

Site

Bückeberg

Image

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Text

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Editorial remarks: This essay is based on a lecture given by the author on February 22, 2001, at the Braunschweig Landesmuseum. A revised version of this speech is available in print; see: "Die Reichserntedankfeste auf dem Bückeberg 1933–1937: Ein Volk dankt seinem Verführer," in **Veröffentlichungen des Braunschweigischen Landesmuseums**, no. 102 (Braunschweig, 2002), pp. 19–61. The speech had to be shortened considerably for the print version. In 2018, the same author, with the assistance of Mario Keller-Holte, published **Die NS-Reichserntedankfeste auf dem Bückeberg 1933–1937: Aufmarsch der Volksgemeinschaft und Massenpropaganda** (Holzminden: Jörg Mitzkat Verlag, 2018).

The Aestheticization of Violence and Politics

Preface

The Nazi regime was violent, militaristic, and inhuman. This assessment will never be unjustified. A different side of the regime, frequently suppressed for a long time, was its fascinating effect upon the masses. To the view of this regime's evil must be added the deceptive veneer of National Socialism: its decorations, flag-waving parades, events, and mythologizing.

Fealty and a willingness to sacrifice was not achieved among the people, especially among young people, through threats and force alone. "National Socialism and its seductive allure were tied to stronger, older emotions and needs. Above all, unfulfilled desires for a nationalist society and elementary needs for identification and exaltation came together in the National Socialist political cult."¹ Approval of the regime was widespread. It did not have to be forced. Many were ready to follow Hitler unconditionally until the bitter end.

National Socialist festivals constituted a paradigmatically seductive place. Here, manipulation and mass psychology met with voluntary compliance from vast portions of the population wanting to express their admiration for the regime. Anyone taking a closer look at the rituals and events presented will see that behind the deceptive veneer lie elements of violence in these staged, artificially idyllic, grand festivals. In this respect, it is possible to recognize, even in a festival, "the two faces of the Third Reich: violence and a sugarcoated reality."²

This connection will be presented in the following, using the Harvest Festival at the Reichsthingstätte Bückeberg as the example. What was it that led sometimes more than a million people to endure the tribulations of a journey of several days, not to mention hours of waiting, only to break out in uninhibited, intoxicated excitement at the sight of their leader? What kinds of mechanisms did the totalitarian state employ to succeed in making its citizens swear fealty on this day?

Traces of the Thingstätte in the Area

Journeying south from Hamelin, the traveler's gaze soon encounters the large area known as the Bückeberg. Broadly and evenly, the mountain slopes downward to the north. A path leading through the middle of the plaza is like the backbone of this huge area and is still known today as the *Führerweg* (leader's path). To this day, this path is not used for agricultural purposes. Above the grounds stood a tribune for the VIP guests. Concrete blocks overgrown with blackberries are all that is left of it now.

The Idea for the Festival and Its Organizer

In the summer of 1933, citizens of the Third Reich first learned from the newspapers that there would be a large harvest festival. "The German peasantry ... will not only make a powerful commitment to the new realm in a show of unity on this day but will also demonstrate its importance as the sustainer of the nation in front of everyone."³ — May 1 had been known to the labor movement as Labor Day, but after the Nazis named it the "Day of National Labor," the peasantry, or the "nurturers of the realm," would be given the great honor of being incorporated into the National Socialist state. — *Erntedanktag*, or Thanksgiving Day, celebrated at the beginning of October, took on central importance in the cycle of newly created National Socialist holidays. By instituting a new annual festival, an absolutely new start would be demonstrated for the people of the Third Reich. The liturgical year was abolished, along with certain socialist holidays. They were replaced by new festivals and memorial holidays, some allegedly based on Germanic tradition. — Although several of these new festivals (such as the *Julfest*, which was supposed to replace Christmas) never became popular, the public loved the Reich Harvest Festival. It was cleverly linked to old rural and ecclesiastical customs. Its particular charm may have been that it was celebrated outdoors, in nature. In contrast, the Nuremberg Rallies, the Third Reich's ultimate festival, were held amid the monumental architecture of the Nazi Party's rally grounds.

