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BEHAVIORISM AND HISTORIOGRAPHY: REFRAMING THE GERMAN RESPONSE TO THE THIRD REICH

Allyson Payne

In *The Nazi Seizure of Power*, William Sheridan Allen outlines the slow but steady takeover of a small German town, Northeim, by the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP). Some of the expected hallmarks of Nazism present themselves over time in his narrative, including parades, ammunition raids, and the presence of a work camp nearby. Simultaneously, others, which readers also generally have come to expect in any sort of literature concerning daily life in the Third Reich, are noticeably absent. Examples include overt violence against Jews and other NSDAP undesirables, physically enforced participation in NSDAP events, enforced party membership, and generally just fear. Where one would expect a chaotic and fear-filled narrative, Allen presents a relatively calm transition to Nazi power.¹ While many historians can and do easily explain away the perceived absence of the expected violent mistreatment of Jews by citing that there were not that many Jews living in Northeim in the first place, and that the NSDAP leadership enforced measures that ensured Jews simply evacuated, the absence of fear provokes deeper analysis. If the German people did not seem to be or were not afraid of the NSDAP, why did they not try harder to resist the party and its policies? This question about the absence of fear may seem isolated to the case in Northeim, but it is a part of a broader debate: were the German people coerced into the acceptance and practice of Nazi ideals, or did they simply consent?

Whether explicitly stated or not, this conversation surrounding coercion and consent underpins much of the existing literature on the general German population under the Third Reich. The centrality of the 'coercion versus consent' debate to the study and subsequent practice of the history of the Third Reich finds its roots immediately following the

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war. Historians from both East and West Germany were determined, as Ian Kershaw points out, to demonstrate that the German people had indeed resisted to some extent, implying that the Germans were not pleased with the NSDAP and, further, that the NSDAP had coerced the German people into obedience.² Given what people knew about the NSDAP atrocities against minority groups, historians generally accepted this narrative. But over the succeeding years, with the publication of works such as Klaus-Michael Mallman and Gerhard Paul's "Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent: Gestapo, Society, and Resistance," the idea of coercion came under fire as it became clear that the accepted image of the NSDAP marching around with their Gestapo taking in or immediately punishing anyone suspected of resistance in jail may have been exaggerated.³ By contrast, in Allen's work, Peter Fritzsche's study *Life and Death in the Third Reich*,⁴ and some of the oral history interviews in Alison Owings' *Frauen*, it seems that people simply gave in to the NSDAP and their violent policies either because they wanted to remain neutral

or because they received something in return from the NSDAP that reinforced their consent.⁵

The conversation surrounding coercion and consent often slips into questions and assessments of responsibility about whether the Germans consented or were coerced, yet it also often bypasses any sort of official definition of the two terms. Even in more explicit pieces such as Richard Evans' "Coercion and Consent in Nazi Germany," the conversation focuses on responsibility and not on defining the terms themselves.⁵ If historians do not adequately define coercion and consent, they cannot possibly determine whether or not Germans fell into one category or the other. Moreover, without a contextual understanding of these terms, historians cannot, in good faith, reach (and have not reached) any responsible judgment.

Even still, to assume that coercion and consent deserve definitions assumes the validity of their apparent dichotomy. Just as most works bypass defining the terms and move toward a judgment argument, those same works underpinned by the debate also fail to validate the dichotomy in the first place. Historians largely accept coercion to mean that the NSDAP forced the German people into submission with threats of violence or ruin. This conception of coercion garners much attention from these same historians due to its sensational nature and exonerative qualities. On the other hand, consent can be defined as voluntarily giving an entity permission to carry out its will. Though it is a simple definition, it is one the reality of which historians must ignore in order to reinforce. The keyword of this definition is 'voluntarily,' which if taken at face value in this context, implies that Germans thought little about what it meant to accept the Third Reich and just did accept the Third Reich, atrocities and all. This sort of concept, of course, completely strips the Germans of any sort of agency or capability and forces historians to 'figure out' what specifically made the

German population susceptible to totalitarian take over.

