Introduction

When important visitors from the world of politics, business, or culture came to Nazi Germany in the years before World War II, one stop was almost always on their itinerary: a camp of the Labor Service (*Arbeitsdienst*). The Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, the Indian civil rights activist Jawaharlal Nehru, the pro-Nazi Swedish explorer Sven Hedin, a delegation of influential French businessmen, and the regent of Afghanistan – these visitors shared little beyond their interest in this institution of the Nazi state. Touring a camp was not one of the obligatory events that state guests and dignitaries were often compelled to endure, yet many visitors expressed a personal desire to see one of the remote Labor Service sites. In the end, quite a few returned with a positive impression of this Nazi institution.[1] The Labor Service, little studied and largely ignored after 1945, evidently exerted a fascination on international observers that should not be underestimated.

The Nazi regime placed high hopes in its Labor Service. It was to be an instrument for overcoming mass unemployment, the country's dependence on agricultural imports, and the physical and spiritual crisis of Germany's youth. Moreover, it was charged with creating a new work ethic, providing paramilitary training, and aiding in the construction of a new national culture (*Volkskultur*). Last, but not least, it was regarded as "the best means of making this National Socialist call for a *Volksgemeinschaft* [national community] a reality."[2]

[1] See the reports in PA/B, R 47643-47648; R 98846-98849; see also A. Schwarz, *Die Reise ins Dritte Reich: britische Augenzeugen im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland (1933–1939)* (Göttingen, 1993), 223–42.

[2] K. Hierl, *Ausgewählte Schriften und Reden*, ed. Herbert Freiherr von Stetten-Erb, 2 vols. (Munich, 1941), vol. 2, 199–205 (1935), quote p. 201. [The idea of the *Volksgemeinschaft* was a crucial piece of Nazi ideology. Robert Michael and Karin Doerr, in their indispensable *Nazi-Deutsch/Nazi German: An English Language Lexicon of the Language of the Third Reich* (Westport, 2002), defined it as follows: "The mystical unity of the blood-race of the national-German-Aryan community, which dominated all other beliefs, classes, parties, individual, and group interests. The central concept of National Socialist thought, it presented itself as the agent of national awakening, as a break with the shame of the World War I defeat, and as a chance to rebuild the German nation. Jews and others outside the racial community were excluded." Since there is no ready English equivalent to this loaded ideological term, I have retained it throughout the book. Transl.]

In pursuit of these goals, during the period from 1933 to 1945 the Labor Service regarded itself as "applied National Socialism."[3] Initially, though, it was merely the institutional continuation of a measure taken by the Weimar Republic – the Voluntary Labor Service (*Freiwilliger Arbeitsdienst*, FAD). Established by the Brüning government in the middle of 1931, it was at the time the most important job program for young, unemployed men. After the National Socialists came to power, however, they tried to distance themselves as much as possible from the FAD of the Weimar democracy.

Still, the two institutions shared a number of features that characterize labor services in general. One can define a labor service as a state-financed institution that collaborates to some extent with private agencies and institutions. It organizes young adults into camps for limited periods of time as it puts them to work on public works projects that are economically unprofitable. Most of the work consists of simple manual labor in the agricultural sector (e.g., soil improvement). Projects undertaken by a labor service are supposed to have a neutral effect on the labor market and not take jobs away from those who are regularly employed. Finally, participants in a labor service do not receive a contractual wage for their work, merely a token stipend in addition to full room and board.

In terms of its organization and projects, a labor service thus shares essential characteristics with collective job-creation programs. But only a labor service has an explicit pedagogical and educational mission. "Education" can mean a great many things in this context: vocational training, political education, or paramilitary drill. The combination of these two elements, education and work, is, in fact, the most important feature of a labor service.

Established around this dual goal of education and work, a labor service's primary mission is to help a segment of the population that is usually hardest hit by unemployment: young adults in general, but especially young men, who are often strongly overrepresented among the jobless. A labor service offers its target group an opportunity to work, thereby counteracting the demoralizing effect of idleness. The young unemployed benefit directly from these goals related to work ethic and social pedagogy. In addition, a labor service is often credited with having a community-building function for its participants, which is further reinforced by an explicit pedagogical dimension.

