

## Humour in Nazi Germany: Resistance and Propaganda? The Popular Desire for an All-Embracing Laughter

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**SUMMARY:** Two directions in the historiography of humour can be diagnosed: on the one hand humour is understood as a form of resistance, on the other hand it is taken as a means of political agitation. This dichotomy has been applied especially to describe humour in National Socialism and in other totalitarian regimes. This article argues that both forms were marginal in National Socialism. The prevalence of the “whispered jokes”, allegedly the form of resistance, has been exaggerated. The satire, allegedly the official and dominant form of humour, was not well-received by the National Socialistic public. This article will reconstruct the rise of a third form, the “German humour”, and discuss the reasons for its success by looking at why satire failed.

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Whenever historical research analyses the meaning of laughter, it construes humour either as a form of protest and resistance or as means of political argument and an instrument of power. The reason for this dichotomy lies in the tradition of humour theory.

There is a hereditary line of humour as resistance that can be traced back to the contemporary German philosopher, Odo Marquard, who called humour a “small subversion”,<sup>1</sup> to his teacher, Joachim Ritter, and finally to the theories of Mikhail M. Bakhtin and Sigmund Freud. For Ritter, laughter originates from an incongruity which is fundamentally opposed to every norm or order.<sup>2</sup> Bakhtin saw such incongruity expressed in the carnival-grotesque of early modern times. He located this kind of humour in popular culture and he saw it as an opposition to power.<sup>3</sup> Freud found a

1. Odo Marquard interviewed by Steffen Dietzsch, “Das Lachen ist die kleine Theodizee”, in Steffen Dietzsch (ed.), *Luzifer lacht. Philosophische Betrachtungen von Nietzsche bis Tabori* (Leipzig, 1993), pp. 8–21, 12.

2. Joachim Ritter, “Über das Lachen”, *Blätter für deutsche Philosophie*, 14 (1940/1941), pp. 1–21. This essay was very influential for the development of humour theory in Germany, as the so-called Ritter school continued its approach. See Wolfgang Preisendanz *et al.* (eds), *Das Komische* (Munich, 1976).

3. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington, IN, 1984), first edn in Russian 1952.

similar function of humour in the jokes of modern society. He characterized the joke as an irritation, a reminder of the unconscious in a rationalized world.<sup>4</sup> This perspective was widely adopted in cultural historiography.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of humour as political agitation is to be found in Henri Bergson's influential text *Le Rire*, where laughter is seen as a form that brings together one community in order to destroy the other.<sup>6</sup> In a subsequent article, Jürgen Brummack described satire as "aesthetically socialized aggression".<sup>7</sup> This form of humour was consequently employed as a political instrument by political mass movements that wanted to gain or to retain power.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, political historiography emphasized the role of satire in mass mobilization from the Reformation to the Enlightenment and in the political struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>9</sup>

The concepts of humour as resistance and political agitation are taken to be an appropriate characterization of humour in dictatorships. From this point of view there is the ruling power that uses satire to ridicule, to abolish, and to exclude its opponents; on the other side there are the people who resist the regime by keeping their humour. Or at least they try to create a sphere of communication of their own by telling deviant jokes. This dichotomy is not used only to describe National Socialism,<sup>10</sup> but there it is used time and again. It parallels a perspective on National Socialism which emphasizes totalitarian coercion instead of widespread consent and thereby tends to separate the National Socialists from the German people.<sup>11</sup>

The following article critically assesses the historical literature on humour in National Socialist Germany and argues that neither humour as

4. Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious* (New York, 2003), first edn in German 1905.

5. Joseph Boskin, *Rebellious Laughter: People's Humor in American Culture* (Syracuse, NY, 1997); Jan Bremmer et al. (eds), *A Cultural History of Humour: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Cambridge, 1997).

6. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Mineola, NY, 2005), first edn in French 1900.

7. Jürgen Brummack, "Zu Begriff und Theorie der Satire", *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 45 (1971), pp. 275–377, 282.

8. For example Georg Lukács describes the satire as a natural ally of the communist movement; Georg Lukács, "Zur Frage der Satire", in *Essays über Realismus. Werke, Band 4, Probleme des Realismus I* (Neuwied, 1971), first publ. 1932, pp. 83–107.

9. For example, Mary Lee Townsend, *Forbidden Laughter: Popular Humor and the Limits of Repression in Nineteenth-Century Prussia* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1992).

10. Kathleen Stokker, *Folklore Fights the Nazis: Humor in Occupied Norway 1940–1945* (Madison, WI, 1997); Paul Roth, *Humor ist eine ernste Sache. Flüsterwitze und schwarzer Humor in der Sowjetunion und im Danach-Rußland* (Stuttgart, 2004).

11. In recent years the aspect of coercion has again been emphasized. See Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power: 1933–1939* (London, 2005).

resistance nor humour as oppression were typical forms between 1933 and 1945. It will be seen that, with respect to the former, the “whispered joke” was in fact of little importance, and that, with respect to the latter, people disliked humour that overtly expressed aggression too much for propagandistic satire to succeed. Instead they favoured the all-embracing, harmonious, and non-contentious laughter that established itself as the main form of humour, the “German Humour”. This article will discuss its rise and the concomitant demise of the National Socialist satire, which was originally propagated as the official form of humour when the regime was established but then sidelined following the change in mood among the public.