1 Hans-Ulrich Thamer, *Verführung und Gewalt* (Berlin: bTb, 1998), p. 417 [translated].

2 Peter Reichel, *Der schöne Schein des Dritten Reiches* (Frankfurt am Main: Hanser, 1996), p. 17 [translated].

3 *Deister-und Weserzeitung Hameln*, July 13, 1933.

The festivals and ceremonies symbolized “the people’s” nationalist society. They fulfilled widespread demand for self-dramatization and national greatness. Society, so torn during the Weimar Republic, celebrated itself as a community willing to make sacrifices, to remain loyal to each other.

The demonstrative grandstanding of the regime and the Party included impressive, fascinating, and awe-inspiring events presented with a degree of unheard-of perfection. For many, the aesthetics were overwhelming, with masses of people, columns of marchers, and forests of flags. Participants welcomed the often quite militaristic displays at these festivals, which were intended to awaken discipline as well as a readiness for action and war. — Joseph Goebbels, who was responsible for directing these festivals, made use of all of the modern media of his day. For the Bückeberg, he said, “As the most revolutionary and modern instrument of the National Socialist state leadership, broadcasting bridges the gap to the most traditional estate, which is most strongly rooted in the past.”⁴

The Bückeberg Site

It was decided to locate the festival in Lower Saxony, since the Nazis regarded it as the land of the free, fierce, and “authentic” farmers. And they wanted it to take place near the Weser, the river that flowed entirely through “German lands,” from its source to its estuary. It also had to be a place that had good train connections, so that crowds of people could be transported.

The mountain’s favorable incline made it possible to create a theater with ascending audience stands. Finally, another advantage, which should not be underestimated, was that the land for the facility was available at no cost.

So, aside from ideological considerations, there were also practical reasons for selecting the site. Officially, though, other reasons were given for choosing it. The land around the Bückeberg was said to be a “fateful site for German history,” the place where Widukind fought Charlemagne, as well as the birthplace of the family of the Nazi martyr Horst Wessel. Since the site had been selected well in advance, it is obvious that this legitimization was devised and formulated after the fact.

The Design

Goebbels commissioned the architect Albert Speer to design the grounds for an open-air rural festival of previously inconceivable size. Speer, who had also devised

the concepts for the May 1 celebration in Berlin and the Nuremberg Rallies, was therefore responsible for a crucial amount of planning for the festival. — Speer’s design for the enormous area was deliberately plain and simple. The design elements were supposed to be subordinate to the natural effect of the Weser Valley landscape. Hence, the Reich Harvest Festival lacked the monumental austerity of the Rally Grounds in Nuremberg. — Speer’s design contained only a few elements:

- the very large “VIP tribune” at the top of the mountain slope, and a second, smaller dais at the foot of the mountain, the so-called Rednerkanzel, or “orator’s pulpit”
- a path around 800 meters long, connecting the two stands
- multiple rings of flags encircling the large plaza

According to Speer’s information, the stands were to be built out of wood, and the decorations would be hand-made. Everything was supposed to be kept thoroughly simple and peasant-like—a “folk festival” in a natural setting. — Speer used only a few elements to create the space for the festival. Flags surrounding the “cult space” united those assembled into a community. An “altar” for the harvest tributes was erected. The “savior” could present himself to the “believers” along the central path. There was a gigantic “leader’s pulpit” for his “sermon.” The speech was to be followed by a profession of faith, and then a song would be sung in unison. The liturgy for the ceremonies resembled a Christian worship service.

In December 1933, Goebbels decided that the Harvest Festival, initially planned for 1934, would also take place every year afterward at the Bückeberg. He designated the mountain an “ancient Germanic ceremonial site” and announced the construction of the Reichsthingstätte Bückeberg, the main ceremonial site of the Third Reich. This decision led to extensive construction.

