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National Socialist Reichstag elections
and plebiscites 1933 – 1938,
the example Schleswig-Holstein

Elections under 20th century dictatorships

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(1. Panel: The function of elections and plebiscites in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany)

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Introduction

During the first NS election on November 12th, 1933, a voter is said to have been arrested immediately after saying “Du wählst mi nich Hitler!” (You don’t get to vote for Hitler!). The same year a Jehovah’s Witness was fired because he did not go to the elections. On top, the warden of the concentration camp *Glückstadt* complained about the bad voting result of the prisoners. He wrote to his superiors: “The result shows that about a third of all *Schutzhäftlinge* (NS prisoners) still hasn’t understood or doesn’t want to understand what this is all about today. Unfortunately, it is impossible to identify the names of the unconvincible ones.”

These statements show: there has been a contradiction between the dictators’ claimed possibility to have freedom of expression during the *Reichstag* elections or plebiscites and the exerted social control by party members and *Volksgenossen* culminating in denunciations which led to prosecution involving the *Sondergerichte* (special courts). The Nazi regime aimed at a collective statement from the *Volksgenossen* like “Unser aller “Ja” dem Führer!” (“yes” to Hitler from all of us). With that in mind, the declaration “Du wählst mi nich Hitler!” could only be interpreted as resistant behaviour which had to be persecuted. Despite all this there have been quite a few voters (male and female) in Schleswig-Holstein who spoke out against the Nazi regime either in front of or inside the polling stations by casting a dissenting vote. This part in the *Third Reich* history dealing with opposition and resistance has been very much neglected, if not overlooked.

This presentation shows my research results in dealing with the local history of Schleswig-Holstein. It will be divided into nine chapters followed by a prospect which describes the possible future of historic psephology and its accomplishments.

Starting situation

Since 1928/29 Schleswig-Holstein had been an early stronghold of the Nazi Party throughout the country. From 1930 through November 1932 they reached the highest percentage with first and second place of all constituencies in the *Reichstag* elections and *Reich* president

elections. It was not until March 1933 that Schleswig-Holstein lost its top position to five other constituencies. Against this background it was to be expected that the votes in Schleswig-Holstein lay above average for the Nazi regime. The lower than average results for the Nazi Party and Hitler in their stronghold Schleswig-Holstein indicate that in the surveyed region it was still possible – at least 1933 and 1934 – to vote against the Nazi regime.

1. Electoral enforcement rather than electoral rights

During National Socialism the lawful voting right was turned into an actual compulsory voting which was enforced by compelling people to go to the ballot.

The Nazis only continued what had already started among the parties of the Weimar Republic: the concept of voting rights meant the obligation to vote. In terms of the elections all laws and regulations of the Weimar Republic were formally carried over, meaning officially there was no obligation to vote. An exception was the simplified procedure for the plebiscites which was implemented by law. The former system of petition for a referendum and referendum had fostered abstention from voting which was not in the new leaders' interest. All measures were aimed at increasing reliability in the eyes of foreign countries and at winning their own voters by maintaining the formal regulations. Besides, the aim of high voter participation extended the time span of voting rights for the population group defined as Jewish (by 1936) and for the NS prisoners (*Schutzhäftlinge*) – the voting rights were taken by the Nazis without any legal basis in 1938.

2. NS policy and the instrumentalisation of polls

All polls were conducted on short notice and for reasons of sheer instrumentalisation. Except in 1934, for the purpose of Germany, self-inflicted crises in foreign policy were supposed to be influenced by acclamation. A strong affirmation in the polls was supposed to demonstrate (an assumed) unity of leadership and people towards Western democratic countries (*Volksgemeinschaftsideologie*).

The political instrumentalisation of all elections becomes obvious when looking at the dates of the *Reichstag* elections as well as the content of the plebiscites: November 1933 the poll was supposed to support the resignation from the League of Nations and along the way help creating an NSDAP unity parliament. The 1934 plebiscite had the purpose to justify Hitler

becoming the new *Reichspräsident*. The plebiscite in 1936 should help to alleviate the foreign affair crisis emerging after the invasion of the demilitarised Rhineland; and the annexation of Austria was also to be legitimized – especially through the local plebiscite!

In fact, the regime's actions were always last-minute and without extended planning. Since public free expression couldn't be allowed, the plebiscites were meant to show foreign countries what an overall positive political mood existed among the people. But the elections of 1936 and 1938 happened to turn this idea into its opposite. Having 97 percent consent among the eligible voters nationwide was a final result absolutely beyond belief for people outside and inside the NS discipleship.

