{essays in history}

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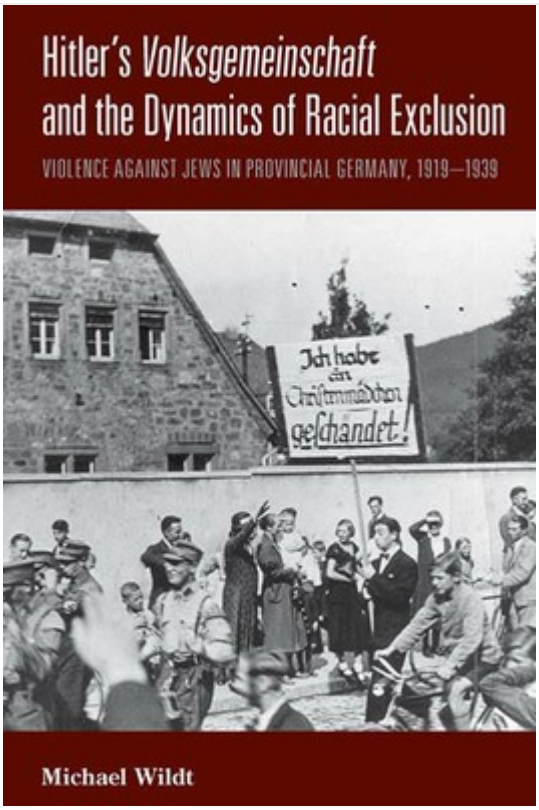
Hitler's Volksgemeinschaft and the Dynamics of Racial Exclusion: Violence against Jews in Provincial Germany, 1919-1939



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Reviewed Work(s)

Hitler's Volksgemeinschaft and the Dynamics of Racial Exclusion: Violence against Jews in Provincial Germany, 1919-1939. By Michael Wildt, trans. Bernard Heise (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2012). Pp. 311. Cloth, $95.00.

On the cover of Michael Wildt's book, a photograph shows a young man marching through the town of Marburg holding a sign: "I have defiled a Christian girl!" This sight became common in Germany in the 1930s, and these acts of public humiliation are the subject of Wildt's book. Wildt studies anti-Semitic acts of violence, humiliation, and exclusion in rural Germany from the founding of the Weimar Republic to the beginning of World War II. While previous studies have considered mainly the state implementation of anti-Semitic policy, Wildt approaches the problem from an *Alltagsgeschichte* (everyday life history) perspective and focuses on "societal anti-Semitism" and the actions of ordinary German citizens (5). Wildt's primary sources are local and regional reports from the Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith (CV), the largest secular German-Jewish organization in Germany. He supplements these with situation reports from Nazi-party and government organizations, as well as personal letters, diaries and memoirs. From these he constructs case studies to demonstrate how Nazis created their *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community). Wildt argues that everyday violence and discrimination was "the central political instrument" of the Nazis and was essential to the creation of a *Volksgemeinschaft* based on racial exclusion (4). Wildt believes this process is most visible in rural areas because Jewish communities were more isolated and Nazi party organs could easily exert control.

According to Wildt's description, *Volksgemeinschaft* is a slippery concept. It is defined by culture, language, and race, existing prior to the state and outside normal political processes. Wildt argues this concept came into its own during World War I. Propagandists painted a picture of a nation united in support of the war, but this was paired with the vigorous exclusion of groups opposing the war. The *Volksgemeinschaft* now entailed "enthusiastic and emotionally laden inclusion linked with a vehement and violent exclusion" (17). Although various political parties used the concept for their own ends, Hitler's ideology exalted the mythic unity of the *Volksgemeinschaft* while calling

for the exclusion of racial enemies, particularly the Jews. Wildt points out that anti-Semites before Hitler relied on writing to disseminate their views, but Hitler desired action. Wildt argues that this action, and particularly local acts of violence, led to "the destruction of civil society and the creation of a new racial order" (38).