### THE “WHISPERED JOKE” – “JOKE VS NAZI”?

Up to the present, evidence of humour as resistance has been sought in studies of National Socialism. Cabaret is a popular subject matter in the academic discourse. But aside from cabaret’s marginal role in society in National Socialism it is still unclear whether its “critical” attitude was due to the fact that comedians reinvented themselves after 1945.<sup>12</sup>

A theme that has fascinated academics and popular writers to an even greater extent is the so-called “whispered joke”, whose target was the National Socialist authorities.<sup>13</sup> This was a joke that, as legend would have it, you could tell only at your peril. In these jokes the ordinary man supposedly showed his resistance and expressed his opposition to the regime. It was, in short, the *Witz contra Nazi* [Joke vs Nazi].<sup>14</sup> The “whispered joke” has become a widespread myth and it has served as proof of the disaffection of many Germans who were unable to express themselves openly.<sup>15</sup> This disguises the fact that the myth served an interest of self-vindication, to separate “the German people” as well as German comedians from “the National Socialists” and their crimes, and to suppose a broad opposition.

The case of Josef Ludwig Müller’s publication *Flüsterwitze aus brauner Zeit* [*Whispered Jokes from Brown Times*], used by historians as an example of a supposedly oppositional public,<sup>16</sup> highlights this problem. In 1933 Müller had acclaimed the National Socialist government in his book

12. Alan Lareau tries to look beneath the surface of the anecdotes in *The Wild Stage: Literary Cabarets of the Weimar Republic* (Columbia, SC, 1995), pp. 126–161.

13. F.K.M. Hillenbrand, *Underground Humour in Nazi Germany 1933–1945* (London, 1995); Klaus Hansen, “Lachen über Hitler. Erörterungen am Beispiel des ‘Flüsterwitzes’”, *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 53 (2002), pp. 737–748.

14. Richard Hermes, *Witz contra Nazi. Hitler und sein Tausendjähriges Reich* (Hamburg, 1946).

15. Gerhard Bauer, *Sprache und Sprachlosigkeit im “Dritten Reich”* (Cologne, 1988), pp. 181–202; Peter Longerich, *“Davon haben wir nichts gewusst!” Die Deutschen und die Judenverfolgung 1933–1945* (Munich, 2006), p. 25.

*Amtsreden zu nationalen Anlässen* [Official Speeches for Public Occasions].<sup>17</sup> He had also successfully published several humorous books. His *Der fröhliche Feierabend* [After-Work Merriment] made suggestions for funny evening talks in the spirit of National Socialism. It ran to five editions and the last edition was published exclusively by and for the German armed forces.<sup>18</sup> In 1948 the Soviet military ordered the works of Peter Poddel, alias Josef Ludwig Müller, to be removed from circulation.<sup>19</sup> In the Federal Republic of Germany, however, Müller was allowed to continue publishing his work without hindrance. With the publication of his “whispered jokes”, he expressly avoided dwelling on wrongdoings that took place during National Socialism and sought instead to document the supposedly true story of the oppressed German people.<sup>20</sup> Other volumes refer to “the suffering and laughing German people” whose jokes made the “twelve years of oppression” bearable,<sup>21</sup> or seek to directly ascertain the existence of a resistance movement – “Vienna defends itself with jokes!” – that never existed.<sup>22</sup>

New research has now established that these “whispered jokes” were hardly widespread and rarely critical. Moreover, they actually added to the popularity of those joked about, and the “ordinary” German need have no fear of retribution at all. Under the so-called Heimtücke-gesetz [Treachery Act]<sup>23</sup> only those German citizens were punished whose biography in general showed a hostile tendency towards the National Socialist movement; they included former members of the German Communist Party. The joke just provided an occasion to instigate a prosecution.<sup>24</sup>

These findings of historical research are consistent with the National Socialist reaction to the “whispered joke”, as it was openly articulated at the time. The “whispered jokes” were welcomed by the regime, they were treated with goodwill and amusement, and they were understood as a token of affection from the people. As early as 1934 Hans Schwarz van

16. Peter Poddel (i.e. Josef Ludwig Müller), *Flüsterwitze aus brauner Zeit* (Munich, 1954); Bauer, *Sprache und Sprachlosigkeit*, pp. 175 and 190, takes this as proof of an underground opposition.

17. Josef Ludwig Müller, *Amtsreden zu nationalen Anlässen. Mit einem Anhang: Wille, Weg und Wesen des neuen Deutschlands in Worten des Führers und seiner Mitarbeiter* (Munich [etc.], 1933).

18. Peter Poddel (i.e. Josef Ludwig Müller), *Der fröhliche Feierabend. Ein Vortragsbuch*, 5th edn (Stuttgart, 1944).

19. Deutsche Verwaltung für Volksbildung in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone (ed.), *Liste der auszusondernden Literatur. Zweiter Nachtrag* (Berlin, 1948), pp. 203 and 223.

20. Poddel, *Flüsterwitze*, pp. 5–6.

21. Vox Populi, *Geflüstertes. Die Hülerei im Volksmund* (Heidelberg, 1946).

22. *Wien wehrt sich mit Witz! Flüsterwitze aus den Jahren 1938–1945* (Vienna, 1946).

23. “Gesetz gegen heimtückische Angriffe auf Staat und Partei und zum Schutz der Parteiuniformen vom 20. Dezember 1934”, *Reichsgesetzblatt* (I), pp. 1269–1271.

24. Meike Wöhlert, *Der politische Witz in der NS-Zeit am Beispiel ausgesuchter SD-Berichte und Gestapo-Akten* (Berlin [etc.], 1997).

