

TRAVELING INTO THE ABYSS: KRAFT DURCH FREUDE IN THE THIRD REICH

Hasso Spode

February 17, 1934: special trains decorated with flags roll through Germany. Ten thousand "worker-holidaymakers" are transported away from the gray cities to the clear winter air of the Bavarian Alps. A propagandistic drumbeat, not only in Germany. "Nazis Send Workmen to Alps for Vacation," is the headline in the *New York Times*. The correspondent reports incorrectly of just a thousand participants and is surprised that wages would continue to be paid during the one-week trip. The article goes on to say: "The station [in Berlin] was gayly [sic] decorated with flags, Nazi bands played military marches, a choir sang German folksongs. . . . Dr. Robert Ley, leader of the Labor Front, said German workmen . . . would get to know their beautiful Fatherland and taste the joys of comradeship."¹

The Inception of *Kraft durch Freude*

When Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of a coalition government on January 30, 1933, he was determined to never relinquish power again. But the dominance of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers' Party, or NSDAP) was still quite fragile. In the elections on March 5 the absolute majority was missed, despite the increasing terror, and the old infighting between "rightist" and "leftist" wings broke out within the party again. The NSDAP also had powerful adversaries, first and foremost the parties of the labor movement. The Communist Party (KPD) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) were soon banned, but there were still the trade unions. To deal with them, Ley, head manager of the NSDAP, engineered a clever coup: implementing an old leftwing demand, May 1 was made a public holiday.² Union leaders called for participation in the demonstrations—to then be arrested the following day. From the ruins of the unions Ley formed the Deutsche Arbeitsfront (German Labor Front, or DAF), whose main task—based on a *de facto* ban on strikes—was supposed to be "establishing absolute peace in the economy." At the same time, however, it was supposed to have an "educational" effect and win, according to Ley, the "hearts" of workers who had become "homeless" over to the new regime. But how was this to succeed if the workers were not allowed to represent their own interests? A field of activity outside the crude sphere of wage and work presented itself as a way out of this dilemma—leisure time.

Hence a daughter organization of the DAF, the Nationalsozialistische Gemeinschaft "Kraft durch Freude" (National Socialist Community "Strength through Joy," or NSG KdF), was formally established in November. With a view to winning over the skeptical business community, "strength" alluded to the hoped-for increase in performance by "well-rested" workers; "joy" took up a catchword from union-sponsored studies in ergonomics, according to which modern rationalization—called "Taylorism" or "Fordism"—would create inhumane working conditions that would drive laborers into

the arms of "Marxism" if no compensation was offered by means of psychological reward ("joy").³ The organization was initially supposed to be called "After Work," after the Italian organization upon which it was modeled, Opera Nazionale "Dopolavoro" (National Agency "After Work," or OND).⁴ KdF, however, quickly eclipsed its fascist model and, in contrast to the corporate structure of the OND, was oriented toward the concept of the *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community). The catchword, which stood for the ideals of inclusion and the overcoming of class distinctions, had been in fashion since the late German Empire, especially with social democratic and liberal leftwing, frequently Jewish, politicians. The young NSDAP had also adopted it in 1920—and linked it to the exclusion of Jews.⁵ Now it took on a concrete meaning. The DAF placed all *schaffende Deutsche* (working Germans) together, regardless of class, be they workers, employers, or civil servants. Blue-collar workers were, of course, the real target group. They comprised half of the working population—and hence had to at least be kept calm if the regime wanted to retain power and prepare for its battle for *Lebensraum* (literally, biosphere).

Ley rightly emphasized that no one could be "ordered" to enjoy leisure time. Since the DAF was an unpopular "coerced assembly and control organization,"⁶ it had to appeal to workers outside of their workplaces and without pressure—admittedly, first after the labor movement had been broken up. Leisure time on workdays and weekends was henceforth organized by KdF: activities included popular sports, socialist pigeon-breeding associations, adult education, singing, folk groups, art exhibitions, variety shows, entertainment, classical concerts, theater, and opera events.⁷ In this respect, KdF served only as a collecting basin for the proletarian leisure time associations of the Weimar Republic. By designing annual leisure time, however, it went far beyond what already existed.