This last aspect had special significance in Germany, which experienced a virtual civil war in the early 1930s. The civil conflicts arose not least from the clashing ideas about social policy held by various segments of the population. A common labor service was supposed to suppress conflicts and differences by promoting a new sense of togetherness. As a result, it was not only the unemployed young people in the labor service who would benefit, but society as a whole. Thus, the mission of the organization was to allow its members to participate in society economically and socially, at least temporarily. At

[3] Ibid., vol. 2, 352–9 (1934), quote p. 356.

the same time, it improved their chances for future participation, thereby contributing to social stability. These were the goals the German Labor Service pursued before and after 1933 – though the notion of what integration into society meant was, of course, quite different in the Weimar FAD and the Nazi Labor Service.

At the heart of this study lies the Labor Service of the Nazi regime, which initially continued to bear the name of its predecessor after the Nazis had come to power. But as early as 1933, the designation "Voluntary Labor Service" was overlaid with labels such as "German Labor Service" or "National Socialist Labor Service," and the coexistence of various names was a sign of the service's tangled institutional structure. Some clarity came only with a law of June 26, 1935: thereafter, the institution was known as the Reich Labor Service (Reichsarbeitsdienst, RAD).[4]

However, the German Labor Service before and after 1933 was not a unique phenomenon. Similar institutions were set up in many countries in the wake of the global economic crisis of 1929. More than a dozen nations were experimenting with this form of labor in the early 1930s. In Europe alone the list included Switzerland, Sweden, and Great Britain. Bulgaria had a compulsory labor service as early as 1920: with the exception of those who purchased an exemption, all young men and women had to perform several months of work dedicated to the public good.[5] The German Labor Service must therefore be seen within a much larger context. In retrospect, the labor services present themselves as institutions of the interwar period that, from humble beginnings, grew in importance with the global economic crisis. At the height of the Depression, it was widely believed that this institution had considerable potential to play a crucial role in dealing with the catastrophic economic situation.

On a global scale, only one labor service equaled the German institution in importance: the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in the United States. The CCC was part of the initial flurry of initiatives that Franklin D. Roosevelt undertook in the spring of 1933 after assuming the presidency, and it developed into one of the pillars of the New Deal. This book is a comparative study of the Labor Service in Nazi Germany and the CCC in the United States. Its analysis does not stop at the deep chasm that separates the German dictatorship from the American democracy in fundamental ways.

[4] See *RGBl.* 1935, I, 769–71.

[5] For an overview, see K. Epting, ed., *Arbeitslager und freiwilliger Arbeitsdienst in Deutschland, Schweiz, Holland, Wales* (Geneva, 1933); *Arbeitsdienst in 13 Staaten. Probleme, Lösungen*, published by Schweizerische Zentralstelle für freiwilligen Arbeitsdienst (Zurich, 1937). For a more detailed discussion of Sweden, for example, see N. Götz, *Ungleiche Geschwister. Die Konstruktion von nationalsozialistischer Volksgemeinschaft und schwedischem Volksheim* (Baden-Baden, 2001). On the approaches taken in France, see H. Eckert, *Konservative Revolution in Frankreich? Die Nonkonformisten der Jeune Droite und des Ordre Nouveau in der Krise der 30er Jahre* (Munich, 2000), 74f.

Instead, it uses the labor service as an instrument to plumb anew the gulf between these two societies.

The RAD and the CCC owe their preeminence to the fact that after 1933, only Germany and the United States had state-financed and largely state-organized institutions that encompassed hundreds of thousands of citizens. At least for a time, both filled a role of outstanding importance among the multitude of measures that were enacted to combat the Great Depression. Moreover, at first glance the two institutions appear strikingly similar: in 1933, both targeted primarily young, unemployed men and had an institutional structure that drew crucial inspiration from the military. From the inception of the CCC in 1933, the minimum duration of service for volunteers in the United States was half a year, and the Nazi regime soon settled on a period of six months as well. In addition, both institutions represented instruments in the battle against youth unemployment, and both combined that goal with a pedagogical mission. Moreover, the kind of labor that was performed was essentially the same.