Berk, a leading National Socialist publicist,<sup>25</sup> assured readers of *Angriff* [*Attacke*] that they could crack “whispered jokes” without worry.<sup>26</sup> *Angriff* was a daily newspaper published by Joseph Goebbels, whose ministry was responsible for propaganda, and it served as the government’s mouthpiece. Other newspapers followed suit,<sup>27</sup> so that in the period 1934–1935 to 1938–1939 one saw a campaign that promoted a relaxed attitude to these “whispered jokes”.

This viewpoint was also taken up in other forms of entertainment, in comic strips and short stories for example.<sup>28</sup> A comic strip that appeared in *Schwarze Korps* [*The Black Corps*] in 1936 assured its readers of Hermann Göring’s relaxed attitude to the phenomenon. At the time, Göring was Minister of the German Air Force and Prime Minister of Prussia. The comic strip depicts someone telling a joke about Göring, holding a hand in front of his mouth in a secretive manner, obviously anxious about being caught. This narrative is repeated three times as the joke is passed on to others, each time the content of the joke is more exaggerated. Finally the joke reaches Göring, who is not at all bothered by the joke and responds: “My God, that’s an old one! – Come up with something new!”<sup>29</sup>

*Schwarze Korps* was not just a marginal magazine but the weekly publication of the SS, so in fact the press organ of one of the most important organizations in the National Socialist movement. It was also the most successful periodical to be launched between 1933 and World War II. By 1937, just two years after it was founded, *Schwarze Korps* had a readership in excess of 500,000.<sup>30</sup> Institutions central to the public face of the National Socialists, including Joseph Goebbels himself,<sup>31</sup> continually stressed the idea of the “whispered joke” as posing no problem and that it could be permitted in daily life to those Germans who were with the regime in spirit.

25. Norbert Frei and Johannes Schmitz, *Journalismus im Dritten Reich*, 3rd edn (Munich, 1999), p. 169.

26. Hans Schwarz van Berk, “Der politische Witz”, *Der Angriff*, 8 June 1934.

27. *Idem*, “Der politische Witz”, *Bayerische Zeitung*, 11 July 1935; R.L., “Der politische Witz im Dritten Reich”, *Regensburger Echo*, 22 June 1934; Carl Heinz Petersen, “Das heiße Eisen oder der politische Witz”, *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 12 June 1938; *idem*, “Das heiße Eisen oder der politische Witz”, *Film-Kurier*, 22 September 1938.

28. Heinrich Spoerl, *Man kann ruhig darüber sprechen. Heitere Geschichte und Plaudereien* (Berlin, 1937), pp. 7–8; Arthur Heinz Lehmann, *Mensch sei positiv dagegen!* (Dresden, 1939), pp. 22–23.

29. Waldl (i.e. Walter Hoffmann), “Pst! – Kennen Sie schon den Witz [...]”, *Das Schwarze Korps*, 2 (26) (1936), p. 7, reprinted in Waldl, *Lacht ihm tot! Ein tendenziöses Bilderbuch* (Dresden, 1937).

30. Mario Zeck, *Das Schwarze Korps. Geschichte und Gestalt des Organs der Reichsführung SS* (Tübingen, 2002), pp. 94–97; for the role of *Schwarze Korps* in National Socialism see also William L. Combs, *The Voice of the SS: A History of the SS Journal “Das Schwarze Korps”* (New York, 1986).

31. Joseph Goebbels, “Haben wir eigentlich noch Humor?”, *Völkischer Beobachter*, 4 February 1939.

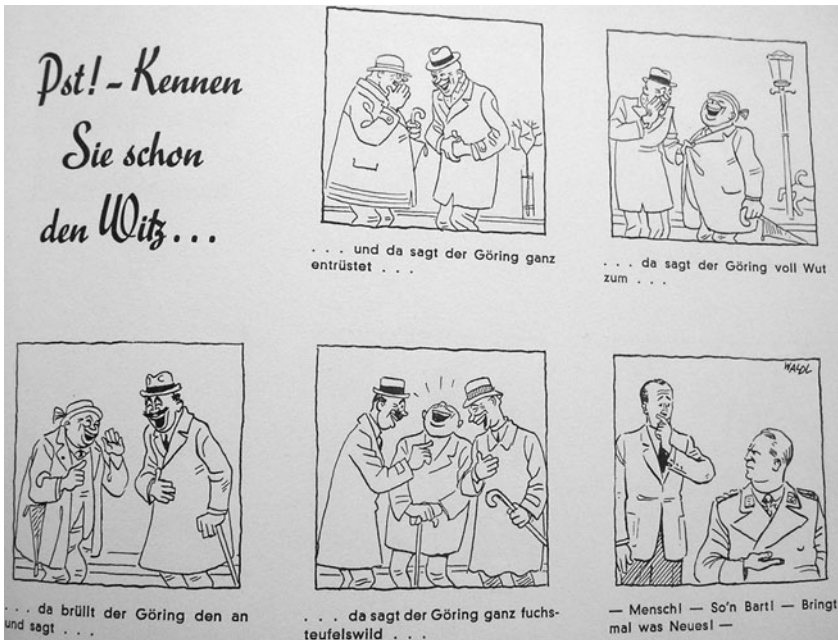


Figure 1. The “whispered jokes” and the regime’s public promise to be easy-going. Waldl [i.e. Walter Hoffmann], “Pst! – Kennen Sie schon den Witz [...]”.