"You too can travel now!"⁸

Vacation travel had become a central element of respectable bourgeois lifestyle in the late 19th century.⁹ "The whole world travels," noted the writer Theodor Fontane—"the whole world" admittedly only denoted a small minority. In the crisis-ridden Weimar Republic, vacation remained a privilege of the "tourist class," which comprised around ten percent of the population. Although the unions had obtained a vacation entitlement of three to six days for the majority of workers (Germany led the way in this), and the socialist hiking and travel organization Die Naturfreunde (Friends of Nature) temporarily had over 100,000 members, only well-off skilled workers and leading officials in the labor movement became part of the "tourist class." With monthly wages of around 200 Reichsmark (RM)—not to speak of the catastrophic unemployment as of 1930—not a penny was left over for travel; thus workers frequently worked during their allotted vacation time for additional pay.

When the KdF department "Reisen, Wandern, Urlaub" (Travel, Hiking, Holidays, or RWU) began operations on February 17, 1934, the enthusiasm was enormous.¹⁰ KdF representatives were overwhelmed with booking requests. The success pleasantly surprised its initiators who swiftly expanded the travel program. By the end of the year, KdF had sold nearly half a million package tours and two million short excursions and hiking trips. And, as the highlight, 60,000 cruises were sold after the first "KdF ship" set sail for England on May 2—the anniversary of the destruction of the unions. With prices far below the normal travel costs of one to three hundred RM, KdF found a gap in demand and fast became the largest travel agency in the world. A week at a fancy health resort—including transport, accommodation, and full pension—cost twenty-eight RM, and a ten-day-long beach holiday at the Baltic Sea forty-four RM. There were also "reduced tours" to places with little tourism for around fifteen RM, a price level within reach for many workers. Round trips, skiing tours, and so-called "cultural tours" to destinations including Paris to learn about the "cultural values and accomplishments of other peoples" were also organized. Such offers were more expensive, but the prices of commercial providers were still significantly undercut. As was the case with cruises. A one-week cruise to Norway cost around sixty RM; a three-week cruise to Madeira, a dream destination for the British upper class, around one hundred and twenty RM (Thomas Cook asked for more than double this for its cheapest cruise). The cruises became the best propaganda for the "new Germany," both in Germany and abroad. Ocean liners had hitherto been regarded as floating metaphors for a class-ridden society: luxury on the upper deck, the poor people jammed together, and the crew slaving away below. The SPD's unfulfilled promise that workers would one day travel the seas with their own ships was gleefully cited—now up to 150,000 *Volksgenossen* (folk comrades, i.e., members of the people's community) went on cruises each year (a figure that would only be reached again in the Federal Republic of Germany fifty years later). The practice of drawing cabins by lot underlined the "socialist" character of KdF. The cruises mostly went to the Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea, and the fjords of Norway. Up to eight ships were chartered and/or purchased. And, in light of the enormous demand, the two largest cruise ships ever built were put into service in 1938–39: the *Wilhelm Gustloff* (named for the murdered Swiss Nazi leader) and the *Robert Ley*. All the guest cabins had a "sea view," and the crew cabins, though without windows, were of the same size and furnishings. When Hitler took part in the maiden voyage of the *Ley* the *Washington Post* enthused: "every one of the 1,500 passengers [can] feel like a Croesus."¹¹ The concept of these luxury ships set a trend for decades to come.¹²

In retrospect, it has been said that KdF was created thanks to a *Führerbefehl* (Fuehrer's order)¹³—but it was Ley and the Minister of Propaganda and Tourism, Joseph Goebbels, who pushed the project forward. Goebbels made the young theater director Horst Dreßler-Andréß the head of the new leisure-time organization. He was part

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of the "leftist" wing of the party and regarded himself as a cultural revolutionary: the "mission" of KdF was to democratize the cultural assets of the country for the people's community. The circle around Dreßler-Andreß fiercely differentiated itself from the cult of "blood and soil" as favored by Alfred Rosenberg, the "chief ideologist" and archenemy of Ley and Goebbels. What was necessary, they wrote in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, was not "celebrating the patrimony" but breaking up the bourgeois "monopoly on culture." Hitler tended to regard these "cultural bolshevists"—as Rosenberg referred to them—as useful idiots, and most of them were later neutralized.¹⁴ Initially, however, their zeal helped the regime achieve an overwhelming propaganda success.