There were, of course, differences. For example, participation in the CCC was always voluntary, while a stint in the labor service was mandatory in Germany starting in 1935. In addition, the educational aspect was accorded far greater importance in Nazi Germany than in the United States, where the CCC more closely resembled a jobs program. These similarities and differences are easy to identify and list. What this study seeks to investigate are the deeper factors that have so far remained unexplored and unknown.

On the whole, there was a special closeness between the German Labor Service and the CCC, just as there was a whole series of similar initiatives in social, cultural, and economic policies in Nazi Germany and under the New Deal. These similarities constitute the larger background to this book. At its center stands the question of how the two countries responded to the cumulative crises of modernization concealed behind the phrase "worldwide economic crisis." The Depression after 1929 was not merely a collapse of the stock market or the economic system; it also had social and political dimensions. It was not only an economic crisis, but also a structural crisis with far-reaching consequences.

Initially, the economic crisis had the most profound impact in both countries. Germany and the United States were hit hardest by the Depression, as reflected in a wealth of economic data: at the worst point of the slump, 33.9 percent of the workforce in Germany and 24.9 percent of the workforce in the United States was unemployed – in no other country was the situation as grim.[6] Although the economic potential for overcoming the crisis was different in the two countries, the pressure to reform and the perception of the

[6] See *The Great Depression and the New Deal. Legislative Acts in their Entirety (1932–1933) and Statistical Economic Data (1926–1946)*, ed. F. E. Hosen (London, 1992), 257–68.

crisis were strikingly similar. To a certain extent, the legitimacy of capitalist democracies was fundamentally questioned on both sides of the Atlantic.

Needless to say, the political responses to the crises that emerged in Germany and the United States were different. While American democracy reformed itself, the Weimar Republic foundered and gave way to the catastrophe of the Nazi regime. Still, when Hitler became chancellor on January 30, 1933, he was confronted by essentially the same task that faced Roosevelt, who was sworn in as president of the United States on March 4th of the same year: overcoming mass unemployment and the global Depression. In an attempt to achieve that goal, both nations subsequently employed what were often strikingly similar instruments of economic and social policy; on this level, the crisis led to a limited degree of convergence. The most important cause behind these similarities was the growth of state interventionism, since both societies, in the face of a catastrophic situation, no longer counted on the power of the market to heal itself. These factors make a comparative study of the two countries an especially obvious choice.

Moreover, a comparison is also suggested by the fact that the United States was not simply any democracy. At the end of World War I, it had outpaced Great Britain as the world's leading economic power. By dint of its investments and its foreign trade policy, it had become an essential economic force in most nations in the 1920s, and especially so in Germany. What is more, until 1929 it had evolved – under the slogan of "prosperity" – into the economic and regulatory model for all national economies, only to become one of the chief victims of the Depression. Finally, the eyes of the world were upon America, because many democrats in the states of Europe and on other continents saw in Roosevelt's reform program a positive counterweight to the seductive power of the two great alternative systems, communism and fascism. "[T]he only light in the darkness was the administration of Mr. Roosevelt and the New Deal in the United States" – that was how the philosopher and historian of ideas Isaiah Berlin, looking back after World War II, remembered the times.[7]

By contrast, other opponents of the totalitarian extremes feared that the political programs of Hitler and Roosevelt were converging. They saw the use of modern mass media to promote politics, large-scale national programs, the rhetorical invocation of the exertions and sacrifices of World War I, and other developments as evidence that the United States was becoming more like the Nazi regime. This perception points not only to uncertainties about the criteria against which to assess the political developments but also to a certain openness and fluidity of the situation.

After 1945, few observers continued to see these similarities, and interest in comparisons between the Nazi regime and the New Deal generally

[7] I. Berlin, "Roosevelt through European Eyes," *Atlantic Monthly* 196 (1955): 67–71, quote p. 67.

waned. Once the full extent of the terror and annihilation Nazi Germany unleashed became known, such comparisons seemed out of place. In Western countries, they were often replaced by analyses that used the theory of totalitarianism to compare National Socialism to the Soviet Union, or the theory of fascism to compare it to fascist Italy or other states. Also implicit in these studies, however, was a comparison with democratic systems, since it was only against that background that one could understand what was specifically totalitarian or fascist. In general, the thesis of singularity itself can be articulated only through an implicit or explicit comparison – a phenomenon is unique only in relationship to something else. By contrast, studies that compared or merely juxtaposed the German and American reactions to the crisis were rare exceptions.