Das Schwarze Korps, 2 (26) (1936), p. 7; *Arbeitsstelle für Kommunikationsgeschichte und interkulturelle Publizistik (AKIP)*, Freie Universität Berlin. Used with permission.

The amount of research, and especially the collections of “whispered jokes”, give the impression that apart from these jokes there was no humour or laughter to be found in Germany at this time. They report on a period “when laughter was deadly”<sup>32</sup> and a laugh about a joke would have meant a lot; “in those days laughter was worth its weight in gold, some people even saved it up”<sup>33</sup>. Biographical recollections of comic artists stress “the terrible humourlessness of the time”<sup>34</sup>. Behind this image lies the motive of lending humour an element of resistance, regardless of actual content or the conditions in which comedy functioned. In doing so the comic artists who had performed during the era of National Socialism sought to put their past in a better light. These assessments reappear in academic interpretations, they distinguish the laughter of “the Germans”

32. Ralph Wiener, *Als das Lachen tödlich war. Erinnerungen und Fakten 1933–1945* (Rudolstadt 1988).

33. Poddel, *Flüsterwitze*, p. 6.

34. Sigmund Graff, *Von S.M. zu N.S. Erinnerungen eines Bühnenauteurs (1900 bis 1945)* (Wels, 1963), pp. 181–182; also see Hans Reimann, *Mein blaues Wunder. Lebensmosaik eines Humoristen* (Munich, 1959), pp. 473–561.

above the “fanatical earnestness of the NS ideology”,<sup>35</sup> and they describe a “lack of humour” as a “defining characteristic of the National Socialist nature”.<sup>36</sup>

In contrast to this picture of a very dark and serious time, there were more laughs in National Socialism than ever. The comical dominated all mass media after the National Socialists had consolidated their regime in 1935. After failed attempts using *Thingspiele*, a sort of medieval folk play, and German classics to create a National Socialist theatre, comedies and farces dominated the stage. The ever-increasing share of comedy in theatre programmes was representative of the trend in all other forms of media. After slumping to 26 per cent in 1933, it rose to 38 per cent in 1935, the same level as the Weimar Republic had enjoyed. By 1941 68 per cent of premiered shows were comedies.<sup>37</sup> The public wanted comedy, it read, heard, and watched this form of entertainment.<sup>38</sup>

#### THE UNPOPULARITY OF SATIRE IN NATIONAL SOCIALISM

The form of humour that the regime proclaimed was the satire. In fact satire was the only form of comedy which the National Socialist Party had developed by 1933. In *Angriff* satire was integrated from the very beginning. Hans Schweitzer drew the caricatures under his pseudonym Mjoelnir, and Martin Bethke wrote satirical sketches. In 1931 the NSDAP broadened its efforts in satire. In 1931 three satirical books were published, based on the articles and drawings appearing in *Angriff*.<sup>39</sup> The first volume was subtitled “Hate and Laughter about our Times”, which accurately defined the type of satirical texts and images that had appeared until 1931.

35. Thomas Grosser, “Perzeptionssteuerung durch Propaganda. England in der nationalsozialistischen Karikatur”, in Gottfried Niedhart (ed.), *Das kontinentale Europa und die britischen Inseln. Wahrnehmungsmuster und Wechselwirkungen seit der Antike* (Mannheim, 1993), pp. 178–204, 182.

36. Kurt Reumann, “Das antithetische Kampfbild. Beiträge zur Bestimmung seines Wesens und seiner Wirkung” (Ph.D., Freie Universität Berlin, 1966), p. 125.

37. Wilhelm Frels and Arthur Luther, “Die deutsche dramatische Produktion”, *Die Neue Literatur*, 32 (1931), pp. 209–215; *ibid.*, 33 (1932), pp. 385–392; *ibid.*, 38 (1937), pp. 278–286; *ibid.*, 39 (1938), pp. 293–299; *ibid.*, 40 (1939), pp. 293–298; *ibid.*, 41 (1940), pp. 185–187; *ibid.*, 42 (1941), pp. 147–151; *ibid.*, 43 (1942), pp. 126–130.

38. For the film industry see Gerd Albrecht, *Nationalsozialistische Filmpolitik. Eine soziologische Untersuchung über die Spielfilme des Dritten Reichs* (Stuttgart, 1969). For the book industry see Tobias Schneider, “Besteller im Dritten Reich. Ermittlung und Analyse der meistverkauften Romane in Deutschland 1933–1944”, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 52 (2004), pp. 77–97.

39. Joseph Goebbels (ed.), *Knorke. Ein neues Buch Isidor für Zeitgenossen*, 2nd edn (Munich, 1931); Mjoelnir (i.e. Hans Schweitzer) and Joseph Goebbels, *Das Buch Isidor. Ein Zeitbild voll Lachen und Hass*, 5th edn (Munich, 1931); Karl Martin Friedrich (ed.), *Der kesse Orje. Spaziergänge eines Berliner Jungen durch das System* (Munich, 1931).

It sought to mock the opposition, to ridicule it, and in doing so destroy it. Furthermore, in 1931, with *O diese Nazis!* [*Oh These Nazis!*] the first satirical play was published in the *Neuland* series, which was close to the NSDAP.<sup>40</sup> In the same year in Leipzig *Die Zeitlupe* [*The Slow Motion Camera*] was founded, which was also linked to the Party, and in Munich a satirical magazine called *Die Brennessel* [*The Stinging Nettle*] was established by the NSDAP publisher Eher.

