

Thomas Kühne

“CHARITY INTO CRIME: HITLER’S COMMUNITY AND THE
HOLOCAUST”

Genocide is understood as the destruction of a politically, socially or culturally defined group. Focusing on the Holocaust, my paper explores the contrary—genocide as a means to build community, not least national community. Since WWI Germans became fascinated with a myth of comradeship and visions of national belonging. Both weakened the idea of individual responsibility and strengthened a moral system that praised group honor, enforced group pressure, and provided group pleasure—shame culture (R. Benedict). From 1933 on, the Nazi regime perfected the change by infusing Germans with a racial ideology and by training Germans in absorbing the spirit of community. Hitler had explained in 1923 how that worked most efficiently: there are “two things which are capable of uniting people: common ideals and common crimes.”

What community building by criminal means implied became obvious only with the Holocaust. Genocidal warfare enabled a rather new kind of nation building at all: the nation as an imagined community (B. Anderson) based on the knowledge of being part of a huge brotherhood of crime. The Total War eventually made sure that Germans were united not only by a new national symbol—the extermination of the Jews—but actually encountered each other more than ever before—on the diminishing battle front as well as in the rubbles of the bombed cities at home. Whereas committing mass murder provided the initial basis for that kind of nation-building, suffering from mass death later spurred its development more effectively. Either way, mass death stimulated national belonging.