

4 The home front

► What was the impact of the war on the German people?

The declaration of war in September 1939 was not met with the patriotic frenzy of August 1914. Rather, the mass of people seemed to be resigned and apprehensive. However, the German strategy of *Blitzkrieg* was incredibly successful and the victories of 1939–40 gave the impression of military and economic strength. Most of the people's doubts were, therefore, dispelled. On Hitler's return journey from France back to Berlin he was met by ecstatic crowds, the images of which were cleverly recorded in the newsreels.

Living standards

Despite the economic priorities for the military build-up, the Nazi economy was not really ready for a major war in 1939 (see pages 235–7). As a result, from the earliest days, the Nazis had to prioritise and introduce the rationing of food, clothes, and basics like soap and toilet paper. Still, the German population continued to be adequately fed – even up until early 1944 – with rations about ten per cent above the minimum calorific standard. However, the diet was very boring and restricted to such staples as bread and potatoes. In the final twelve months of the war food rationing led to real shortages (and real hunger by 1945).

Not surprisingly, the trade in consumer goods struggled from the very start. In the first two years furniture and clothing sales fell by 40 and 25 per cent, respectively. Coal was reserved for industrial production, which meant that there was less available for domestic heating. In the final months of the war the situation worsened dramatically, for example:

- clothes were in very short supply
- boots and shoes were also hard to find, because of the shortage of leather, leading to an increase in the use of wooden clogs
- small luxuries, like magazines and sweets, were also stopped.

Despite every attempt to make the ration system fair for all, the high demand for the above goods meant that the black market flourished.

Workers

The demand for labour had remained critical from the mid-1930s, so there was never a shortage of work. Workers in high-demand war industries were exempt from conscription but non-essential workers had to enlist for military service.

In order to maintain productivity, the bonus and overtime payments, which had initially been stopped, were reintroduced. However, workers were not able to feel any real benefit because of the government's increases in income taxes as well as the imposition of higher taxes on beer, tobacco, cinemas and travel.

From 1942 the demand for labour was extended when Speer directed the economy to focus on fighting a 'total war' (see pages 237–8). This created pressures:

- Working hours were increased from 52 hours in 1940 to 60 hours in 1944.
- Skilled labour became in seriously short supply.
- Millions of foreign workers were mobilised to work (see page 239).
- Non-essential businesses were closed in 1943 and all workers aged to 16–65 had to register for vital work (which caused great resentment with the *Mittelstand*).

As circumstances from 1944 became more desperate there was a total ban on holidays, all bonuses were stopped, and rewards were limited to just an increase in rations.

Peasantry

With the onset of the war in 1939 pressures on the peasantry developed in many ways. Young men were increasingly conscripted to the military fronts, which caused a growing shortage of agricultural labour. This necessitated the use of cheap forced labour from peasants from eastern Europe, for example Poles and Czechs, despite this conflicting with the Nazi view that these labourers were not racially acceptable. Although the rural communities complained of hardship because of the shortage of farm machinery and animal food supplies, they were largely self-sufficient and did not suffer the same adversity and levels of bombing of those in the cities.

Women

In the early war years, the conscription of women to essential work was used sparingly. Indeed, because of the decline of consumer industries, the number of female workers actually decreased. Also, there was less incentive for women to work since families of conscripted soldiers received benefits.

Speer's aim to mobilise the economy for total war called for an increase in the conscription of women workers. However, Hitler wished to retain the traditional roles of women in order to maintain civilian morale. As a result, conscription for women aged 17–45 to work was introduced from 1943, but there were many exemptions, which limited the impact.

The Nazis were caught in the contradictions of their own ideology between the theory and practice of female employment. They were motivated by military expansionism which needed to employ women effectively, so, in the final two to three years of the Nazi state, more and more women ended up in work. Only in the last desperate twelve months of the war were women up to age of 50 conscripted, with many of them taking up auxiliary roles within the armed forces. By 1945 women comprised nearly 60 per cent of the workforce, but this only came about because of the decline in male workers.

With the unfolding of the war, greater pressure was put on women; with so many men away, they had to take on more responsibilities both in and out of the home. In the cities, long hours in arms factories made life very arduous, especially if women had to combine this with running a household and bringing up children. In the countryside, German women experienced considerable hardship meeting the continual demands of running farms on their own. The shortage of agricultural labour had created major problems from the 1930s (see page 196), but once the young men were sent away for military service, it got worse. Yet, the government could not bring itself to renounce fully its anti-feminist stance. As an official in the NSF wrote, 'It has always been our chief article of faith that a woman's place is in the home – but since the whole of Germany is our home we must serve wherever we can best do so.'

Youth

The youth of Nazi Germany in the war was a very dislocated generation. The effects of evacuation, Allied bombing and family losses all combined to take their toll on them, emotionally and socially.

One main impact of the war on young people was the decline in education and academic standards, although this had already started in the late 1930s. Now, with the conscription of teachers to military service there was a marked decline in the number and quality of teaching staff. Formal exams ceased in 1943 and by the end of 1944 any teaching in schools had all but petered out.

There was a general move in emphasis from learning to drill and discipline. With compulsory membership of the HJ in 1939 (see pages 200–2), an even stronger focus on militarism was imposed on the youth. The age of military service was reduced to seventeen in 1943 and lowered again to sixteen in 1945. In addition, increasing numbers of teenagers were used for defence work such as manning anti-aircraft batteries. For young people there was no avoiding the increasing demands of war.

The German youth became increasingly polarised between those committed to the cause and the disaffected. Many of them were repelled by the regimentation and military training of the HJ and, as the war progressed, alienation set in. For a few, this disillusionment developed into the formation of counter-groups such as the Edelweiss Pirates (see page 202), but they remained a small minority.

Interestingly, a youth leader wrote in 1942 that 'the formation of cliques, i.e. groupings of young people outside the Hitler youth ... has particularly increased during the war, to such a degree that a serious risk of the political, moral and criminal breakdown of youth must be said to exist'. The Nazi response became increasingly harsh. Various gangs were rounded up by the *Gestapo* and had their heads shaved. In some cases, young people were sent to camps – and most notoriously twelve Edelweiss Pirates were publicly hanged in Cologne.

