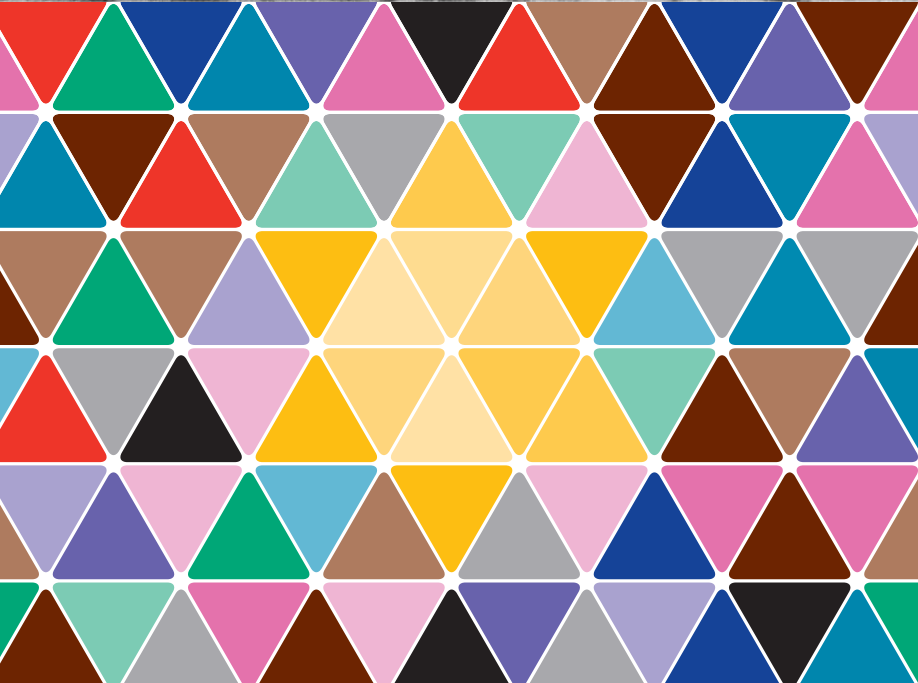


Persecution of Trade Unionists



Mosaic – Victims
of Nazi Persecution



Persecution of Trade Unionists

Trade unions developed in Europe during the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. Through collective action such as strikes, unions began to offer workers protection against the low wages and long working hours that had existed in most factories. Although many governments and employers were hostile at first, most European countries had passed laws by the early 20th century, which gave workers the right to join unions and to go on strike.

The German trade union movement was one of the largest and most powerful in the world with a membership of more than 10 million workers in 1920. Although numbers dropped, especially after the Depression began in 1929, around 7 million people still belonged to unions in the early 1930s. German unions were organised into large federations that were linked to different political parties. By far the biggest and most important was an alliance called the Free Trade Unions, which was close to the socialist Social Democratic Party (SPD); there were also Christian and liberal federations.

Although there were sometimes large strikes, the German unions generally preferred to negotiate with employers to improve wages and working conditions. They were helped by the democratic governments of the Weimar Republic which forced businesses to allow workers' representation and which listened to union's demands. A 1927 law, for example, which extended unemployment benefit, was first proposed by the unions. The unions also helped their members in less obvious ways through their own training schemes, leisure activities, housing companies and even banks.

The Nazis were officially named the National Socialist German *Workers'* Party but independent trade unions had no place in Hitler's vision for Germany. This was partly for ideological reasons: the socialist trade unions were influenced by Marxism, which the Nazis saw as a Jewish-inspired movement to divide German society. However, there were more practical factors: the unions were a barrier to the Nazi aims of bringing all areas of public life under their control and of winning over the working class to Nazism.

Attempts to destroy the unions were assisted by the attitudes of some German business leaders and conservative politicians, many of whom shared the Nazi fear of a socialist revolution. More generally, many of these people felt that the unions had become too powerful in the 1920s and looked for restrictions on or even complete abolition of union rights. This was one of several reasons why many conservatives chose to help the Nazis get into power and to join or support Hitler's government.

Hitler's appointment as German Chancellor on 30th January 1933 was followed by attacks on union members and their offices in at least 45 towns in Germany in the following two months. However, the unions rejected calls from some of their leaders for a general strike because they believed that this would give the Nazis an excuse to take even more violent action against them. Instead, they controversially decided that the best way of ensuring survival was to distance themselves publicly from the SPD and to try to cooperate with the Nazis. The Nazi leadership cynically encouraged this policy by making 1st May (the traditional workers' day) a national holiday and inviting union leaders to take part in the celebrations.

The Nazis' true intentions were revealed just a day later. On 2nd May 1933, stormtroopers violently occupied offices of the Free Trade Unions across Germany. In the city of Duisburg, four officials were beaten to death by Nazi thugs in the cellar of the trade union headquarters. Many more union leaders were arrested and held in prison or concentration camps, and were often beaten up or tortured. Although most of them were released after a few weeks or months, they continued to be monitored by the Gestapo (the Nazi secret police) and faced the risk of being rearrested. Additionally, many former union officials were placed on a blacklist which meant that they could not find work in the factories.

The Christian and liberal trade unions voluntarily submitted to Nazi control a day after the attack on the Free Trade Unions who were then abolished in June 1933. Unions were replaced by a Nazi Party organisation, the German Labour Front (DAF), which also seized all of the money and property that had belonged to the unions. All German workers were required to be members of the DAF, even those who

had never belonged to a trade union, making it the biggest organisation in Nazi Germany with more than 20 million members by the late 1930s.

The DAF did provide some benefits for its members, including training schemes and the Strength through Joy (KdF) programme which offered subsidised leisure activities such as sports and holidays to favoured workers. The working class also gained from the rapid fall in unemployment after 1933. However, the DAF's claim that it represented the workers was clearly not true: all collective bargaining (the right to negotiate wages and conditions with employers) was abolished as was the right to strike. Instead, pay and working conditions were decided by officials appointed by Hitler. As a result, workers found themselves having to work longer hours. By 1939 the average working week had increased by 20 per cent. The DAF was also used to spread Nazi propaganda and to identify workers who were hostile to Nazism.

Some former union leaders tried to encourage resistance to the Nazis but this was difficult due to surveillance and repression by the Gestapo. After the failed July Bomb Plot against Hitler in 1944, some of them were executed or sent to Dachau concentration camp. It is unknown just how many German trade unionists were arrested by the Nazis between 1933 and 1945 but the number was certainly in the thousands, not least because many were also members of the SPD which further made them Nazi targets. Although relatively few were murdered outright, many suffered prolonged imprisonment and physical maltreatment as well as loss of work and continued police harassment. After the collapse of Nazism, unions were restored with full legal rights in West Germany. They continue to play an important role in modern day Germany.



Further materials will become available through the course of this joint project.

For further information go to National Union of Teachers www.teachers.org.uk and Holocaust Educational Trust www.het.org.uk

This brochure can be used with the following items



Photo of Wilhelm Leuschner – credit: Wilhelm-Leuschner-Stiftung DA 315

Photo credit: bpk