By utilizing these satires the NSDAP tried to attract a broader audience, as satire had been a popular form of entertainment in the Weimar Republic; the well-known critic Alfred Kerr spoke of a “factory of contemporary satire”.<sup>41</sup> As other political parties before it had done, the NSDAP sought to use satires to its own advantage, combining entertainment with propaganda. It tried to go beyond the earlier satires, which rather crudely took up the concerns of the SA, and sought to employ satirical forms that would attract a bourgeois audience. That can be seen at first glance from the layout of the satirical magazines, which based themselves on the bourgeois style of the publication *Simplicissimus* and distinguished themselves from the rather unprofessional and aberrant layout of communist satirical publications.

With the NSDAP-DNVP coalition taking power on 30 January 1933 and the setting up and foreseeable consolidation of a dictatorship, satire appeared to assert itself as *the* form of comic entertainment in National Socialism. *Brennessel* was seen as the leading satirical publication. In September 1933 the editorial staff of *Simplicissimus* debated the magazine’s future direction. From all sides, including the political authorities, there emerged a general consensus that they “were all terribly dull and boring! – that the ‘Brennessel’ is so much better!” Enough to drive one to desperation were “these old maids and this ‘Gartenlaube’ spirit – that has crept in among us” as one staff member commented.<sup>42</sup> The “Gartenlaube spirit” that had supposedly become characteristic of *Simplicissimus* was a reference to *Die Gartenlaube* [*The Arbour*], a family newspaper that embodied the humour of the nineteenth century and which was said to have appealed to “elderly spinsters”. In contrast *Brennessel* was regarded as young and fresh.

However, if one looks at the development of satire past 1934 – something that historical research has neglected and even termed a

40. Max Reitz, “*O diese Nazis!*”. *Nationalsozialistisches Lebensbild in 3 Akten* (Leipzig, 1931).

41. Alfred Kerr, “Quer durch die Zeitsatire (16.5.31) [Manuskript für eine Rundfunksendung]”, in Hermann Haarmann, “*Pleite glotzt euch an. Restlos*”. *Satire in der Publizistik der Weimarer Republik. Ein Handbuch* (Opladen, 1999), pp. 208–212, 208.

42. Rosl Thöny, the wife and agent of *Simplicissimus* cartoonist Eduard Thöny, in a letter to cartoonist Erich Schilling, quoted in Ulrich Appel, *Satire als Zeitdokument. Der Zeichner Erich Schilling. 1885 Subl/Thüringen–1945 Gauting bei München. Leben – Werk – Zeit – Umwelt* (Witterschlick [etc.], 1995), pp. 262–263.



“pointless” exercise<sup>43</sup> – it becomes clear that satire ran into difficulties as the public began to express their dislike of its destructiveness. One example here is the play *Die endlose Straße* [*The Endless Road*] by the popular playwright Sigmund Graff, which became the target of public complaints.<sup>44</sup> Graff’s play tells the story of a German military unit that has fought in a battle which left half of its members dead; the survivors are now recuperating. At this point the Zahlmeister, responsible for the organization of provisions for the troops and the administration of units, visits the unit. Normally he would carry out his duties further back from the front. He wants to welcome the soldiers and has brought wine for the officers – a friendly gesture that pleases the soldiers, who act cordially. But as the nightly exchange of fire begins at the front, he starts to get nervous.

*[A loud, long thundering shot]*

Second Lieutenant: But my dear Zahlmeister! That’s just our own, they’re not firing at us!

Zahlmeister: Yes, yes – But I must – I really must –.

Second Lieutenant: Come now! Stop making such a song and dance!

Zahlmeister [*worked up*]: Lieutenant, Sir! – It would be better. Otherwise I will arrive around midday and – please believe me – it is the right thing to do [*he hurries to the exit*].

*At that moment, when the Zahlmeister opens the door, there is another shot. He doesn’t know if he should go backwards or forwards. He turns back, goes again towards the door and then stumbles out.*<sup>45</sup>

In this scene Graff manages to create a lasting impression by using the movement of the actor, the aimless running back and forth and the abrupt change of direction, to support the dialogue. The Zahlmeister’s behaviour stands out from the casual manner of the troops. He pretends to be heroic but is in fact terrified when confronted with a situation that is hardly life-threatening. In contrast to the simple life and the daily, unrewarded heroism at the front, this appears absurd and the Zahlmeister comes across as a farcical figure. Although the play had been running successfully at many German theatres since 1930 and was, according to critics, a model portrayal of World War I seen from a National Socialist perspective, it provoked complaints from the Association of Zahlmeisters in 1933 when it became likely that the NSDAP would be forming a stable government and that a dictatorship would probably be the result.

In a similar fashion a seemingly harmless story about a Christmas tree, published in *Schwarze Korps*, attracted complaints from the public. A mother who lives abroad is trying to send her son a Christmas tree. The

43. Klaus Schulz, *Kladderadatsch. Ein bürgerliches Witzblatt von der Märzrevolution bis zum Nationalsozialismus 1848–1944* (Bochum, 1975), p. 202.

44. Graff, *Von S.M. zu N.S.*, pp. 109, 153–155.

45. Sigmund Graff and Carl Ernst Hintze, *Die endlose Straße. Ein Frontstück in 4 Bildern* (Berlin, 1930), p. 62.

customs officers refuse to let it through, because the import of coniferous trees is not allowed. The article becomes satirical as the officers' behaviour is depicted in an exaggerated way. The officers debate whether the regulations also apply to felled coniferous trees, if they apply only to the import overland, if they apply to every type of coniferous tree, if you need a certificate from a tree nursery as to its propagation, and if it would be necessary to summon the head of the botanical gardens to act as an expert witness.<sup>46</sup> In response to this article the magazine received many complaints from civil servants, who felt derided by the story, and saw it as an attack on the civil service and therefore as an attack on the state itself.