In 1934, Speer presented a model of the Reichstingplatz Bückeberg. An earthen wall, 8 meters high and wide, 1,200 meters long, and decorated with 2,500 flags, would surround the grounds. Merchant stalls, first aid stations, and toilets would be built into the embankment. The two tribunes were stone. In front of the orator’s dais there was a large, level plaza for **Thing** plays and folk dancing. Mighty stairs on the west and east sides led to the rally grounds. — The monumental size of the gigantic earth wall and the stone tribunes was in keeping with the facilities that Speer was building at the time in Nuremberg. They hardly corresponded to the original concept of an outdoor agricultural fair. The design for the Reichstingplatz Bückeberg—a piece of theatrical, imposing architecture for a ceremonial site aspiring to immortality—represented a kind of architectonic megalomania.

4 *Völkischer Beobachter* (North German edition), September 19, 1934.

5 *Deister-und Weserzeitung Hameln*, October 8, 1935.

— As a **Reichsthingplatz**, however, Bückeberg remained incomplete. Its huge walls and stone steps were never built, while the stands and the stairs remained wooden structures.



Design for the Reichsthingplatz Bückeberg, model, 1934 (Gelderblom Collection, Hamelin)

Preparations Leading Up to the Festival

The Labor Service undertook the preparations. The *Freiwillige Arbeitsdienst* (Volunteer Labor Service), or FAD, was renamed the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* (Reich Labor Service) or RAD, in 1935. It was significantly involved in constructing the **Thingstätte** at the Bückeberg, as well as other **Thingstätte** throughout Germany. The flagpoles were set up. Both tribunes were completed and decorated. After each festival, both stands were partially dismantled and put into storage. Small wooden toilets were built along the edges of the plaza. — Besides the work on the festival grounds themselves, measures had to be taken to ensure not only the smooth arrival and departure of visitors, but to provide them with lodging, as well. The *Reichsbahn* (state railway) was tasked with most of the transportation. There were a large number of train stations and stops in the wider area around the festival grounds. Besides the Hamelin central train station, nine other stations were used, with additions being made to some, while others were completely rebuilt. A newly erected train station in Tündern had four tracks and particularly long platforms. Hitler's special train began stopping here in 1935. — Many construction projects—either to build new streets or to widen existing ones—were undertaken, ensuring that columns could march from the train stations to the festival grounds. A new line, Hameln–Altenbeken, was planned for the area on the west side of the Weser, although it was never built, probably because the sight of it disturbed the farmers' idyllic world. A highway was also supposed to be built a few kilometers south of the festival grounds. It was meant to cross the Weser between Kirchohsen and Grohnde, and would, it was surmised, accommodate much of the needed transportation. — Besides the train, people arrived by bus, car, and truck, on bicycles and on foot, by steamboat and paddleboat. Of course, the last

kilometers from the train stations and the large parking lots—situated at a moderate distance from the facilities—had to be covered on foot. Only the VIPs, diplomats, and the veterans being honored were driven directly to the rally grounds. — The army also built four pontoon bridges to supplement the existing bridges over the Weser. The RAD was also responsible for building enormous campgrounds, which, in 1934, created an opportunity for political propaganda, among other things: that year seven thousand laborers hiked for seven days to the Bückeberg, where they occupied a bivouac shaped like a swastika.

Festival Visitors Arrive at the Bückeberg

Groups of villagers, frequently dressed in traditional costume, made their way to the Bückeberg. Even the journey there, which was often a long one, was supposed to create a sense of community.

“On Saturday evening a special train from Passau arrived at the Hamelin train station at 11:12; the passengers on this journey had left on Friday evening at half-six and had therefore been on the train for thirty hours. The trip there and back took a total of sixty hours—in this case, we can definitely talk about sacrifice.”⁵

In 1937, the number of trains was around five hundred. Around one thousand people arrived on each train. Trains pulled up at the central station in Hamelin at intervals of just a few minutes. Many kilometers of tracks were required to park the trains until they were ready to depart. Every year the celebrations were expected to be bigger than the previous year, and the number of special trains was expected to exceed the number required the year before.