Social tourism developed into KdF's most important field of activity. The RWU department accounted for four-fifths of the revenue; many considered "Kraft durch Freude" to be merely a cheap travel agency. From February 1934 to September 1939, this vacation machinery transported over seven million *Volksgenossen* to their holidays, and of them one in ten went on a cruise.¹⁵ Including the weekend excursions and hiking trips, more than forty-three million people had traveled with KdF by the beginning of the war.¹⁶ Statistically, this corresponded to eighty percent of the German population over the age of fifteen: a huge logistical achievement.

A discount on train travel and a reduction of comfort standards certainly played a role in the sensational pricing policy, and in the beginning KdF benefited from the economic plight of the hotel industry.¹⁷ But what was truly decisive was the serial production, and the resolute will to use the motto "high turnover, low prices" for sociopolitical purposes. Thomas Cook and other travel agencies had already organized collective trips at reduced prices; the industrialization of travel on a really large scale, however, was invented by KdF. The principle of assembly line production, as Henry Ford introduced it in his automobile factory in 1913, was transferred to a very complex, intangible consumer good. Paradigmatic were the plans for five huge seaside resorts along the Baltic Sea. The pilot project begun on the island of Rügen in 1936 was soon the largest construction site in Germany.¹⁸ The complex, later named Prora, was intended to become the "seaside resort of the 20,000": a narrow, six-story structure that extended—interrupted by a fairground—nearly five kilometers along the beach. In it, around 10,000 identical "living and sleeping cell units" were lined up. These dimensions called for sophisticated logistics: questions of "bringing, distributing and transporting large crowds of people," praised the architecture magazine *Baugilde*, were "brought to a mature solution." The design by the former *Werkbund* (Association of Craftsmen) architect Clemens Klotz, in the style of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), won a grand prix at the Paris World Fair in 1937. By the beginning of the war the Fordist vacation factory had almost been completed.¹⁹ Although it did not go into operation, it pointed the way to the future of tourism, which the writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger characterized as "standardization,

packaging, and serial production."²⁰ The universal "grammar of rationalization"²¹ started to shape tourism, too—even though vacation travel was actually supposed to take people away from the gears of the industrial world.

An irresolvable dilemma: the industrialization of travel is the *conditio sine qua non* for the democratization of travel. But did the regime succeed with its promised "shattering of bourgeois travel privileges"? Yes and no.²² In the case of domestic KdF holiday trips, workers represented almost one-third of the participants, on cruises, nearly one-fifth. (In the case of the weekend trips, which were not a fundamental innovation, the figure was probably around fifty percent).²³ The psychological impact was correspondingly large. The social impact, in contrast, remained rather modest. Workers contributed to only about five percent of the tourist boom overall.

In any case, by 1939, around one-tenth of the blue collar workforce had gone on a KdF vacation trip at least once. This was still not a social breakthrough, but nevertheless gave the *impression* that everyone could partake in the pleasures of "better people"²⁴—a message spread by the millions of participants more than by the controlled media in which skeptics had no faith. Reports smuggled to the SPD executive who had fled to Prague complained: "Some say: 'Yes, the state didn't offer us anything like this in the past. We didn't leave our nest then.' Especially the women talk for months about the beautiful trips and thus also inspire those around them." One report asked: "Why didn't you do this in the past as well?"²⁵

"Socialism of Deed"

Another SPD informant analyzed: "It is skillful speculation on the petty bourgeois inclinations of the apolitical worker. For such a man, it is already something if he has once gone on a cruise to Norway. . . . He consequently imagines that he has climbed one rung higher up on the social ladder."²⁶ The Gestapo naturally evaluated the reports of the exiled SPD; the DAF leadership must have been delighted that their strategy for producing loyalty seemed to have succeeded. The magic words behind this strategy were the "socialism of deed": in contrast to the empty promises of the Social Democrats, the message was that the National Socialists really did something for workers.