Interest in comparative studies revived only with the growing realization that comparisons do not necessarily amount to an apology for National Socialism, and that this method, in particular, is able to uncover both shared elements and differences. Around 1970 there were a number of approaches that could have paved the way for a systematic examination. I should mention chiefly Barrington Moore's study of the social origins of democracy and dictatorship, a 1973 collection of essays on the political and social history of the United States in the interwar period edited by Heinrich August Winkler, and Jürgen Kocka's study of the status and attitudes of white-collar workers in Germany and the United States. John Garraty outlined a general comparison of the policies of the Nazi regime and the New Deal.[8] Although these programmatic preliminary studies, which pointed to a limited degree of convergence, were widely noted in both countries, only a very small number of in-depth studies followed in their footsteps.[9]

[8] See B. Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, with a new foreword by E. Friedman and J. C. Scott (Boston, 1993); H. A. Winkler, "Die Anti-New-Deal-Bewegungen: Politik und Ideologie der Opposition gegen Präsident F. D. Roosevelt," in H. A. Winkler, ed., *Die große Krise in Amerika. Vergleichende Studien zur politischen Sozialgeschichte 1929–1939* (Göttingen, 1973), 216–35, and especially the introduction by Winkler; J. Kocka, *Angestellte zwischen Faschismus und Demokratie. Zur politischen Sozialgeschichte der Angestellten. USA 1880–1940 im internationalen Vergleich* (Göttingen, 1977); J. A. Garraty, "The New Deal, National Socialism, and the Great Depression," *American Historical Review* 78 (1973): 907–44; Garraty, *The Great Depression. An Inquiry into the Causes, Course, and Consequences of the Worldwide Depression of the Nineteen-Thirties, as Seen by Contemporaries and in the Light of History* (Garden City, 1987).

[9] See H. Puhle, *Politische Agrarbewegungen in kapitalistischen Industriegesellschaften* (Göttingen, 1975); L. J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War. German and American Propaganda, 1939–1945* (Princeton, 1978); Garraty, *Great Depression*; P. Gassert, "Der New Deal in vergleichender Perspektive. Arbeitsbeschaffungsmaßnahmen in den USA und im Dritten Reich 1932–1935," Master's thesis, University of Heidelberg, 1990; H. Ickstadt, "Versions of Public Art: Self-Representation in the Iconography of Nazi Germany and the New Deal," *American Studies in Scandinavia* 24 (1992): 1–16; L. Herbst, "Die nationalsozialistische Wirtschaftspolitik im internationalen Vergleich," in W. Benz et al., eds., *Der Nationalsozialismus. Studien zur Ideologie und Herrschaft* (Frankfurt/Main, 1993), 153–76.

While these pioneers of the comparative study of systems used this method primarily to probe into the conditional factors underlying dictatorships and democracies, this book revolves around a different question: against the backdrop of a crisis that was fundamentally similar in Germany and the United States and, even more importantly, was perceived in similar ways, how competent was the Third Reich in dealing with the Depression compared with the liberal reform democracy in America? This book is therefore a comparative examination, not of the causes of the Great Depression, but of the approaches toward overcoming it.[10]

The labor services seem particularly well suited for a comparison between the Nazi dictatorship and the New Deal. The RAD and the CCC are highly instructive institutions, since they were both situated at the crossroads of economic and social policy, of economics and ideology. Moreover, the labor services reflected to a large degree the notions of masculinity, human nature, and society that prevailed in each country. They were simultaneously instruments of mass mobilization and instruments for the self-representation of the respective political orders. Lastly, the labor services were intended to exert a socially integrative effect beyond the circle of their immediate participants.

This study is thus embedded within the context of a comparison of the societies of Germany and the United States, without aspiring to be a complete and exhaustive comparison: the overall development of the two societies was the stage on which the labor services played merely a secondary part – but one that appears in all the key scenes. Moreover, the focus is largely on the National Socialist Labor Service, while the comparison to the CCC and, secondarily, to the German precursor, the FAD, is used primarily to situate and contextualize this institution. A comparison reveals more clearly than any other approach the range of action, the options, and the alternatives to the path that the Nazi institution eventually chose. Seen in this light, the developments in Germany are stripped of the self-evident inevitability that is often imputed to them.

