

David W Fletcher, Fall 2002

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## WILLIAM SHERIDAN ALLEN'S *THE NAZI SEIZURE OF POWER*

William Sheridan Allen's *Nazi Seizure of Power* (revised edition; New York: Franklin Watts, 1984) gives a credible and highly readable account of what the book's subtitle suggests: The Experience of a Single German Town, 1922-1945. In reality, Allen focuses his narrative on the critical years during which power shifted from the struggling socialists of the Weimar Republic to the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (the NSDAP), 1930-1935. He cursorily summarizes "Life in the Third Reich, 1935-1945" in the next-to-last chapter of the book, and he minimally covers the 1920s when he sets the stage for what is the real beginning of his story in the book's third chapter, "Enter the Nazis, Spring-Summer 1930." The unique factor of Allen's work is that he gives primary attention to a limited locality—Northeim in southern Hanover-Brunswick. In this, Allen follows the lead of two earlier studies by Ernest-August Roloff and Rudolf Heberle about the Nazification of Brunswick and Schleswig-Holstein, respectively. But Allen's microhistory narrows the focus to a single town for "the entire period of the Nazi Revolution" (XII). Interestingly, in order to protect the privacy of the townspeople, the original printing of *Nazi Seizure*, which was adapted from Allen's doctoral dissertation, falsified the *Stadt* (as "Thalburg") and most of its notable *Buergers*. But the ruse was up after the release of the book in German, as *Der Spiegel* ("Unsere kleine Stadt," 28 November 1966) revealed both the name of the town and a majority of its leaders. The revised edition, occasioned by the fiftieth anniversary of Hitler's seizure of power, maintains a measure of anonymity for persons still alive and not named in the *Spiegel* article.

In *Nazi Seizure*, Allen attempts to answer a question pertinent to historical and political processes: how could “a civilized democracy . . . be plunged into a nihilistic dictatorship”?

Allen sees the machinations of Nazis at the local level as a real key. Like a good social historian, he argues that “the actual seizure of power in the spring of 1933 occurred largely from below, though it was facilitated and made possible by Hitler’s position as Chancellor of Germany.” But he cautions against a common fallacy of such inductive reasoning, that is, mistaking a part for the whole. He realizes that, at best, the evolution of Nazi control in Northeim shows typological or “representative characteristics,” since in many ways it was not an “average German town.” Yet as a microcosm it can be closely studied or scrutinized, so he submits his work as “one concrete example of what the Nazi Revolution meant in all its varied aspects in one confined area” (XII).

From roughly 1930 through 1935, Allen details chronologically Northeim’s political meetings, elections, newspaper editorials, parades, demonstrations, town meetings, violence, and even boredom and disinterest. He pulls his data from local and state archives, newspapers, personal interviews, and various interpretive works. He even includes information from a chance find at the State Archives of Lower Saxony in Hanover: “the correspondence of the Nazi Party of Local Group Northeim, 1929-1938” (XVII). With an enormous amount of minutiae, at times *ad nauseam*, Allen highlights the “big” picture of civil disturbance, tension among Communists, Nazis, and Socialists, hatred between the *Reichsbanner* and the brown shirts or *Sturmabteilung*, the Nazi appeal to and manipulation of the general populace, the Nazi growth in numbers and power, and their eventual assumption of complete and total control of the town. Occasionally,

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Allen's use of effusive detail causes him to contradict himself (see 92-92; but he noticeably omits details about the involvement of Northeim's women and the effects of the Roehm purge). Quite often, he must relate local events to what is happening on the national level (see pages 36, 59, 97-98, 117-118, 119, 123-124, 126, 144-145, 155-156, 177, 191, 203, 251, and 272). In other words, he is forced to see events in Northeim as influenced from the top down. But this does not negate the value of *Nazi Seizure* as a complete and thorough account of the Nazi takeover of Northeim, which serves as an important type for understanding the process in Germany as a whole.

Allen clearly highlights the conflictive political situation in Germany before the Nazi takeover. But the event that gave NSDAP Local Group Northeim the momentum to assure a political majority really came from the top or the national level, namely, the appointment of Hitler to the Chancellorship. Similarly, the process of *Gleichschaltung*, which Allen describes brilliantly for the situation at Northeim, came from the central government through the *Gauleiters* to the local organizations. Allen correctly observes that this "coordination" of the community's economic, educational, political, religious, and social institutions bore a distinct look in Northeim, no doubt due to the town's peculiar circumstances and the character of its Nazi leaders. Yet the same result occurred throughout the Reich—complete Nazi control. He further shows the complete breakdown of trust in German society as a consequence of Nazi terror and rumor, and this had the effect of "atomization" on the populace or isolating individuals from their normal social intercourse and making them powerless to act, except for involvement in Nazi

directed groups and activities. In this way, the will to resist was totally minimized, and, interestingly, in Northeim the greatest aversion to Nazi domination came from within the ranks of the NSDAP itself. Once this atomization became complete, however, Allen indicates how the initial excitement wore off and gave way to merely maintaining the ritual, or “playing the games” of the Third Reich controllers, so to speak.

Allen rarely delves into psychological phenomena (but see 142-144), apart from his excellent, insightful character portraits (no doubt, based on personal interviews). But he does offer economic and social interpretations of the Nazi takeover. He insists that the depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s effectively “radicalized the town” and rendered Northeimers susceptible to the novel approaches of an energetic and persistent Nazi minority. He also attributes the victory of Nazism to “the desire on the part of Norheim’s middle class to suppress the lower class and especially its political representatives, the Social Democratic party. Nazism was the first effective instrument for this.” But this sort of interpretation is highly subjective and open to criticism, and Allen knows this, so he cautions, “Exactly why Northeimers were so bitterly opposed to the Socialists cannot be answered on the basis of a study of this town alone; the answer lies in the history and social structure of Imperial and Weimar Germany, and possibly can be given only by a social psychologist” (296). Seemingly, Allen knows well the limits of his microcosmic study for broader interpretive issues, and he stays within the bounds.

As a descriptive portrait of the “initiative, vigor, and propaganda” (295) of Norheim’s Nazi leaders, *Nazi Seizure* remains a highly readable and reliable classic. While Allen perhaps

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understates the role of the central (and regional) Nazi apparatus, he nevertheless highlights the important actions and interactions of the “small” and “unnamed” participants in Germany’s towns and hamlets. This is where “the revolution was made actual . . . in the hundreds of localities like Northeim” (296). No doubt, broader social, political, and economic histories of the Third Reich should be read along with *Nazi Seizure* to maintain a balanced perspective. But Allen’s examination of the Nazi “destruction of formal society,” whereby the people of Northeim were reduced “to unconnected social atoms,” decidedly identifies a key element in the Nazi devastation that wrested away power at the local level and subverted the entire community (298).