"Socialism of deed" was the war-economy variant of "white socialism," as promoted by the automobile tycoon Henry Ford. Ford had energetically supported the NSDAP on their path from political sect to ruling party. The ardent anti-Semite was a great admirer of Hitler, just as the *Führer* honored Ford reciprocally and awarded him the highest order.²⁷ Both of them took strategic aim at depoliticizing the working class "infected with Marxism" and thus at the creation of a broad, satisfied middle class. But in Germany the basic prerequisite for consumption capitalism *à la* Ford was missing: the coupling of wages to advances in productivity (this only occurred during the

"economic miracle" of the postwar period). Instead, wages were forcibly kept low so as to limit the cost of armaments. In the National Socialists' vision, it was only the plundering of the *Lebensraum* in the East—carefully concealed at first—that would compensate Germans for their sacrifices.

Until then, it was not only necessary to do away with determined opponents of the regime but also to satisfy the potentially dangerous *Volk* by "raising living standards."²⁸ To this end, *Volksprodukte* (people's products) were promoted by the regime.²⁹ By means of standardized serial production, selected prestigious consumer goods were to be reduced in price to such an extent that the breakthrough in mass consumption the Weimar Republic had promised the masses seemed within reach. The focus was on cars, radios, and travel, but goods ranged from refrigerators to television receivers and even a *Volksflugzeug* (people's airplane) was planned. The *Volksempfänger* (people's radio) became a bestseller. But scarcity of resources and the premature start of the war caused most of the Fordist *Volksprodukte* to fail. This applied in particular to the *KdF-Wagen* (KdF car): the price of 990 RM was calculated too low; and even though the hyper-modern production sites were completed in 1939, it only went into serial production as the *Volkswagen* after the war. The only mass produced "people's" consumer good unprecedented internationally was the package tour.

KdF tourism went hand in hand with improvements in holiday regulations.³⁰ The duration was increased to one to two weeks, the payout of holiday entitlements was prohibited, and the circle of beneficiaries expanded with young workers and women benefitting in particular. This was a tangible gain in the quality of life. Taking holidays was no longer a privilege in which one could actually see something "socialist." In the long history of the development of tourism, from a whim of sentimental romantics to a bourgeois privilege to the biggest industry in the world, the National Socialist period is a key phase.³¹

Final Remarks

The leading role the Third Reich played in holiday policy had to be recognized in 1936 even by the International Labor Organization of the League of Nations, from which Germany had resigned. When the Olympic Games were taking place that year in Berlin, a bombastic "World Congress for Leisure Time and Recreation" was held in parallel in Hamburg—the dove of peace was chosen as the symbol.³² The congress established a supposedly progressive leisure time international organization, the "International Central Bureau 'Joy and Work.'" Although never publicly mentioned, it was conceived as a counter-structure to the League of Nations—no one other than Robert Ley was elected its president. There was no foreign keynote speaker who did not praise KdF in glowing terms, while German speakers indulged in peace and social rhetoric. People only too

happily wanted to believe that the German leisure-time policy wanted "understanding between peoples and to arouse mutual respect," as Ley lied in his welcoming speech to the 3,000 participants:³³ "I am convinced that it is not violent measures that can bring people happiness. If people . . . are inspired and moved by the fact that they all have to live next to one another, they will then also have a place next to one another."

Shortly before the outbreak of the war, Ley was received in London by King Georg VI and Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. The subject of the meeting was the next World Congress for Leisure Time in Stockholm in 1940. The congress never took place.

