

„Freude und Erholung durch die KdF Fahrten“: `Strength through Joy` in Nazi Germany



Tourism was a key component of National-Socialist ideology and policy. After the party's rise to power in 1933, several social programs and leisure programs were initiated in order to consolidate the regime's position. By far the most popular among the people of Germany became the organization *Kraft durch Freude*. Inspired by the leisure organization *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* in Fascist Italy, KdF was founded as a sub department of the Nazi workers union *Deutsche Arbeitsfront*. It was intended as a multi-functional political tool, whose goals were multi-faceted: engendering political loyalty, social control and the regeneration of the German body by ways of healthy leisure activities. One of the main factors of its considerable success was its social tourism program policy: the KdF offered cheap holidays for the masses, effectively uplifting the financial barriers of a hitherto privileged leisure

commodity and democratizing travel. In its programs, the KdF offered various holidays for the German people, ranging from hiking trips to promote regional knowledge of the *Heimat* and national integration, to luxurious cruises in the Mediterranean.¹

The KdF organization sought to promote the German racial community. Non-surprising only Aryans were allowed to participate in its activities: Jews and other inferior races were excluded. This community was defined according to the 'blood and soil' ideology, in which race and settlement area was united. These ties were made visible and tangible by the hiking trips KdF offered: trips to particular areas allowed citizens to see the German culture displayed, particularly in the form of architecture, nature and the traditional regional garments of its inhabitants. Workers would learn to appreciate the past and feel a bond with their fellow Germans. In numerous brochures KdF offered idealized images of these areas, highlighting the rich cultural heritage and natural splendor of the nation and promoting by ways of the Nazi racial iconography. It sought to integrate the German nation by travel, as in the case of trips offered to the recently annexed areas like Sudetenland and Austria.

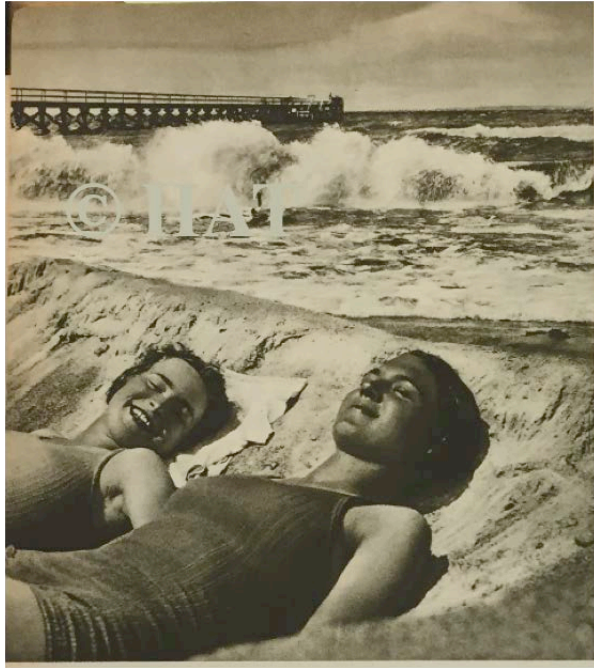
¹ See for an overview of the history of the KdF: Hasso Spode, *Wie die Deutschen "Reiseweltmeister" wurden: Eine Einführung in die Tourismusgeschichte* (Erfurt, 2003).



The advertisements of the KDF illustrate a fascinating interplay between political propaganda and modern commercial marketing techniques. Although the Nazi ideology was based on explicitly anti-materialistic premises, it sought to accommodate popular desires and consumer preferences.² This is strikingly illustrated in the various advertisements of trips to seaside resorts and spa's. By way of advertisements and choice of models, KdF sought to promote the racial purity of the German people. The several brochures show an abundance of healthy bodies, handsome faces and flawless physiques. They promote a form of leisure with a focus on physical and mental health, rather than frivolous consumption. Equally these advertisements sought to accommodate consumer preferences. The abundance of visuals depicting single women is particularly striking. On the one hand, the image of women travelling alone was employed to encourage single women, in particular the recently relatively affluent white-collar workers, to partake in KdF trips. On the other hand, such marketing strategies were employed to convince men of the possible pleasures of a vacation. In feuilletons, featuring a young man and girl, who fall in love during a ski-trip, personal pleasures and the promise of successfully engaging with the opposite sex anticipated and reflected male desires.³ More explicit in this respect was the abundant imagery of women in sensuous poses on the beach in brochures and other printed media, which all together differed not much from the despised contemporary American advertisements.

² Shelly Baranowski, 'Selling the "Racial Community": Kraft durch Freude and Consumption', in: Pamela E. Swett e.a., *Selling Modernity. Advertising in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Durham and London, 2007), 127-150. See for the broader context of consumption in the Third Reich: Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-first* (London, 2016).

³ NS-Gemeinschaft Kraft durch Freude, Gau Baden, 'Doppelte Spur', *Urlaub 1937. Jahres-Fahrtenprogramm des Amtes Reisen, Wandern und Urlaub* (Berlin, 1937).



Social Harmony

The success of KdF was considerable: at the onset of the war it had facilitated 7,5 million vacation trips, of which more than 700.000 were cruises.⁴ In addition, the organization effectuated a mental shift: tourism, hitherto a privilege of the upper and middle classes, was available for broader segments of the worker population.