3. Election campaign and propaganda of a *Volksgemeinschaftspartei*

Solely the National Socialist German Workers' Party was responsible for election propaganda. In hindsight their election campaign appears very modern employing all possible mass media. In the sense of a *Volksgemeinschaftspartei* the Nazis tried to get all eligible voters to say "yes" at the polls – either by free will, through social pressure or force.

In November 1933 both press and party still reacted quasi "spontaneously" to the short-dated poll but there was four weeks time left for propaganda. Whereas in August 1934 the Nazi regime made their only but very decisive mistake – shortly after the death of *Reichspräsident* Hindenburg: it did allow for too little time when choosing the poll date for the decision of merging both political offices for Hitler: President and Chancellor of the *Reich*. After only a week of national mourning there was merely one further week left for propaganda which was conducted deliberately reverent and without much uproar. But the assassination of the SA leadership happened only a month earlier and non-public criticism about merging both offices led to a defeat for Hitler which he could have prevented. The two following election campaigns 1936 and 1938 on the other hand were organised as professionally as possible in order to avoid the same mistakes.

With regard to the press the elections were increasingly characterised by the central instructions coming from Berlin. They dictated more and more precisely as to what, where and how comments were to be published in the newspaper. The press published recurring slogans and articles, reported on the local and nationwide election campaign, and went head over heels in addressing the *Fuehrer* with devotion. The public picture was dominated by

banners, propaganda installations and monumental portraits of Hitler. The election campaign closed with grand marches to central places, the broadcast of a speech by Hitler, a benediction, and the closing oath on “*Fuehrer*, people and Fatherland”.

4. Your vote for the *Fuehrer*

Since the election campaign was centered on Adolf Hitler, the regime channelled each poll as an acclamation for the *Fuehrer*. The election propaganda conventionalised Hitler as the “Messiah” for the Germans. People had expectations towards his politics which bordered on (pseudo)religion.

For all elections the Nazi Party and the government of the *Reich* placed their emphasis on the affirmation of the public for the person Adolf Hitler so that each ballot issue was conventionally turned into a debt of gratitude to be paid to him for his commitment to Germany. This way the eligible voters would no longer ballot for or against a factual issue or the National Socialist Party – they were supposed to vote either for or against the *Fuehrer* personally which built up an additional psychological inhibition threshold casting dissenting votes.

5. Deceit of voters, breach of election secrecy, voter fraud

The government of the *Reich* tried to keep up the image of free acclamations towards foreign countries but at the same time the voters’ result would be manipulated anytime in favour of the Nazi Party. A change in the counting of invalid votes 1933, a governmentally ordered voter fraud 1936 as well as the exclusion of certain eligible voter groups (1936: *Jews* and 1938: NS prisoners) show very obviously what the regime was able and willing to do.

On the outside the government and the administration of the *Reich* tried to paint a picture of conducting constitutional elections whereas in reality these elections were defined by the Nazi Party and its divisions and alliances. There was a so-called “ballot towing service” from the SA which visited eligible voters at home and forced them to go to the ballot. Up until 1936 the Party occupied all the positions in the polling stations and the count of votes took place behind closed doors supervised by the NSDAP. This way they could not only commit voter fraud but were able to identify and persecute possible election boycotters by getting hold of electoral registers and ballot lists. The very high percentage of turnout during National

Socialism is rooted in the fear of denunciation if one was a non-voting “traitor of his country” and in the circulating rumours about the re-identification of the non-voters through the registers.

The social control in front of and inside the polling stations increased from one acclamation to the next and added more pressure to vote for the Party. 1936 at the latest is the year where one could no longer speak about electoral freedom.

6. Voting results as an indicator demonstrating the integration into the *Volksgemeinschaft*

Dissenting votes were quickly declining during National Socialism due to a mixture of different reasons: enhanced social control, fear of possible reprisals, successful (Nazi) election propaganda, growing content of the masses due to the economic recovery (resulting from military armament) and the integrational force of the NS-*Volksgemeinschaft*.

NS foreign policy was very popular beyond social and political borders. Part of the left-wing working class turned to National Socialism which in combination with the aforementioned reasons for declining votes is an ample explanation for the success of the Nazis during elections. The majority of the *Volksgenossen* looked at the NS-*Volksgemeinschaft* as a community of success which reflects in the polls. Especially the nationalistic conservative voters appreciated NS foreign policy and only partially disagreed. Voters’ abstention or casting invalid ballots does not in general prove antagonism against the NS regime. It rather shows their discontent with regard to particulars of the Nazis’ political course.

7. Voting results as an indicator for rejection of the NS regime

Due to the way voting results were realised in National Socialism, they do not allow for an exact quantification of consent. On the contrary, they should be rated as a minimum of expressible dissent that the leadership had to tolerate.