Festival Visitors

For the Nazi leadership, which was very concerned about maintaining popularity, it was necessary to show that their success curve went nearly and uninterruptedly straight up. The official numbers of visitors in 1933 was 500,000; in 1937, the last year the festival was held, it was 1,200,000. These numbers were supplied by the event producers and were certainly rounded up for propaganda purposes. Still, no one can contest the fact that the Bückeberg Festival was a successful mass rally overwhelmed with visitors.

The “March” of the Festival Visitors

At 6 a.m. balloons tethered by the army floated above the grounds, pointing the way for the festival attendees. Even the “march” there was staged as a quasi-military operation. — Many arrived in the darkness to secure themselves good spots near the *Führerweg*. It took at least four hours to fill the plaza. Columns of marchers arrived at the grounds be-

tween six and ten a.m. The march was supposed to end at 10 a.m., two hours before the dictator's arrival. Those already in place spent the next hours watching the sight of endless columns marching in orderly step to the Bückeberg. The people and their march to the grounds was part of the show itself. Although alcohol was forbidden on the grounds, beer was obviously not counted as alcohol.



The crowded festival grounds in 1935
The central path and the upper tribune (above right) for the VIP guests are easily recognizable. The tribune where Hitler stood to address the masses was situated closer to the plain and is not visible in this photo. It is located further along the central pathway (to the left).
(Postcard, Gelderblom Collection, Hamelin)

The Opening Acts

While waiting for Hitler to make his appearance, the crowds were entertained by the army playing military marches. Massive choirs of 15,000 singers—even 20,000 in 1937—also performed. There were aerial shows, as well as groups of singers and actors performing on special podiums. Acrobatics by 1,500 laborers demonstrated the “life force of the German man.” Boats sailed the Weser in formation.

When the plaza was full, the program promised that groups of peasant dancers in costume would appear on the Führerweg, starting at 10 a.m. A total of three thousand traditionally garbed farmers, both male and female, were selected to create a line along the Führerweg: reapers from Westphalia carrying sheaves, East Prussian farmers, fisherfolk from Frisia, and lots and lots of peasants from the region surrounding the Bückeberg.

Right behind the line of peasants in traditional costume stood the SS. They were responsible for security and keeping order at the festival. In their black uniforms, black boots, white gloves, and symbolic skull and crossbones, the SS represented military force and might on the festival grounds. What is today regarded as a tense contrast between the picturesque costumes and the martial SS uniforms obviously did not bother the festival's visitors at the time.

“The People's” Society (Excursus)

In the irrational worldview of the National Socialists, there were two major propaganda concepts: “the people,” meaning, the racist, pseudo-socialist “people's community,” and the “leader,” the savior expected by “the people.” The desire to dissolve boundaries, to meld with each other, makes up the fascination of the nationalist society. The concept was vague yet promising, at least for the majority of the economically oppressed classes. — Institutions such as Volkswohlfahrt (People's Welfare), Winterhilfswerk (Winter Relief), and the organization Kraft durch Freude (Strength through Joy) orchestrated the nationalist “people's community.” They also introduced a development that ignored class antagonisms and differences in status, preaching national public spirit and good cheer, while propagating solidarity among the people.

Some events in Hamelin make it clear that there was a dark side to “the people's” cheerful celebrations: the aggressive actions taken against “enemies of the people.” In 1933, the Hamelin Nazi Party tried to prevent Jewish shop owners from opening their shops during the festival, who successfully complained to the district president against this measure. In later years, most of the Jewish merchants had already been eliminated. In the Gestapo files, one can read that Hamelin members of the Jehovah's Witnesses had been denounced to the Gestapo as enemies of the regime, because they had not decorated their houses. Hamelin's social democrats and communists were regularly taken into “protective custody” while the festival was on.