The ideological figureheads of this propaganda effort were the cruises to Madeira and Norway. The fact that workers were having their sojourn on cruise ships and luxurious and fashionable spa's and seaside resorts was unprecedented, and served as a powerful illustration of the regime's success. In various media, like the periodical *Deutschland (...)*, the experiences of German workers abroad, were highlighted. According to a quasi-personal recollection of one such a trip to Madeira, the local Portuguese could not believe that the vacationers were German workers, because they were so immaculately dressed and even wore shirts with collars. Altogether, the tours functioned as a striking illustration of the success of the regime. In addition, their holiday experiences, engendered pride in the success and accomplishments of the National-Socialist regime: 'Wir, deutsche Arbeiter, haben das alles erlebt - auf Dampfern, deren Preise früher nur die Reichsten bezahlen konnten. Wir haben auch die Elendsviertel in Lissabon gesehen, die vielen Bettler an den Wegen, die Armut der Fischer. Und wir sind heimgekehrt, stolz auf unser Deutschland, stolz auch auf uns selbst, denn wir, wir sind ja Deutschland!'⁵

According to another personal recollection, such a cruise resembled a 'Paradise', a transformative experience, which 'die Seelen neu formt, die ihnen einen neuen Inhalt gibt,

⁴ For the figures see: Hasso Spode, 'Some Quantitative Aspects of »Kraft durch Freude« Tourism, 1934-1939', in: Margarita Dritsas ed., *European Tourism and Culture, History and National Perspectives* (Athens, 2007), 123-133.

⁵ 'Deutsche Arbeiter fahren in die Welt', *Deutschland*, nr. 6 (1935), 26-27.

die sich dann zu Hause ausströmen müssen, Bekenner einer neuen Zeit und einen neuen Glaubens.¹⁶

The democratization of travel, the KdF had effectuated, was eagerly highlighted by the propaganda department of the regime. The KdF-fleet was a striking illustration of the social harmony and equality among the racially pure community, the Nazi-Regime propagated: the 'Wilhelm Gustoff', a modern cruise liner the Arbeitsfront had built, was proudly designated as the world's first 'cruiser without classes.' Traditionally, cruise ships were segmented in classes which varied in luxury and reflected the social hierarchy. On the 'Gustoff' all cabins, even the crew sections, were equally luxurious and comfortable.⁷

The KdF actively promoted their organized tours as a clear break with the predominant bourgeois travel culture. In feuilletons, the figure of the snobbish bourgeois tourist and their antiquated travel habits was ridiculed in order to accentuate the new travel culture of the KdF-trips. For example, a certain Gottlieb Spießers' summer sojourn in a spa, who considered it not to be 'standesgemäß' to travel with the 'großen Herde' of KdF travelers. The feuilleton underscored that the antiquated bourgeois travel form of the Sommerfrische was no match for the pleasures and comforts offered during the KdF trips.⁸



Germany within reach with the KdF

⁶ NSG Kraft durch Freude, Gau Baden, 'Erinnerung an eine Meerfahrt', *Urlaub 1937. Jahres-Fahrtenprogramm des Amtes Reisen, Wandern und Urlaub* (Berlin, 1937).

⁷ "'Wilhelm Gustoff' Das Schiff ohne Klassen', *Urlaub 1938. Jahres-Fahrtenprogramm des Amtes Reisen, Wandern und Urlaub*.

⁸ NSG Kraft durch Freude, Gau Baden, 'Herrn Spießers Sommerfrische', *Urlaub 1937. Jahres-Fahrtenprogramm des Amtes Reisen, Wandern und Urlaub* (Berlin, 1937).

Conclusion

The reality of the holiday did however not correspond with the propaganda as disseminated by the KdF. The workers, which the regime had promised their due vacation, were invariably underrepresented during the more expensive holidays. Instead of camaraderie and the dissolution of class boundaries, the formation of cliques during the holiday was a commonplace feature of the vacation. Although the vacationers might be susceptible for the message of pride in the German racial community, utilizing the vacation to have a clear break from everyday life and to enjoy the baser pleasures of life featured more prominent on the agenda. According to inside rapports of the Gestapo, heavy drinking, especially during tours along the wine lands of the Mosel and Rhine, and having extramarital sexual liaisons featured more prominent on the agenda. As a contemporary saying had it: during the night many Germans lost a lot of 'Kraft' by too much 'Freude'. However, although not all of the goals of the KdF were realized, it played a key role in the democratization of tourism and paved the way for mass-tourism. The holiday, hitherto an upper class privilege, was definitely within reach of the masses, be it as an actual holiday or as a definite future possibility.

Suggested reading

Shelley Baranowski, *Strength through Joy: Consumerism and Mass-Consumption in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 2004).

Rudy Koshar, *German Travel Cultures* (New York, 2000).

Kristen Semmens, *Seeing Hitler's Germany: Tourism in the Third Reich* (Baingstoke, 2005).

Hasso Spode, 'Arbeiterurlaub im Dritten Reich', in: Carolina Sachse e.a. ed., *Angst, Belohnung, Zucht und Ordnung: Herrschaftsmechanismen im Nationalsozialismus* (Opladen, 1982), 275-328.

Hasso Spode, 'Fordism, Mass Tourism and the Third Reich: the Strenght through Joy Seaside Resort as an Index Fossil', *Journal of Social History* 38 (2004), 127-155.

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