Those familiar with the topic see historians do just that in many published works, no matter the topic. In *Frauen*, Alison Owings' aim is to decide for herself the guilt, innocence, or at the very least, the nature of the involvement of German women with the NSDAP—yet her analysis slips in questions geared towards environmental factors which may have influenced each woman in her decision to or not to support the NSDAP.⁶ Eric Johnson's *What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany* works to assess the level of Germans' guilt by determining what knowledge they were privy to during the Nazi years.⁷ Still, Johnson, although this is not his main goal, provokes conversation over what made the Germans particularly unable to resist. Allen, in his aforementioned work *The Nazi Seizure of Power*, works to figure out what traits in the people of Northeim left them particularly receptive to Nazism so that when the NSDAP took over, there was not really a fight.⁸ In less obvious works, such as Detlev Peukert's "The Genesis of the 'Final Solution,'" anti-Semitism appears as the product of an ideological shift, with the additional point that the Germans were highly receptive to such a shift because of World War I.⁹ This determination of particularly German traits is also a popular topic in forums where the foremost German historians consider the various events leading up to, during, and after the NSDAP rise to power.¹⁰ These sorts of narratives are problematic in that they inadvertently blame the German population for accepting the NSDAP but simultaneously exonerate the Germans by blaming their susceptibility largely on factors beyond their control.

To accept the 'coercion versus consent' dichotomy is to, at least somewhat, excuse the Germans either way and to land—either they were forced or they were uniquely receptive to totalitarian ideological and physical takeover as a people—

on the comfortable conclusion that either way it was out of the Germans' hands. At worst, it completely forgives the German people because they were forced against their will. At best, the dichotomy allows for shallow blame to be placed on Germans as a whole because the ability to accept the NSDAP evils is labeled as unique to them. This judgment is a moral one and uncomfortable for historians to make—though this does not stop them from attempting. In any case, if considered on a spectrum, coercion and consent can feasibly be placed together on one end or on completely opposite ends. Neither reality is feasible because humanity does not operate on a black and white binary. This would suggest that a third option exists outside of coercion or consent.

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Indeed, although many works support the dichotomy of coercion and consent, either inadvertently or advertently, there is evidence within them of a third option. Though often glossed over, in truth the German acceptance of the NSDAP had less to do with fear or susceptibility and more to do with what Germans got out of the NSDAP seizing power. Within the agentless dichotomous framework of 'coercion versus consent,' the NSDAP seizure and implementation of

power is presented as something simply done to the German population. When presented in this way, it actually provides little valuable commentary on whether or not Germans were responsible for what happened and what their reasoning for doing so may have been. A more productive way to understand the German and NSDAP dynamic is to reframe it relationally. Instead of accepting the NSDAP seizure and implementation of power as something done to the German people by force or by susceptibility, the relationship can be better understood as mutually beneficial. The NSDAP provided something to the Germans in return for their support. By reframing the relational understanding of the dynamic between the NSDAP and the German populace, more emphasis is placed on behavior, a concept far more useful for historians who wish to incorporate discussions about agency and capability.

Shifting the debate towards a new focus on behavior would not be unfamiliar to historians of the Third Reich and, in fact, would be in line with both modern and contemporary scholarship. To date, historians have devoted much time to studying the behavior of NSDAP instigators by employing analytical behavioral studies, including the Milgram and the Stanley Prison experiments, and including them as serious aspects of their historical works. One example among many is Michael Bess' *Choices Under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II*.¹¹ In line with previous scholarly examinations of the behavioral aspects of Nazi rule, then, historians will benefit from incorporating the behavioral analysis of B.F. Skinner. In 1937, American psychologist B.F. Skinner introduced the world to operant conditioning. Operant conditioning, in the simplest of terms, refers to a type of behavioral conditioning in which response frequency is determined by the type of stimuli administered. Operant conditioning can then be broken down into three facets based on the type of stimuli administered. These three

facets are punishment, negative reinforcement, and positive reinforcement. In this case, punishment means administering negative stimuli to decrease a behavior, negative reinforcement means removing negative stimuli to increase a behavior, and positive reinforcement means administering positive stimuli to increase a behavior.¹²