“I expect that all of the trains in the Hannover district will be occupied by 1,200 passengers. Only the lame, the invalid, the lazy, the idle, and elements opposed to the state may remain at home. Everyone else must travel to Hamelin on October 1 to witness the great state event, where the Führer will speak.”⁶

In contrast to the racist model of the physically perfect, superior “Nordic master race” were the “cursed races” of outsiders: Jews, homosexuals, the mentally ill, habitual criminals, communists, and Gypsies [Romani]. Just possessing one of those traits was enough for a person to be marginalized, persecuted, or murdered. Beginning in 1933, the regime waged a savage war against minorities, which only became increasingly more visible and aggressive with the outbreak of the war in 1939.

The festival was a forceful, totalitarian attempt to overcome the deep divide in society caused by the Nazis, who tried to present an image symbolizing a united “people's” society. Part of the festival—which was supposed to be a place of integration, where Germany could achieve the “approval of the world”—always incorporated the exclusion of nonconformists. Kitschy, ritualized, idyllic communities were contrasted with aggressive behavior toward the “enemies of the people” and “strangers to the community.” Hence, the festival can also be described as a place of symbolic violence. At the Bückeberg, this was most obvious in the military exercises and Hitler's speech.

Hitler's Arrival at the Plaza and His "Passage through the People": The Festival's Major Ritual

When Hitler arrived at the plaza, a twenty-one-gun salute was fired from canons placed on the surrounding hills. Then, amid the sound of a march played by an army honor guard, Hitler proceeded to the foot of the mountain. — At that point, accompanied by the "Badenweiler March," he began walking along the Führerweg through the cheering crowd. The men and women who had waited up to six hours for him found themselves in an intoxicating state.

The photographs show people cheering uninhibitedly. Their willingness to devote themselves to the Führer dissolved all physical barriers.

The staging ensured that the Führer did not climb the mountain alone but was instead followed by an entourage. According to the plan, the "passage through the people" was supposed to take fifteen minutes. It took up to fortyfive minutes—to cover 600 meters. Children kept breaking through the barriers to hand him flowers. Hitler himself often stopped to talk to individual farmers.

In this moment, the Führer and the people experienced a religious, nearly erotic relationship, a symbiosis. An unnamed attendee said: "So, he gave me his hand, and I didn't wash my hand for three days afterward. An incredible experience!"⁷ Like a priest, Hitler climbed "heavenward," heading toward an "altar." A Thuringian church council member wrote, "Christ has come to us through Adolf Hitler."⁸ Hitler's performance was staged like a worship service, helping to sanctify a demonstration of political power.

Military Exercises for Show

A postcard from 1935 features the decorated, finished grounds. On the plain, not too far from the lower tribune, was a village, "Bückedorf," full of houses and a church erected especially for the festival. "Bückedorf" was the target of an extensive, long military exercise with tanks. West of the railroad, near Tündern, battles were also staged. The new Luftwaffe (air force) intervened in the battles with its airborne troops. The festival audience felt as if they were standing on the heights with the commander, overlooking the battle.



Bombers over the "Bückedorf"
(Postcard, Gelderblom Collection, Hamelin)

In March 1935, Hitler broke all of the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles by introducing general conscription and the air force. In 1936—conscription had been extended to two years—the village was called **Meckererdorf**, or "grumbler's village." A cemetery with gravestones had been set up there. The **Deister- und Weserzeitung** reported: — "A new village—and the dead are there already? Well, they were certainly not residents of Bückedorf. They were strangers to the town, even strangers to the country; they were never part of us. And the crosses put up over them were far too much of a church blessing, because their names were Thälmann, Rosa Luxemburg ... and so on!"⁹

In order to understand the cynicism of these sentences, readers should know that Ernst Thälmann (leader of the German Communist Party from 1925 to 1933) was still alive—in the Buchenwald concentration camp—and Rosa Luxemburg (another famous communist) had been murdered in 1919 by members of the Freikorps, an irregular voluntary militia.

