them: "Who did your hair?" I was used to Misha, he was my hairdresser back home.[141]

The Nazis cut the prisoners' hair in an effort to dehumanize their victims in their first moments at the concentration camp. By changing their appearance so drastically, it cut them off from their former identity and forced them into uniformity.[142] Coupled with the prison uniforms, it took away their visible individuality. For women, it further represented a loss of their femininity. Most of the women despaired; however, this woman used laughter to point out the absurdity of the situation. By doing so, she rejected such dehumanization and held onto a sense of identity.

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[138] Elie Cohen, *Human Behaviour in the Concentration Camp,* trans. M.H. Braaksma (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1953), 104.
[139] Ostrower, "Humour as a Defence Mechanism," 189.
[140] Konnelyn Feig, *Hitler's Death Camps: The Sanity of Madness,* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), 77.
[141] Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed,* 44.
[142] Carpenter, "Laughter in a Time of Tragedy," 14.

Furthermore, she subverted the power that the Nazis held over her. By relating them to her hairdresser back at home, she transformed the situation to one where the oppressors worked for her.[143] While her friends may have thought she was crazy, humour functioned as a survival tactic for her.

The ability to point out the absurdity in their situation, as demonstrated by this example, was crucial to being able to laugh in the midst of tragedy. By combining normalcy with the absurd conditions the victims found themselves in, they were able to break the tension and find consolation amongst the tragedy. It helped them face the reality of life in the camps without going insane. One survivor describes showering at the camps. He was shaved, stripped naked, and herded into the showers with a group of other men.

> The illusions some of us still held were destroyed one by one, and then, quite unexpectedly, most of us were overcome by a grim sense of humour. We knew that we had nothing to lose except our ridiculously naked lives. When the showers started to run, we all tried to make fun, both about ourselves and about each other. After all, real water did flow from the sprays![144]

The convergence of the ordinary routine of showering with the abnormality of seeing the naked bodies of the other prisoners created an ironic situation that summoned a reaction.[145] These men were able to use laughter to mediate the terror that these circumstances elicited, helping them to comprehend their reality. Additionally, he acknowledged the fear that they would be gassed. When water flowed from the sprays, the prisoners felt an extreme sense of relief that they were able to express through laughter. Holocaust survivor Leontine Tels-de Jong describes a situation in which humour provided the same relief. She was crammed in a train car with other Jews during the transport from the Dutch transit-camp Westerbork to Theresienstadt, without

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[143] Ibid., 18.
[144] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning,* 55.
[145] Carpenter, "Laughter in a Time of Tragedy," 17.

sufficient food, water, or toilet facilities.[146] During this journey, the train kept stopping at stations to wait for signals. At one of these stops, the man next to her said, "Ladies and gentlemen, when the train stops again, let's pretend this train is full already!" According to Tels-de Jong, the whole car started laughing. By pointing out the absurdity of the situation, this man was able to break the tension and provide a moment of relief.

At one of Chaya Ostrower's lectures, a woman approached her and recounted a story of one of her relatives, who was a child during the Holocaust:

> A boy, about ten years old, was brought to the gas chamber at Auschwitz extermination camp along with some other children. While the other children cried and shouted, this child burst out laughing. An SS man approached the child and asked him why he was laughing. The child replied, "You are bringing me to my death, and for this I'm supposed to wait in line?" The SS man took the child out of the line, and the child was saved.[147]

In this powerful example, humour saved the life of this Jewish child. While for most Jews under Nazi rule, humour did not directly save their lives, their laughter was no less powerful. Through its critical function, humour gave them symbolic power over the Nazis, and offered a means to criticize the regime. Its cohesive function brought people together as a group, laughing together at their oppressors and sharing information on how to survive in the camps. Finally, its coping function provided a temporary relief from their suffering, allowing them to carry on in the face of unimaginable horrors. The Nazis did everything in their power to dehumanize and annihilate the Jews, but they never silenced their laughter.

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[146] Üngör and Verkerke, "Funny as Hell," 184.
[147] Ostrower, "Humour as a Defence Mechanism," 191.

Conclusion

Humour in Nazi Germany served different functions for different groups. Although in theory humour did not fit with the National Socialist ideology, in reality it served the regime's interest to provide the public with laughter they could somewhat control. In the final years of the Weimar Republic and the early years of the dictatorship, the Nazis used satire to target their enemies through ridicule, thus establishing a contrast between the positive actions of the regime and the negative traits of their enemies. The initially positive response to such satire shows that it was an effective means of propaganda. As the Nazis consolidated power, however, satire ran into complications. When there is only one accepted community, to be the target of satire was to be excluded from the community altogether, and "Aryan" Germans resisted this. By analyzing the decline in popularity of satirical magazines following 1934, it becomes clear that the German public no longer accepted this form of propaganda. Instead, the National Socialists turned to a new form, German humour. By removing all traces of people who did not fit with the Nazi ideal and by promoting the integration of all people into the community, it allowed the Party to spread their ideology without anyone being at risk of being excluded. Ultimately, the public's rejection of satire demonstrated their desire to conform to the regime and be included in the *Volksgemeinschaft*.

For "Aryan" Germans, humour directed at the Nazi regime did not function as a form of resistance, but rather provided a means to express their dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the Third Reich without being truly critical. Thus, it too acted to maintain conformity. While most "whispered joke" anthologies stress the danger in telling these jokes under the 1934 "Law Against Treacherous Attacks on the State and Party and for the Protection of Party Uniforms," a closer analysis of the Nazi response to these jokes tells a different story. Messages in prominent

Nazi sanctioned publications suggest that as long as the joke-tellers otherwise supported the regime, they were permitted to and even encouraged to engage in this type of humour. It was only those Germans who otherwise did not fit with the Nazi ideology who were at risk, such as cabaret performers who used humour to directly criticize the regime.

While humour was accepted under Nazi rule as long as it maintained conformity with its ideology, for Jewish Germans this was never possible. Thus, for Jews persecuted by the Nazis during the Holocaust, humour represented a way to gain power symbolically over those who tried to dehumanize them. Jewish laughter served as cultural resistance against a movement that desperately tried to exterminate it. They used humour to criticize the cruelty of the regime, to create group solidarity by laughing together at a common enemy, and to cope with the horrors of their daily reality.

In the years following the collapse of the regime, people continued to laugh about Hitler and the Nazis. Anthologies of jokes from the years 1933-1945 were published beginning in the immediate aftermath of the war. Theodor Seuss Geisel, popularly known as Dr. Seuss, published *Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories*, parodying the rise of Hitler in 1958.[148] In 1967, Mel Brooks released *The Producers*, a movie about a producer and an accountant who scheme to produce a musical about Hitler, designed to fail.[149] The trend continues to this day, with the release of *Look Who's Back* in 2015, a movie imagining what would happen if Hitler were to wake up in present-day Germany,[150] and *Jojo Rabbit* in 2019, where Hitler becomes an imaginary friend for a young boy in Nazi Germany.[151] Despite the apparent dichotomy between laughter and the Third Reich, they did coexist, and trends like these show that there will always be a desire to relate the two.

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[148] Dr. Seuss, *Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories* (New York: Random House Publishing, 1958).
[149] *The Producers.* DVD. Directed by Mel Brooks. Fox Searchlight, 1967.
[150] *Look Who's Back.* DVD. Directed by David Wnendt. Constantin Film, 2015.
[151] *Jojo Rabbit.* DVD. Directed by Taika Waititi. Fox Searchlight, 2019.

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