Given this thematic focus, the current study is based on the following questions. First, was the German Labor Service rocked by internal crises between 1933 and 1945, as scholars have maintained until now? Is it in fact true that it was never able to evolve beyond a "shadowy existence"?[11] I look at the internal efficiency of the German Labor Service and its ability

[10] In recent years more studies have been taking this kind of approach; see most recently Götz, *Ungleiche Geschwister* (Sweden and Germany); R. J. Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (London, 1995) with a multinational comparison; L. Bendavid-Val, *Propaganda & Dreams. Photographing the 1930s in the USSR and the US* (Zurich, 1999); H. Stoff, "Utopian Thinking between Producerism and Consumerism. What Distinguishes the American New Deal from the German Volksgemeinschaft?" in N. Finzsch and H. Wellenreuther, eds., *Visions of the Future in Germany and America* (Oxford, 2001), 445–67.

[11] The phrase "shadowy existence" (*Schattendasein*) used in W. Benz, "Vom freiwilligen Arbeitsdienst zur Arbeitsdienstpflicht," *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 16 (1968): 342;

to assert itself outwardly in the areas in which it was active. For the first years of the Nazi regime I analyze to what extent the service made an effective contribution to overcoming the economic crisis. By contrast, for the second half of the 1930s, I discuss its relationship to rearmament and to the war preparations that were the main goals of the regime. One question concerns the effectiveness of the Labor Service and thus its accomplishments in absolute numbers. The other question concerns its efficiency, that is, the resources used or the money expended to achieve the intended goals. As we have seen, these kinds of questions can be dealt with especially well against a comparative backdrop.

Second, to what extent was National Socialist labor policy original?[12] Which of its elements meet the general definition of labor services, which were indebted to the *Zeitgeist* of the Depression years, and which were specific to the Nazi regime? The approach of juxtaposing the RAD to its predecessor organization and to the CCC is especially well suited for this kind of comparison because, although the United States, unlike Germany, retained its democratic system, there were enough similarities between these two highly industrialized, capitalist nations during the crisis of the world economy that we can speak of a valid comparative scenario. A comparison between the FAD of the Weimar period and the American CCC is also conceivable. However, since the focus of this study is the little-studied Nazi Labor Service, the question of whether the FAD of the crisis-ridden Weimar democracy showed more similarities to Roosevelt's initiative than it did to the RAD can be explored only as a side note.

At the heart of the comparison is therefore an examination of the contribution that the labor services made to overcoming the crisis and of their success in fulfilling the other tasks they were given with respect to employment and education. The potential for solving the crisis and the competency for doing so thus represent the *tertium comparationis* of this comparative study. The German historians Otto Büsch and Peter-Christian Witt have called these two factors – potential and competency – the "trans-economic" dimension of the Depression and have described them, rightly so, as an important focus of future research: this dimension deals with the strategies that the various countries pursued in response to the Depression, strategies that were shaped by a combination of political, social, economic, and cultural-perceptual factors.[13] In concrete terms, this study examines how these two countries and societies used a labor service to address, on the one hand, the problems of youth unemployment and, in later years, war preparation and,

similarly in H. Köhler, *Arbeitsdienst in Deutschland. Pläne und Verwirklichungsformen bis zur Einführung der Arbeitsdienstpflicht im Jahre 1935* (Berlin, 1967).

[12] On the question of originality, see Herbst, "Wirtschaftspolitik," 153–76.

[13] O. Büsch and P. Witt, "Krise der Weltwirtschaft – Weltkrise von Wirtschaft und Politik," in O. Büsch and P. Witt, eds., *Internationale Beziehungen in der Weltwirtschaftskrise* (Berlin, 1994), 15–26.

on the other hand, the education of the next generation in accordance with society's guiding ideals.