Translated from the German by Amy Klement

- 1 The New York Times, February 18, 1934, p. 26.
- 2 See Hasso Spode, "Arbeiterurlaub im Dritten Reich," *Angst, Belohnung, Zucht und Ordnung: Herrschaftsmechanismen im Nationalsozialismus* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1982), pp. 275–328; Timothy W. Mason, *Social Policy in the Third Reich: The Working Class and the "National Community"* (Providence/Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1993), and Hans-Gerd Schumann, *Nationalsozialismus und Gewerkschaftsbewegung* (Hannover/Frankfurt: Norddeutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1958).
- 3 Pioneering was the study by the Belgian socialist Hendrik de Man, *Der Kampf um die Arbeitsfreude* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1927). See the critical view of "rationalization" in Charlie Chaplin's famous *Modern Times* (Beverly Hills, CA: United Artists, 1936).
- 4 See Daniela Liebscher, *Freude und Arbeit: Zur internationalen Freizeit- und Sozialpolitik des faschistischen Italien und des NS-Regimes* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2009); Spode, "Arbeiterurlaub," chap. 3.1 (see note 2).
- 5 Shelly Baranowski, *Strength through Joy: Consumerism and Mass Tourism in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), translates *Volksgemeinschaft* as "racial community." But the term *Rassengemeinschaft* was not used. It would not have been very popular—*Volksgemeinschaft* was basically perceived as a social program: like the Swedish "people's home" (*folkhemmet*), it promised inner peace and cohesion by transcending the Marxist concept of class struggle.
- 6 Schumann, *Nationalsozialismus*, p. 155 (see note 2).
- 7 See Wolfhard Buchholz, "Nationalsozialistische Gemeinschaft 'Kraft durch Freude': Freizeitgestaltung und Arbeiterschaft im Dritten Reich," (PhD diss., University of Munich, 1976).
- 8 "Auch Du kannst jetzt reisen!" [poster], ed. NSG KdF, Gau Thuringia, ca. 1935.
- 9 See Hasso Spode, *TraumZeitReise* (working title) (Konstanz, forthcoming), chaps. 6 and 7.1.
- 10 On KdF tourism, see Wolfhard Buchholz, *Die Nationalsozialistische Gemeinschaft* (see note 7); Spode, "Arbeiterurlaub" (see note 2); Kristin Semmens, *Seeing Hitler's Germany: Tourism in the Third Reich* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Baranowski, *Strength through Joy* (see note 5); for the figures, see Spode, "Some Quantitative Aspects of 'Kraft durch Freude' Tourism," in *European Tourism and Culture*, ed. Margarita Dritsas (Athens: Livanis Publishing, 2007), pp. 123–34.
- 11 The Washington Post, March 12, 1939, B2.
- 12 It is a myth that they were designed as troop ships; their purpose was propaganda, although they did fetch the *Condor Legion* from Spain in May 1939 and they could have served (but did not) as hospital ships. In 1945, the *Gustloff* became a dreadful metaphor for traveling into the abyss: overcrowded with fugitives, it was sunk by Soviet torpedoes and 9,000 people drowned. The fate of the *Gustloff* was put into a novel by the Nobel Prize winner Günter Grass, *Crabwalk* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2002).
- 13 See Hasso Spode and Albrecht Steinecke, "Die NSG KdF – ein Volk auf Reisen?" in *Zur Sonne, zur Freiheit! Beiträge zur Tourismusgeschichte*, ed. Hasso Spode (Berlin: Verlag für Universitäre Kommunikation, 1991), pp. 79–94, esp. pp. 79–80.
- 14 Dreßler-Andreß lost his post at Rosenbergs's instigation in 1938. Interned by the Soviets in Buchenwald in 1945, he was released after three years as a "thoroughly idealistic man" and made a career in the German Democratic Republic. The new CEO of KdF was the sociopolitically unambitious SS officer Bodo Lafferentz, former director of RWU; in 1949, he was also classified as "less burdened."