Those attending the festival in the autumn of 1937 saw a maneuver in which all branches of the armed services participated. It was a realistically staged battle involving more than 10,000 men and the deployment of tanks and bombers. A bridge across the Weser was destroyed by the planes. Pounded by artillery and under a hail of bombs, "Bückedorf"—which had been renamed—went up in flames.

The military's show exercises took up ever more room in the program—up to around an hour—until 1937, when the Harvest Festival was staged one last time. Military exercises, the glorification of modern technological

- 6 The propaganda chief of the Hanover region, in a directive dated September 21, 1933, Landesarchiv Niedersachsen Hauptstaatsarchiv, Hanover, Hann 3101 no. 196/2, p. 63.
- 7 Lothar Steinbach, **Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Glaube? Ehemalige Nationalsozialisten berichten über ihr Leben im Dritten Reich** (Bonn: Dietz, 1983), p. 85 [translated].
- 8 Philipp W. Fabry, **Mutmassungen über Hitler: Urteile von Zeitgenossen** (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1979), p. 105 [translated].
- 9 **Deister- und Weserzeitung Hameln**, October 7, 1935.

progress, Thanksgiving, and groups of costumed peasants—those attending the German Harvest Festival saw nothing wrong with these juxtapositions. No one was upset by the military show. This is borne out by numerous statements from festival visitors.

Our usual image of National Socialism one-sidedly emphasizes the romanticism of “blood and soil,” a relapse into anti-modernism. This is, however, wrong. “It was this that was both characteristic and threatening: the mixture of robust contemporary style, efficient progressiveness, the dream of the past, and highly technologized romanticism.”¹⁰ — “Between 1933 and 1945 the idealized ‘typical’ German led a double life; he was a split personality. The staid people who quietly lived an unpolitical, normal life were simultaneously the same people who put on uniforms and marched, who were intoxicated by the will to power and obeyed it; they were subjects who rose to power, as well as power seekers who were also subjects. That the regime served both the citizens’ need for calm, order, and security as well as the consciousness of the ‘superior’ man and hero is what makes up the whole of its appeal.”¹¹

The 1933 festival ended in chaos. Most of the people were not familiar with the area and they could not find their way back to the various train stations. Hence, the next five festivals over the ensuing years were held during the day, so that people could easily find their lodgings or special trains by daylight. Hitler only reluctantly agreed to this change. He preferred to hold his speeches at night: “During the day it seems that man’s volition still resists ... with the greatest of energy any attempt to have another’s will forced upon him.”¹²

From a safe distance, and with the knowledge that Hitler’s rule ended in total defeat, the success of this festival can hardly be understood. In the decade after the war, the festival was largely suppressed. It has been present in the Museum Hamelin for a few years. It is only in the personal memories of the people who live near the Bückeberg that it played a vivid role and has been essentially transfigured in the process.

In the late 1990s, the author of this text, the Hamelin-based historian Bernhard Gelderblom, introduced to experts and the public alike the theme of the Reich Harvest Festival and the Bückeberg through an exhibition and lectures. — In 2011, the State of Lower Saxony agreed to Gelderblom’s proposal to preserve the historical site as both an architectural and a cultural memorial. — In late 2018, at Gelderblom’s request, the district of Hamelin-Pyrmont and the Verein für regionale Kultur- und Zeitgeschichte Hameln e. V. founded the Dokumentations- und Lernort Bückeberg gemeinnützige GmbH. — Currently (2019), the Bückeberg-gGmbH is planning to make the facility accessible through a network of paths and informational plaques.

10 Thomas Mann, “Gedanken im Kriege,” in *Essays*, vol. 2: *Politik* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1977), p. 115 [translated].

11 Christian Graf von Krockow, *Die Deutschen in ihrem Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1992), p. 213 [translated].

12 Adolf Hitler, quoted in Krockow 1992, p. 192 [translated].



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