The correlation between coercion and punishment is clear. Historians who advance the argument that the German populace was coerced into supporting the NSDAP, by the NSDAP, are generally referring to the idea that the Nazis used threats of doxing, boycotts, and violence up to and including death in order to keep the people from rising up in revolt. The evidence for this argument is not difficult to find. In the various interviews of her *Frauen*, Owings asks why the participants did not resist in general or why they did not do more than they had done to resist the NSDAP. Frau Wilhelmine Haferkamp gives the classic and representative answer, telling Owings that of course she did not speak out against the NSDAP. If she had, she would have been shot.¹³ In another example, in Allen's study of Northeim, those who disobeyed the ammunition laws were punished, and in one recorded incident a woman who did not 'heil' with enthusiasm was sent a threatening letter from Ernst Girmann—Northeim's NSDAP party leader—which stated that such actions could likely leave her vulnerable to acts of violence, acts of violence from which he would not protect her because, according to Girmann, they would be deserved.¹⁴ Allen also describes the situation in Northeim as one where even the threat of NSDAP retaliation was enough, as there was a known work camp nearby.

However, for the average German person, these threats were just that—threats. Historians point to public punishment, boycotts, and violence, which did indeed take place, but unless one was a targeted minority and since the NSDAP had no established terror laws focused on Aryans, the German

citizens were likely under little true threat.¹⁵ Indeed, most of the cases in which a German was punished to the same degree as a minority individual was typically when found to be aiding said minority. Even in that situation, though, many Germans felt quite confident in defying the system with little fear of punishment.

In the same interview in which Frau Haferkamp wholeheartedly stated that she would have been hung for speaking out against the NSDAP, she related at length about how she fed the Polish prisoners working in the ditch outside of her house even after NSDAP officials told her not to and threatened her. In addition, Frau Haferkamp emphatically stated that she continued to support her Jewish neighbors even though her own husband worked for the NSDAP.¹⁶ Further still, Allen describes how the Nazi neighborhood officers in Northeim could be bribed and that one officer would even bribe the neighborhood with wine because he wanted to be liked. He also writes about how the town felt confident challenging Girmann's changes to the religious school system.¹⁷ In addition, according to *Frauen*, many knew about the atrocities committed against those with mental or physical deformities, but no one felt that they were in danger of similar actions being taken against themselves.¹⁸

All of this considered, the punishment argument is shaky, but scholarship describing the state of things at the top of the NSDAP are the nails in punishment's coffin. One of the most famous misconceptions of punishment is over the Gestapo. For a long time, historians and amateurs alike believed that, similar to the KGB, the NSDAP Gestapo were listening and watching at all times. But Mallman and Paul's research on the infamous Nazi secret police called this view into serious question.¹⁹ In addition, with Devin Pendas' "Racial States in Comparative Perspective" and Ian Kershaw's "Hitler: 'Master in the Third Reich' or 'Weak Dictator,'" the image of

a surprisingly asynchronous NSDAP comes into full view.²⁰ In essence, Nazi policy was not coherent or well-enforced enough to establish widespread punishment, and thus punishment could not have likely been a useful behavioral tool in service of reinforcing NSDAP support, which also largely aligns with Skinner's theory on the effectiveness of punishment. If punishment was likely not an effective tool, what then effectively garnered German support?

Interestingly enough, without ever being named as such, negative reinforcement gets some attention in historical scholarship in the form of discussions about the role of anti-Semitism in reinforcing NSDAP support. It is no secret that a large part of NSDAP policy was rooted in anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism had always been present in Germany, but with the close of World War I and the essential downfall of Germany financially and politically, Germans were on the hunt for a scapegoat. Although Pendas argues that Germany had been trying to make amends with the Jewish population, Germans once again turned on the Jews and pinned the rotten post-war reality on them.²¹ In addition to pinning all of Germany's troubles on the Jews, they imagined and disseminated the idea of a worldwide conspiracy in which Jews orchestrated everything, even events happening in contemporary Jim Crow South.²² The idea behind this argument is that the NSDAP promised to get rid of the Jews, and others deemed undesirable, if they had the country's electoral support. This lines up theoretically with the concept of negative reinforcement: removing 'negative' stimuli [the presence of Jews] in return for favorable behavior [support of the German people].