- 15 Jews were not considered *Volksgenossen*. As of at least 1935—when they were made constitutionally second-class citizens—they were excluded from the DAF and thus from KdF as well.
- 16 More than forty-five million, including Austria and other annexed territories. During the war the main task of KdF became entertaining the troops; see Buchholz, *Nationalsozialistische Gemeinschaft*, chap. IV (see note 7); Baranowski, *Strength through Joy*, chap. 6 (see note 5).
- 17 When the tourist industry recovered, KdF switched to less frequented resorts; and, in 1939, Austria, now called “Eastern March,” became the main destination: national integration superseded social integration as the major task. See Spode, “Some Quantitative Aspects,” table 5 (see note 10); on the conflicts between KdF and commercial tourism, see Spode, “Arbeiterurlaub” (see note 2), and Semmens, *Hitler’s Germany* (see note 10).
- 18 See Spode, “Ein Seebad für 20,000 Volksgenossen: Zur Grammatik und Geschichte des fordistischen Urlaubs,” in *Reisekultur in Deutschland*, ed. Peter J. Brenner (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1997), pp. 7–48; also idem, “The ‘Seaside Resort of the 20,000’: Fordism, Mass Tourism and the Third Reich,” Cddc.vt.edu, accessed January 28, 2020, www.cddc.vt.edu/digitalfordism/fordism_materials/spode.htm.
- 19 What was lacking was ten elegant restaurants reminiscent of Le Corbusier and a monumental, Neoclassicist festival hall designed not by Klotz but by Erich zu Putlitz at Hitler’s request (which violated the “unity of the ensemble,” as *Baugilde* cautiously criticized). During the war, bomb victims were quartered there. In the German Democratic Republic, the People’s Army used the compound; today, the parts of it that remained serve their original purpose as a seaside resort. See the artistic documentary by Mat Rappaport, *Touristic Intentions*, online at touristic-intentions.com.
- 20 See his seminal essay, first published already in 1958, “A Theory of Tourism,” *New German Critique* 68 (Spring-Summer 1996): pp. 117–35, esp. p. 129.
- 21 On this grammar, see Spode, “Ein Seebad,” pp. 10ff. (see note 18).
- 22 See Spode, “Some Quantitative Aspects” (see note 10); Spode and Steinecke, “Die NSG KdF” (see note 13).
- 23 By comparison, in 1937, the biggest British social tourism operator, the Workers’ Travel Association, organized 61,000 trips; this corresponded to 4 percent of KdF vacation trips and 0.6 percent of all KdF trips.
- 24 In contrast to middle-class family holidays, KdF vacationers were largely solo travelers, four-tenths of them women—prudish participants and officials again and again complained about sexual excesses; see Spode, “Arbeiterurlaub,” chap. 3.3 (see note 2).
- 25 *Deutschland-Berichte der Sopade*, cited in Spode, “Arbeiterurlaub,” pp. 314–15 (see note 2).
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 The characterization of Nazi policy as “non-Fordist” by Baranowski in *Strength through Joy* is absurd; see the harsh criticism of this book by Rüdiger Hachtmann, “Tourismusgeschichte – ein Mauerblümchen mit Zukunft,” *HSozKult.de*, accessed January 28, 2020, www.hsozkult.de/hsk/forum/2011-10-001.
- 28 Convinced that due to poor living conditions Judeo-Marxists agitators had been able to “stab” the fighting forces “in the back” in 1918, Hitler and his entourage feared a recurrence of this constellation—and, indeed, the outbreak of war was very unpopular. See Mason, *Social Policy* (see note 2).
- 29 See *Die Konsumgesellschaft in Deutschland. 1890–1990*, ed. (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2009). Ironically enough, the *Bild-Zeitung* again promotes *Volksprodukte* today.
- 30 See Spode, “Arbeiterurlaub,” chap. 2 (see note 2).
- 31 See Spode, *TraumZeitReise* (see note 9).
- 32 See Liebscher, *Freude* (see note 4). A smaller congress had taken place in Los Angeles in 1932 and Rome followed in 1938. After 1945, the fascist-Nazi-influenced formative phase of leisure time policy was thoroughly repressed—when the next congress of this kind was held in 1964, it was called the “First World Recreation Congress.”
- 33 Internationales Zentralbüro Freude und Arbeit, *Bericht über den Weltkongreß für Freizeit und Erholung* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1937), XI.