



Transcript of Wolf Kaiser: Gleichschaltung

My summary of events has emphasized the shrewd and ruthless tactics of the Nazis. But this is only one side of the coin. On the other side we see the helplessness, conformism and conversion of most Germans. The majority of Germans were not followers of the Nazis in January 1933, but the democratic parties that had got more than three quarters of the vote in 1919, had lost the majority under the influence of the economic crisis already in 1930. Once Hitler had begun to establish his dictatorship, only few showed resilience and engaged in resistance under rapidly-deteriorating conditions and growing threats to their freedom and their lives. The consolidation of power cannot be understood as a merely political process. It was also a radical social change. One factor in this process was admission to the Nazi Party. Between January and the end of April 1933 the Nazi Party grew from 850.000 to 2.5 million members. Then admission was stopped and only in 1937 gradually re-opened because those who had joined the party before it could provide access to all kinds of positions and jobs were afraid of too many opportunists competing in the race for the jobs from which political opponents and Jews had been excluded.

The rapidly-growing number of party members is already quite remarkable. The social relevance of membership and participation in Nazi Party activities becomes even more visible if we look at the numerous sub- und satellite-organizations. Before the Second World War began, about two-thirds of the German population were members of one or more organizations of the Nazi Party apparatus. About 20 % of these members had an active role either as a professional with salary, pension etc., or in an honorary capacity. There were various motivations to join the Nazi party organizations – from enthusiasm to fear of being fired or not getting a job without membership. We can assume that many of those who joined the party under pressure were then consciously or subconsciously looking for “positive reasons” for their membership. Beyond the impact on attitude and opinions, Nazi Party organizations had considerable influence on the social institutions to which they were linked, for example the National Socialist Teachers’ Organization on schools, the National Socialist People’s Welfare on the social welfare and health systems, the National Socialist League for the Maintenance of the Law) on the judiciary, etc.

In most social organizations the *Gleichschaltung* (the enforced conformity) was executed within the first months of the regime’s existence, very often by decisions of the leaders of the respective organizations themselves. To give an example: On 27 April the leader of the veterans’ organization *Stahlhelm*, League of Frontline Soldiers, Franz Seldte, declared that he assigned himself and his organization with its 500,000 members to the Fuehrer; in consequence, *Stahlhelm*-units were integrated into the SA. *Gleichschaltung* was effective with all organisations that were not

forbidden, though only partially so with the churches. Although the Nazi affiliated German Christians achieved a remarkable victory in elections within the Protestant Church in 1933, Reich Bishop Ludwig Mueller was not very successful in the long run. Therefore, the regime decided on a different method of control by founding the Reich Ministry for Matters of the Churches. The churches were by no means bastions of resistance, but they remained the only great organizations that maintained some sort of independence.

I think we must pay attention to the social process of *Gleichschaltung* in all its dimensions if we want to understand why the Nazi regime became so quickly unassailable and why it could mobilize the nation to such a degree and in such dimensions that it became a serious threat to the rest of world.

My overview has not comprehensively explained why the Nazis and their collaborators committed the genocide of the European Jews and why this was tolerated if not supported by most Germans. This cannot be done without in-depth analysis of anti-Semitism and the radicalisation process before and during the war. But I hope that my remarks shed some light on the preconditions for this development.