From the reaction of *Schwarze Korps* it becomes clear that this was not the first case in which the public complained about its satires. According to the editors the magazine had been approached in confidence by "tailors, doctors, servants, bakers, accountants and lion tamers" who felt derided by their representation in *Schwarze Korps* and in other media and asked *Schwarze Korps* and the authorities to take measures against those ludicrous representations. But instead of complying, *Schwarze Korps* blamed its readers for being too inhibited and asked for a more relaxed attitude towards satire, for "more humour".<sup>47</sup>

The complaints about Graff's play and the reaction to the story in *Schwarze Korps* were far from singular. The newspaper *Die Deutsche Presse*, which as the official journal of the National Press Association reached all journalists, claimed that German society as a whole felt offended by satires,<sup>48</sup> and Graff felt that protests against his play represented a broader movement.<sup>49</sup> In addition to this the loss of the satire's popularity became obvious in sales figures. *Brennessel* was closed down in 1938 because of dwindling sales and a lack of new subject matter. In the same year the magazines, *Kladderadatsch* and *Simplicissimus*, which had shared a rich tradition, had only 10,000 readers each, just one-third of their circulation during the Weimar Republic. This loss of popularity also extended to satires targeting opponents outside Germany, the anti-Semitic, anti-Bolshevist, and anti-Western caricatures. In a press campaign in 1938 against the allegedly cruel treatment of the German minority in Czechoslovakia, German newspapers were ordered to print caricatures. By then, the reason for this order was no longer the popularity of satires as a means of political agitation; it was that foreign newspapers were more likely to reprint those caricatures than texts.<sup>50</sup>

46. Anonymous, "Eine leider wahre Geschichte. O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum", *Das Schwarze Korps*, 2 (2) (1936), p. 5.

47. Anonymous, "Mehr Humor!", *Das Schwarze Korps*, 2 (6) (1936), p. 1.

48. W. Koeppen, "Kollektives Beleidigtsein?", *Deutsche Presse*, 25 (1935), p. 426.

49. Sigmund Graff, "Die 'negative' Figur", *Der Neue Weg*, 64 (1935), pp. 264–265.

50. Hans Bohrmann et al. (eds), *NS-Pressenanweisungen der Vorkriegszeit. Edition und Dokumentation*. 7 Bände (Munich, 1984–2001), no. 2544, 15 September 1938.



Figure 2. The complaints of the public about satires and the reaction of *Schwarze Korps* “More Humour!” Anonymous, “Mehr Humor!”, *Das Schwarze Korps*, 2 (6) (1936), p. 1. Copyright: Arbeitsstelle für Kommunikationsgeschichte und interkulturelle Publizistik (AKIP), Freie Universität Berlin. Used with permission.

THE WISH TO LAUGH TOGETHER

At first the comedians reacted to public complaints by mocking their critics and sticking to their satirical guns. Graff saw that art in general was threatened by these complaints about satire and held the view that this kind of public reaction would have to be stamped out through collective effort.<sup>51</sup> Carl-Martin Köhn, writing for *Brennessel*, which had received heavy criticism for its satires as early as 1933, felt the urge to reply openly to the critics in 1933 in a gruff tone that reflected the editors’ conviction that they were in the right and were justified because they represented the National Socialist interest: “And you have many associates, who, exactly like you, anonymously and with nameless big mouths, dare to bore us with your letters.”<sup>52</sup>

51. Graff, “Negative Figur”.  
 52. Lanzelot (i.e. Carl-Martin Köhn), “An ‘Porzia!’”, *Die Brennessel*, 3 (1933), p. 182; *Die Brennessel*, “In Sachen: ‘Darf die deutsche Frau [...]’”, *ibid.*, p. 471.

Numerous articles in various media appeared in 1935 more friendly in their wording, but still showing annoyance at readers' conduct and their criticism of satire. The prelude came in 1935 in *Brennessel*, which was allegedly the leading light of National Socialist humour and was therefore the first to deal with public complaints. The editorial described this specific group of the readership as "those completely lacking in humour". "They peer to the left and the right, and look out for a mocking look, they are the antennae of protest, receivers of outrage."<sup>53</sup> Gunter d'Alquen, chief editor of *Schwarze Korps* and so one of the most influential journalists in Nazi Germany, brusquely recounted the times before 1933 in a foreword to a collection of satires published in 1937: "with defiant laughter, with biting scorn, we crushed a system of fat cats and profiteers, we made parties and their creatures totally ridiculous, [...] we lacerated them with the pen, we nailed them down and handed them over to the caustic, deadly laugh of the people." But satire had its time and served its purpose to "improve" and "cleanse" Germany. So d'Alquen stressed at the end of his introduction: "Should we, now that we have won power with our youthful strength, forget laughter and become blunted? We have remained youthful, we are truly laughing now!"<sup>54</sup> From this spirited outburst, we can conclude that he and other satirists had been urged to abandon this kind of humour.