However, there is much historical evidence from interviews, personal histories, and statistics, presented by Owings, Allen, and Fritzsche, among others, which contradicts the idea that the general German populace actively sought the removal

of Jews and other minorities. Already mentioned is Frau Haferkamp, who emphatically announced that she had a good many Jewish friends.²³ Though it is sometimes seen as negative by scholars today, according to Allen, Northeimers typically shied away from mistreatment of the Jews. In fact, Allen notes that, in Northeim, to some degree, the perceived mistreatment of the Jews by Jewish individuals was largely self-reinforcing. A Jewish man might see a friend on the street and assume the friend will avoid him, so to take the situation back into his own hands he might cross the road himself, leading to the friend avoiding him in the future thinking this is what the Jewish friend wants.²⁴ Moreover, some historians suggest that anti-Semitism may not have been presented coherently at the time when people were developing their opinions on the NSDAP. For example, Allen reviewed the topics of the meetings from the beginning of the NSDAP rise to power in Northeim, which would have been when people were forming their opinions and possibly even loyalties to the NSDAP, revealing that very few of those meetings dealt with anti-Semitic themes. In addition, a statistical piece developed from interviews of those who lived through the Third Reich suggests that anti-Semitism was not a topic often spoken at length about, and that people rarely listed anti-Semitic sentiment as their reason for supporting the NSDAP.²⁵

Ultimately, the role played by anti-Semitic sentiment in ordinary people's support for the NSDAP is unclear. While some might suggest that Hitler, as an avid anti-Semite, directly influenced and enforced the dissemination of anti-Semitism down the ranks to landing on the civilians, secondary literature suggests that this may be an oversimplification. In fact, historians heavily debate this and generally fall into two camps: either as 'intentionalists,' proponents of the idea that the Third Reich developed from Hitler's ideological intentions, or as 'structuralists,' who

emphasize Hitler as just one among many components of the Third Reich.²⁶ Detlev Peukert suggests that anti-Semitism as a policy point did not actually spring from Hitler but rather from the ideological transition from theodicy to logodicy. Logodicy, of course, was calling for societies in downturn to expel their “sick” or “deviants” for the good of the society.²⁷

On a behavioral level, negative reinforcement is the most effective tactic to use when trying to reinforce a new behavior while using a new stimulus, yet in Nazi Germany negative reinforcement was not the most effective tactic used by the NSDAP. While the NSDAP might have been new to the political scene, Germans were familiar with both the turmoil of democracy and the standard despot style monarchy, so, in a sense, they would have been familiar with a hybrid of the two. Additionally, anti-Semitism, as mentioned above, was not unfamiliar to Germans. This was an ideology with which they would have interacted on a daily basis. By this logic, behaviorally, it makes no sense for negative reinforcement to be effective on this group of people. They were familiar with supporting such individuals and were familiar on some level with the Nazi promise to remove the Jews. Considering all of this, it does not appear that either anti-Semitism or negative reinforcement seemed to be a convincing catalyst for the general support of the NSDAP.

So, if punishment never quite developed properly and negative reinforcement was never set up to be effective, what then was? The answer to this question is the only type of Skinner’s reinforcement left – positive reinforcement. The reason for this is simple: in essence, a positive type of reinforcement, and especially a type which rewarded everyday behavior, made supporting the questionable NSDAP attractive to a group of people who had just been financially and culturally decimated. While historians are quick to list the ‘positive’ things the NSDAP accomplished, especially

in the late 1920s and 1930s, some even suggesting that these positives were nice perks for those who supported the NSDAP, none have suggested a concrete relationship between the so-called positives of Nazism for the German people and their enthusiastic support for the NSDAP.