The study begins in 1933, the year the Voluntary Labor Service that had been set up in Germany in 1931 was "coordinated" (*gleichgeschaltet*) by the new Nazi leaders and the Civilian Conservation Corps was founded in the United States. For Germany, the focus will be on the years prior to the outbreak of war in 1939. When it comes to the development of the RAD after that date, neither the American labor service nor any other institution of the New Deal provides us with a meaningful object of comparison. Hence, the discussion of the German Labor Service during the war period will be limited to a few brief asides. It was at this time that National Socialism came into its own in a war of aggression driven by racial and economic motivations.[14] However, the new profile of tasks that the Labor Service formulated in connection with these developments began to take shape as early as 1938. As a result, an examination focusing on the years prior to 1939 can incorporate all the essential changes the RAD underwent with regard to the war.

As for the CCC, this study ends in 1942, a year that is the functional equivalent of the turning point in the German Labor Service in 1938. Shortly after the United States entered the war, the CCC was abolished; had it not been, it too would have been forced to undergo major changes.

The comparative perspective adopted here also explains why this study is focused on the labor services for men. First, in Germany it was a far larger and more important institution than its counterpart for women. Second, the labor service for young women has been thoroughly studied by other scholars. Third, a comparison of female labor services would lack a functional equivalent because there was no comparable institution of national significance in the United States. Finally, it is not possible to include the German Labor Service for women systematically in the comparison, because the organization, education, and work of this institution were significantly different from both the American CCC and the German service for men. Incorporating the labor service for women would mean that three relatively independent objects would have to be compared. That is not possible within the framework of this study, nor would we learn much by juxtaposing the institution for women in Germany with the American CCC. Including the labor service for young women in Germany would thus blunt the edge of the comparison.

Although the years of Nazi rule represent one of the most exhaustively studied periods in history, to date no comprehensive account of the labor service for young men between 1933 and 1945 has been published. This stands

[14] See, for example, L. Herbst, *Das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945. Die Entfesselung der Gewalt: Rassismus und Krieg* (Frankfurt/Main, 1996), 9; Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–1945: Nemesis* (London, 2000), 233.

in stark contrast to the organization's self-perception after 1933, when its leader, Konstantin Hierl, called it a "pillar in the rebuilding of our Reich and our people."[15] Other contemporary testimonials and memoirs also reveal that the institution was an essential feature of everyday life and of the public face of the Nazi regime. The fact that it has, until now, been largely ignored by historians thus marks a significant gap in the scholarly literature.

There are two primary reasons for this neglect. First, the existing source material for the Labor Service is exceedingly poor. Although the RAD was relatively benign compared to the SS and other institutions, it was among the few organizations that destroyed most of its files in 1945. The documentation that has survived is almost entirely fragmentary, both at the Reich level and for its regional branches.[16] Studying the RAD therefore required the rather laborious, circuitous approach of working through the state and party organizations that collaborated with the Labor Service and through other sources. That meant consulting the files of dozens of Reich ministries, National Socialist mass organizations, associations, and regional and local bureaucracies.

Given the surviving material, one focal point of this study rests on questions of state law and finances: the extant files pertaining to the Labor Service from the Reich Interior Ministry, the Reich Finance Ministry, and the Reich Audit Office are especially numerous. In contrast, it is not possible to make definitive statements about other issues, especially with respect to the practical work of the institution. However, a research trip to the United States turned out to be a stroke of good fortune, since the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, holds documents relevant to this particular Nazi organization.[17] All in all, this study endeavors to be more than a rough sketch of the German Labor Service but less than a complete picture.

In addition, I have drawn on published material, especially the Nazi literature on the Labor Service, and on oppositional voices such as the reports issued by the exiled Social Democratic Party (SPD). Another rich source for the early years of the regime is newspapers, some of which I scanned systematically, some of which I accessed through collections of clippings compiled by the Stahlhelm, the *Arbeitswissenschaftliches Institut der Deutschen Arbeitsfront*, the *Reichslandbund*, and several other institutions. All this material was supplemented by memoirs and a few interviews of former participants.

The second reason for the absence of a monograph on the Labor Service can be summed up in a single name: Helmuth Croon. For decades, Croon,

[15] Hierl, *Ausgewählte Schriften und Reden*, 345–9 (1933), quote p. 349.
[16] See H. Croon, "Aktenhaltung und Archivgutpflege im Reichsarbeitsdienst," *Archivar* 3 (1950): cols. 175, 177.
[17] Most of the originals of the files existing on film in Record Group 242 are in German archives. However, I was able to access additional sources in the United States.