With public complaints continually being voiced, it became clear that the mood of the people had changed and that not the public protests but satire itself had become the problem. This was articulated in an article that appeared in the nationalistic and anti-modern *Fridericus*, whose publisher, Friedrich Carl Holtz, was seen as a "pioneer and fighter for National Socialist Germany".<sup>55</sup> It responded to *Schwarze Korps* by laying out its front page in a similar style and proclaiming "Humour at the Front!" in large letters – an allusion to *Schwarze Korps*'s reply, "More humour", to public criticism of the "Christmas tree" story. Holtz, who also authored the article in *Fridericus*, stated that the "cutting humour" of *Schwarze Korps* was no longer appropriate in the *Volkgemeinschaft* [community] of National Socialism, given the new mood of the people within it.<sup>56</sup>

As the satirists were about to be sidelined they took on a gentler tone. From 1936 none of the few satirical books came out without an explanation or apology. In 1939 Walter Foitzick, from 1938 to 1944 chief editor of *Simplicissimus*, reflected meekly on the direction humour had taken. To joke about the National Socialist state and Party was unproblematic, because "heavens above, when someone has so much

53. Lanzelot (i.e. Carl-Martin Köhn), "Die ohne Humor", *Die Brennessel*, 5 (1935), p. 226.

54. Gunter d'Alquen, "Wir lachen sie tot", in Waldl, *Lacht ihn tot!*, p. 3.

55. Wilhelm Freiherr von Müffling, *Wegbereiter und Vorkämpfer für das neue Deutschland* (Munich, 1933), p. 217.

56. F.C. Holtz, "Humor an die Front!", *Fridericus*, 19 (1936), pp. 1–2.

power, they can allow themselves to be taken down a notch or two". The real challenge in Germany was to write satires against the "secret superpowers" – the cyclists, cactus lovers, footballers, and the hard of hearing. But, he said, he had to stop talking about these groups, as he heard already the "drum roll and the trumpet of the court, the hard of hearing come towards me and want to pulverize me".<sup>57</sup> Ultimately he promised to make jokes only about himself, and his books were to be understood only in that light.

The satirists had retreated following a change in the collective mood. The satirists themselves interpreted the lack of humour of their complaining audience as rooted in psychological deficits. Carl-Martin Köhn described the internal life of the humourless people. "They are not satisfied with the honour of their profession and with their untouchable existence. [...] They place external approval above the quiet awareness of their internal merits."<sup>58</sup> All authors were agreed that the need to complain came from having a very low self-esteem. From the authors' viewpoint people were insecure and placed too much emphasis on their status and the symbols that projected this status to the outside world. According to Sigmund Graff, the public therefore suffered from a misjudgement. Their attitude derived from "a complete misjudged interpretation of *Standesehre* [class honour] and an even greater misunderstanding that transferred the totalitarian principle of the state onto the private individual." Satires about their *Stand* [class] should be taken in good spirit.<sup>59</sup>

But the term *Stand* was already politically loaded; *Stand* was the basic element of the National Socialist economic organization. This new form of organization was supposed to overcome the class conflicts and to form a new harmonious society. The profession could no longer be understood as a private choice and apolitical. The state's demand for total political control also reached into the private sphere, such as work. According to the perception of the people the private was no longer private; it was in fact political and public.<sup>60</sup> *Schwarze Korps* described how doggedly a certain affected group would fight for their reputation and claimed to know why. "Instead of laughing out loud, like thousands of our readers have already done, they are angry", although they all know "how unshakeably secure our civil service is in the service of the German people".<sup>61</sup> The affected group did not, however, share this impression. It was more that they felt their position in the National Socialist state was being shaken by the satirists.

57. Walter Foitzick, *Unter uns gesagt. Heitere Daseinsbetrachtung* (Munich, 1939), p. 7.

58. Köhn, "Ohne Humor".

59. Graff, "Negative Figur".

60. Friedrich Bülow, *Der deutsche Ständestaat. Nationalsozialistische Gemeinschaftspolitik und Wirtschaftsorganisation* (Leipzig, 1934).

61. Anonymous, "Mehr Humor!"

The structural reason underlying the changed mood of the public was the fact that the direction of humour had changed. In a democratic society each satire offered one opinion among many, and satirical writers of different political persuasions could exchange blows on a level pegging. Magazines such as *Brennessel* and *Schwarze Korps*, the Party's press organs, held a lot of authority as the voice of National Socialism. Furthermore, from the public's point of view every public statement took on this role as the voice of National Socialism because, according to National Socialism, the public sphere had to be seen as "uniform" and "totally controlled", and so everything appearing in the public arena would be perceived as the direct will of the National Socialist state. If, before, there had been various opinions entering a debate on an equal footing and with which the public could identify, now every press organ was above the reader and simultaneously expressed the only singular possible ideology.

Sigmund Graff illustrates this process in his play *Die endlose Straße*. He places a loyal group, for whom there is no way out, in the scene. An escape from this group means either ridicule, if the *Zahlmeister* returns to the rear echelons, or a sure death, as behind the front lurks the enemy. The fighting troop is a group without alternatives, which binds it with the extreme idea of a *Volkgemeinschaft*. In both groups there remains no more background against which the actions of the ridiculous figure can be perceived as making sense or can be taken seriously. From the public's point of view, the satirical attacks had reached an unacceptable severity. The understanding author in *Fridericus* called for "no more jokes at the expense of people who are economically dependent, lower in rank or those who are just defenceless. Such jokes are not humorous, but brutal."<sup>62</sup>