Some historians suggest that anti-Semitism was considered a positive for NSDAP supporters. However, as stated previously, the relationship between the average German citizen and anti-Semitism is shaky at best. While there are undoubtedly cases of anti-Semitic fanatics out there, German civilians seemed to be capable of dissociating anti-Semitism from the NSDAP. Take again Frau Haferkamp. She waxed poetic about her Nazi child-bearing trophy, but seemed horrified by the NSDAP treatment of the Jewish people she knew.²⁸ Moreover, Fritzsche argues that anti-Semitism was something to justify away Nazism rather than to revel in it, as is demonstrated in one mother’s letters to her daughter.²⁹ Therefore, in this context, because anti-Semitism did not necessarily grow support for the NSDAP, anti-Semitism should not be considered a positive.

Conversely, a positive would be anything the average German citizen considered to be unequivocally good for them and that also garnered support for the NSDAP. Included within this category are the NSDAP’s reduction of unemployment, contributions to charity, and the development of the Autobahn, among other things. Ideological positives are also included within this category, as well as the sense of nationalistic pride in working without labor unions that the NSDAP seemed to give to workers. Though this may seem like an analysis of positives tailored to the argument intended, this is the relational reality of positives. As cyclical as it sounds, positives are considered to be positives both because of and by the level they increase support for the NSDAP. Additionally, the timing of these positive factors—

both ideological and material—correlate inversely with the NSDAP rise to power, which in and of itself suggests a relationship. As the NSDAP rose to power, the occurrence, or at least the suggestion of such positives, decreased as more negatives, such as anti-Semitism or violence, manifested in their absence. This is because the NSDAP needed to gain support quickly in the beginning. By establishing themselves as a party of progress and care—getting rid of unemployment, improving public works, lifting worker morale, contributing to charities, and reinforcing family values—the NSDAP was essentially providing the German populace with a reward for their support. And the Germans took this bait.

The question, then, comes down to intent. Was this showering of positives on civilians intentionally deployed to gain support, or was this sort of behavior simply innate to human activity? The NSDAP was known for their interest in shaping human behavior, including, but not limited to, their reward system designed to increase childbirth and the indoctrination of young boys and girls in the Hitler Youth. While these excursions in behavior farming might beg the reader to conflate them to the point of intention, the truth is that while the NSDAP was undoubtedly manipulative, Germans typically stayed away from American psychology. Germans preferred more theory-based psychology, while the Americans focused on more practice-based forms. Essentially, although behaviorism is rooted just as firmly in the early twentieth century as the NSDAP, the NSDAP likely never paid serious attention to this ‘inferior’ form of psychology and, thus, were unlikely to have knowingly implemented some intentional plan based on Skinner’s operant conditioning. This begs a final question: if intent cannot be determined, does that damage the integrity of the argument made here? Behaviorism prides itself on being a generalizable field due to the inherent human qualities upon which it focuses; thus, it is no stretch to layer Skinner’s

operant conditioning over a study about German support of the NSDAP. Behaviorism as a field of study is highly generalizable and lends itself to this sort of analysis.

It is clear that the debate over ‘coercion versus consent’ is an oversimplification which ignores human agency and capability, and that in its place, layering early twentieth century behaviorism over the accepted narratives can reveal both accepted flaws and overlooked relationships; however, the work to fully understand the relationship between the German populace and the NSDAP is far from complete. While an excursion into operant conditioning might reveal a relationship between the two, the dynamics between them remain complex. Central to this complexity is a full understanding of the term “support.” Did support for the NSDAP mean converting into a totalitarian fanatic? Did support simply mean allowing children to participate in the Hitler Youth? While this essay has explored which method of behavioral manipulation likely garnered the most support for the NSDAP, questions of definition such as those outlined above remain, suggesting the need for further investigation and revision of the German historiographic field.

ENDNOTES

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- 17 Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power*, 284-287.
- 18 Owings, *Frauen*, 23; Owings, *Frauen*, 27.
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- 20 Devin Pendas, "Racial States in Comparative Perspective," in Devin O. Pendas, et al., eds., *Beyond the Racial State: Rethinking Nazi Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 116-143; Ian Kershaw, "Hitler: 'Master in the Third Reich' or 'Weak Dictator,'" in Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems & Perspectives of Interpretation*, 5th Ed. (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic), 69-92.
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- 28 Owings, *Frauen*, 17-31.
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