Many Germans held Jews responsible for Germany's defeat in 1918, as demonstrated by CV reports of anti-Semitic violence throughout Germany in the 1920s. Wildt suggests that these moments of violence, where the rule of law was suspended, severely damaged the Weimar Republic. Applying the philosophy of Hannah Arendt, Wildt argues National Socialist violence against Jews and political enemies demonstrated the Weimar Republic's lack of power and challenged the government's theoretical monopoly of violence. When Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, he still saw violence as a legitimate claim to power and so continued to use it to assert Nazi authority once they were in control of the state. While the regime proclaimed the unity of the *Volksgemeinschaft* from above, ground-level violence often led by local SA (Storm Troop) chapters isolated and excluded the regime's enemies.

Wildt gives considerable attention to the boycotts against Jewish businesses beginning in April 1933. The boycott was officially only one day long, but it continued in many small towns and often escalated into property destruction and beatings. Although the regime's Ministry of Economics was uneasy about the property destruction and stress on the economy, Wildt effectively argues that the Nazis eventually came to see boycotts as a valid method of achieving the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Boycotts alienated Jews from the economy and their neighbors and simultaneously reminded Germans of their duty to buy from German-owned stores and support the *Volk*. The early 1930s saw continued calls for boycotts, property destruction, beatings, and public humiliation against Jews. This was coupled with an almost complete lack of police response to Jewish complaints, showing the breakdown of law in Germany. Local police and courts refused to act on valid laws when it came to Jewish citizens. Anti-Semitic rumors and inflammatory newspapers spurred collective violence. Wildt argues that spectators, just as much as perpetrators, participated in the violence by offering their tacit approval and validating the *Volksgemeinschaft*.

"Racial defilement," or mixing Aryan and Jewish blood, was another source of anti-Semitic violence. Groups of SA officers forced Jewish men suspected of "defiling" Christian women, or Christian women suspected of being "defiled," to parade through the streets to jeering crowds. The story of this book's cover photo is a typical example. Wildt fascinatingly compares these humiliation processions to pillories, though he points out that pillories were originally supposed to reinforce the existing order whereas Nazi-era pillories helped construct a new racial order. Wildt also shows that, though the regime made use of violence "from below," the instigators acted violently in defiance of state law and police enforcement, while they invoked the name of the *Führer*. Wildt characterizes this violence as intentionalism from below by showing how local actions influenced the Nazi creation of anti-Jewish racial laws. The violence, however, could not simply be replaced by racial laws because the National Socialist state takeover could not be reconciled with the party's essence of violent opposition to the civil state. "National Socialist politics was violence, it operated through violence, and it was through violence that these politics found expression" (128). Wildt emphasizes the significance of the November 1938 pogroms, *Kristallnacht*. He argues most Germans had accepted Hitler's rationale that Jews were to blame for the threat of war on the horizon. The violence and murder of *Kristallnacht* crossed the line from isolation of the Jews to destruction.

Several episodes in the book remain insufficiently explored. While Wildt's analysis of perpetrators and bystanders is fascinating, he sometimes portrays their actions as simply an extension of party politics led by the local SA chapters. The reader is left unsure whether the participants in violence were consciously aware of their contribution as part of creating the *Volksgemeinschaft*. This is a slight criticism, however, in light of Wildt's excellent use of unique sources and his illuminating analysis. Wildt uses his research to address a difficult question: how did German society disintegrate under National Socialist rule? Wildt appears to follow the influence of historians like Hans Mommsen by showing that National Socialist government was not monolithic and that Hitler was easily affected by pressures from the German people. Popular violence, while inspired by National Socialist doctrine, was dynamic and sometimes able to push Hitler's actions in more extreme directions. Wildt portrays the exchange of ideology, violence, and political pressure as a conversation between people and government as each helped to

radicalize the other. The omnipresence of violence in everyday life, Wildt convincingly shows, was vital to the destruction of pre-National Socialist German society and the emergence of increasingly violent and exclusionary government policy. Wildt's book is a rich and valuable addition to our understanding of National Socialist ideology and practice throughout Germany. Wildt shows that popular violence in Nazi Germany, while not the sole creator of the racially exclusive *Volksgemeinschaft*, had a grave effect on German society and government.

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