In 1932 a National Socialist critic praised the political weapon of satire with the statement that "laughter kills".<sup>63</sup> After 1933, from the public's point of view, satire really did have this effect. People wanted above all else to avoid social death by all means. Because of this it can be concluded that the public's complaints about satire were not an expression of resistance; instead they showed the overwhelming desire of the greater part of the population to belong, to be part of the *Volkgemeinschaft*. Furthermore, behind these complaints lay a deep trust in the National Socialist state. *Schwarze Korps* still made fun of the exaggerated reactions. But the article that appeared in *Fridericus* showed that attitudes had changed. From 1936 the various professions and social groups could rely on the National Socialist state. The Minister of War and head of the German armed forces, Werner von Blomberg, ordered that depictions

62. Holtz, "Humor an die Front!"

63. Kim, "Satire ist, wenn man [...]", *Die Brennessel*, 2 (1932), p. 266.

ridiculing the army cease.<sup>64</sup> Martin Mutschmann, head of the district of Saxony, started a campaign against depictions that ridiculed Saxony and its inhabitants.<sup>65</sup>

#### THE ALL-EMBRACING LAUGHTER OF THE *VOLKSGEMEINSCHAFT*

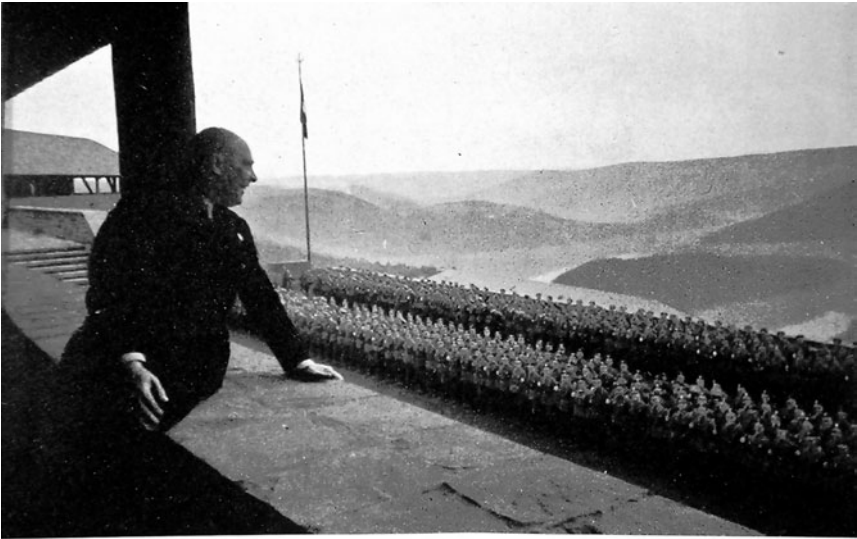
“Whispered jokes” and satires are held up time and again as being typical forms of humour during National Socialism. Both were surely a part of humour in National Socialism, but they were actually marginal. The “whispered joke” has become a myth for the self-vindication of Germans; unexpectedly, the National Socialist concept of satire failed as it provoked massive protest from the public. In the specific public sphere of National Socialism, a laugh that attempted to exclude could not be tolerated because to be shut out of the *Volksgemeinschaft* meant total exclusion.

In these protests, which were also aimed at the official National Socialist institutions, it was not about protesting against National Socialism itself as about protesting against the type of humour that had the means to exclude from National Socialism. When *Fridericus* called for “Humour at the Front!”, it demanded a change of form, away from somehow irritating jokes and away from destructive satire to a new form which allowed humour that could bring people together, at least those “who toed the line”. This form, the “German Humour”, became the humour of National Socialism, through public pressure and not by coercion. People protested against humour that could be understood as protest. Everyone wanted to laugh together, and everyone laughed together, but only as long as one wanted or was allowed to toe the line.

In his study of the functions of humour for the human being and his perception of the world, Peter L. Berger spotted a third meaning of humour aside from as a form of protest and aggression. He called it the “benign humour”. But in his opinion this form of humour remained virtually meaningless: “In this incarnation, then, the comic functions as a mild and thoroughly healthy diversion. It is in this form that ‘Humor is the best medicine’”. As we have seen, this seemingly harmless humour gains some importance – always depending upon the social context – if the position of this “benign humour” is marked in the panorama of different possible forms of humour, in the humorous landscape of a time, and if the social group that uses and promotes this humour is defined. For Berger this form of humour is “the most common expression of the

64. Willy Kuhnt, “Kampf dem Vereinstheater-Kitsch!”, *Volksbühnenwarte*, 17 (1936), pp. 1–2.

65. Schl., “Wahrt Ehre und Ansehen des Gaues Sachsen, schützt unser Volkstum und unsere Arbeit!”, *Die Deutsche Arbeitsfront. Gau Sachsen*, 16 (1936), no. 42, pp. 2–3.



Auf der Ordensburg Vogelsang

Figure 3. Laughing together in 1939. A popular comic artist at Ordensburg Vogelsang, a school for the National Socialist elite.

Anonymous, "Auf der Ordensburg Vogelsang", in Ludwig Schmitz, *Verschmitztes* (Leipzig, 1941). Copyright: Arbeitsstelle für Kommunikationsgeschichte und interkulturelle Publizistik (AKIP), Freie Universität Berlin. Used with permission.

comic in everyday life".<sup>66</sup> This should be reason enough to highlight the impact of this humour for a given society, also in democratic systems. Perhaps this form is in fact more significant than forms that can be interpreted in terms of aggression, protest, and political agitation.

66. Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin, 1997), pp. 99–101.