

Kühne, Thomas: *Belonging and Genocide. Hitler's Community, 1918-1945*. New Haven: Yale University Press 2010. ISBN: 978-0-300-12186-5; vii, 216 S.

**Rezensiert von:** Jochen Böhrer, Historisches Institut, Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena

This is an interesting essay on a difficult question: What were the bonds between the German society and the Nazi mass crimes? The question has rarely been dealt with so radically: According to Kühne, the entire German „people's community“ (Volksgemeinschaft) was not only aware of, but – both directly and indirectly – involved in these crimes (p. 3-4).

The first chapter (Craving Community – World War I and the Myth of Comradeship) demonstrates how the loss of orientation in the wake of industrialization at the end of the 19th century resulted in stratification and social tensions within the German society (for example Protestants against Catholics, socialists and workers against ruling classes). Neither the so called „Spirit of 1914“ nor the party truce (Burgfrieden) were able to bridge these gaps. Other countries such as England and France were not free of such antagonisms, but in 1918, they found themselves amongst the victors and still possessed colonies. Thus, they built up less inner tensions and had more space to discharge them. In contrast, in Germany the perception to be surrounded by enemies prevailed even in peace times. The counter-concept was the widespread myth of comradeship, born in the trenches of the First World War and shared by the political right and left. But only nationalist and rightwing organizations used this myth to create the ideal of the Volksgemeinschaft, which should include all „real“ Germans and exclude their „internal enemies“ (like for example the German Jews or Communists).

From 1933 onwards, the Nazis forged the myth of comradeship into the envisaged people's community by creating a welfare state for „Aryan“ Germans only, whilst simultaneously training them in militarized mass organizations (Chapter Two: Fabricating the Male Bond – The Racial Nation as a Training Camp). Here, the Volksgemeinschaft materialized in an undiffused way, customizing

its members to systematic breaches of norms and laws and ostracizing nonconformists that could not or did not want to „belong“.

Creating community through participation in common rituals and crimes and through exclusion of „non-Aryans“ is the common thread of the book. The methods applied became much more radical with the Second World War, when new spaces and opportunities opened to the uniformed members of the German Volksgemeinschaft in the occupied East. In chapter three (Performing Genocidal Ethics – Togetherness in Himmler's Elite) and four (Spreading Complicity – Pleasure and Qualms in the Cynical Army) we see that brutalization, excesses, and crimes were no obstacles to the program of persecution and elimination of Jews and other locals, but – by welding the brothers in crime even more together – formed one of its most important bonding elements. The German Army's notorious „criminal orders“ provided a seemingly legalistic framework for atrocities against enemy soldiers and civilians in a world where „condemning compassion for the enemy as a sin against one's own comrades was the essence of Nazi genocidal ethics“ (p. 109). But, according to Kühne, one did not necessarily have to be a fanatic Nazi to share such implementations of the war of extermination. Most German policemen and soldiers, longing for the secure haven of comradeship, gave up the individual „I“ and merged into the „We“ of their groups regardless to their convictions and beliefs. At the Eastern Front, where military comradeship and the feeling of belonging to the German master race became inseparably entangled and the Wehrmacht became „the spearhead of the Volksgemeinschaft“ (p. 126), witnessing and committing mass crimes became a daily routine. It was the awareness of this compliancy and the anticipation of its dreadful consequences for the German nation once if the war would be lost that kept up the fighting spirit amongst German soldiers until the bitter end.

After having scrutinized the milieus of former and current warriors as male members of the Volksgemeinschaft, the book extends the model of affiliation by complicity on women in the „Community of Crime“ (chapter five). Women were members of Nazi women or-

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ganizations, SS-auxiliaries in concentration camps or in services in the occupied East (Osteinsatz), worked with the Wehrmacht or police units or lived as a family side by side with their husbands in their violent environments.

Kühne's knowledgeable study provides us with valuable insights into the wheelwork of the Nazi genocide and the entanglement of large parts of the German society. Ingenious and with admirable ease, he weaves the relevant findings in anthropological, sociological, psychological and perpetrator research from authors such as himself, Karin Orth, Klaus-Michael Mallmann, Christopher Browning, Jürgen Matthäus, Harald Welzer, Omer Bartov, Martin Dean, Elizabeth Harvey, Peter Longerich and Dieter Pohl<sup>1</sup> into his fabric, combining them with descriptive examples and citations from first hand evidence such as perpetrators diaries, letters, and post-war testimonies. His great achievement is to sway the spot from crimes of heinous hatred to the reverse of the medal that enabled the perpetrators to commit them: the love of comradeship and the feeling of belonging to the German Volksgemeinschaft.

Kühne's overall approach though – linking his findings to the Volksgemeinschaft as a whole – might be challenged. As he admits himself, the women milieus he uses as examples were not small in numbers, but did not represent a majority within the female part of the German society either (pp. 143, 148, 151). And, one might ask, what about the millions of German boys, men and pensioners who were not members of veteran organizations, police or army units, or did not pass Nazi training camps? Kühne's assumption that the widespread knowledge within the German society of the mass crimes sufficed for those who had never witnessed them to feel in one boat with those who had committed them (pp. 159-161) could use some further examination for sure.

On the other hand, Kühne's elaborate interplay of belonging and exclusion in its extreme form allows him to explain convincingly large scale participation in or acceptance of war crimes – most and foremost within the German Army – as well as other forms of mass violence – like for example the participation of non-German perpetrators in the Holocaust

(p. 80-81). Without a doubt he has provided us with a valuable tool to examine other cases of political mass murder. Consequently and not surprisingly, he positions himself clearly within the trend of Anglo-Saxon research to see the Holocaust as „a genocide“ amongst others during 20th Century (p. 3).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kühne cites the respective titles, with the exception of the equally important and influential study of Götz Aly, *Hitlers Volksstaat. Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus*, Frankfurt am Main 2005.

<sup>2</sup> For example Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution. A Genocide*, Oxford 2009.