Both a voting analysis based on the results at the polling stations as well as communities and the evaluation of written sources show: reasons for a rejection at the ballot arose from steady ideologies, social networks, and the existence of an anti-environment. There were the followers of the *KPD* (Communist Party of Germany), distinctly fewer at the *SPD* (Social Democratic Party of Germany), the very small catholic minority and particular to the region

of Schleswig-Holstein the Danish minority who constitute the dissenting votes and abstentions in this federal state.

Qualitatively speaking it was the former Communist voting milieu and to a lesser degree the Social Democratic milieu within the banned political working-class movement which increased the possibility for Nazi antagonists to vote with “no” at the polls. In doing so, eligible voters used all methods thinkable: boycott of elections, dissenting votes or producing invalid ballots.

8. Eligible voters and their options for conduct

Eligible voters who chose a dissenting vote at NS elections during exposed themselves to a high personal risk. Their actions were political, public and anti-NS regime. This was looked upon as severe dissent.

Up until 1933 and 1934 the possible range of options among eligible voters still existed in such a way that – given their willingness to accept possible negative consequences – the courageous among them were able to enunciate their objection at the elections.

In contrast to the Weimar Republic, during NS dictatorship it took a lot of personal strength to say “no” at acclamations or cast an invalid ballot – not knowing whether dissenting votes would be retraced and the election secrecy be breached. This does not inevitably mean that lack of courageousness should be rated as consent with the NS regime. By being published in the newspapers, dissenting votes set a distinct example and were perceived in that way by the Nazis as could be seen in how they used their propaganda. It took quite the same amount of personal courage not to appear at the ballot at all despite the fact that the “ballot towing service” of the SA was present or to avoid local social control through making out a ballot. Organised opposition against the Nazi elections was mainly found among the illegal *KPD* and to a lesser degree among the *SPD*. Part of the Danish minority and Jehovah’s Witnesses called for abstention from voting and also the followers of the anti-Semitic *Tannenbergbund* voiced their discontent at the elections. On a personal level there were several individual voters who used the polls as their opportunity to express their dissent without being traceable to a certain political group.

9. Elections in the NS government as a proof for the consent dictatorship

(Zustimmungsdiktatur)

Voters' behaviour indicates that the *Zustimmungsdiktatur* (Frank Bajohr) should be rated in the sense of a "consent to success" of the NS regime. It reflects the milieu-spanning national consensus. Against the background of difficult economic conditions this consensus made it possible for the National Socialists - even among former left-wing strongholds - to win the majority of eligible voters or at least to keep them from voting against them.

The NS policy corresponded with the needs of the majority of the German population for a perverted form of peace, order and prosperity. This is confirmed by the fact that there occurred considerably higher amounts of dissenting votes in certain Schleswig-Holstein ballots than elsewhere. Furthermore, there have been a set of supporting documents proving that courageous voters have always found ways to express their reluctance with the dictatorship which means vice versa that high consenting results at the ballot cannot be totally ascribed to manipulations and fraud.

At least on the eve of Second World War the voting population of Schleswig-Holstein and the German *Reich* had collectively aligned with Adolf Hitler and the government. This includes an indirect responsibility of the "Guided" for the actions of their *Fuehrer* who could ultimately feel legitimised by the people with everything he did.

What is left to do?

On the one hand one could compare the results for Schleswig-Holstein with those of other structurally alike regions. On the other hand the so-called hibernation thesis could be inspected. It contains the question whether attitudes (especially within former *SPD* and *KPD* circles) have continued beyond National Socialism. Were these attitudes able to "hibernate" during the dictatorship and turn out as consolidated social milieus after 12 years? For research of that kind one would need an investigation area where voting results from 1932 to 1938 as well as the first democratic post-war elections are available. On top (!) it is necessary that not too many movements of population occurred. If in that case strong continuities of voters' behaviour were apparent, it would indicate that a hibernation of attitudes beyond National Socialism had taken place.

This undertaking cannot be realised for Schleswig-Holstein due to the fact that finding such an area within the federal state is difficult: the huge immigration of refugees and displaced persons after 1945 and the bad transmission of voting results are making it almost impossible. Most likely other investigation areas would have to be discovered.

About the author

Frank Omland, born in 1976, graduate social education worker, native of Schleswig-Holstein, living in Hamburg, working at a counselling centre. Since 1988 dedicated to the research and communication of the history of the Weimar Republic as well as National Socialism in Kiel and Hamburg. Since 1991 an active member of a research group investigating National Socialism in Schleswig-Holstein (www.akens.org), since 2003 part of the steering committee. Research focus: elections and plebiscites 1919 – 1938. Contact: omland@freenet.de Tel. 040-85 65 28.