Suicide in Nazi Germany
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Christian Goeschel offers a unique analysis of how ordinary Germans responded to the political, social and economic crises of Nazism by comparing suicide rates across Germany from the birth of the Weimar Republic with Imperial Germany’s defeat in 1918 to the downfall of Nazi dictatorship in 1945. Goeschel borrows Durkheim’s thesis that suicide is often the result of anomie, or social instability that results from the dissolution of social structures, to give suicide an historical context in which a person’s suicidal behavior is reflective of social, political and economic circumstances. Additionally, Goeschel attempts to reconstruct contemporary interpretations of suicide, as well as demonstrate how suicide offers introspection into changing ideals of German masculinity through one of the most tumultuous periods of modern history.

Suicide rates rose considerably during the Weimar Republic, and popular newspaper coverage of these suicides reflects a general interest in and awareness of this phenomenon. Contemporaries often cited the Versailles Treaty, economic depression, republicanism, military defeat and increasing secularization as primary motivating factors for the rise of suicides across Germany. Goeschel argues that many suicides during the Weimar years were most likely due to high unemployment rates and economic misery rather than a perceived decline of morality, feminism or republicanism as often argued by religious groups and propagated by mass media. Nevertheless, the popular public perceptions that suicides were motivated by the policies of the Weimar Republic contributed to the government’s waning public support. While the nexus of suicide and unemployment among men may have been exaggerated, it became “the most radical expression of the failure of man’s traditional role as pater familias amidst the socio-economic deprivation of the late Weimar years” (26).

Not surprisingly, Nazi propagandists capitalized on the rise in suicides and popular perceptions of those suicides by conflating (and exaggerating) suicides with German defeat, the Versailles Treaty and Weimar economic policies. National Socialist ideology condemned suicide among eugenically fit Germans while encouraging suicides among persons perceived as racially inferior or “incurably ill” (64). Despite economic recovery between 1933 and 1939, suicide levels did not drastically decline as Nazi propaganda suggested. Goeschel argues that after the Reichstag Fire Decree, suicides and politics were often intertwined, as suicide “was often the last resort for keeping one’s dignity amidst Nazi torture and arrest” (75). Although some murders by the SS were reported as suicides in an effort to avoid judicial investigations in the early years of the Third Reich, many actual suicides occurred within concentration camps and among political opponents. After the Anschluss in March 1938, anti-Semitic violence reached unprecedented levels throughout the Reich, and a surge of Jewish suicides followed. Suicide among Jews was both a final attempt to retain self-assertion, and an act of hopelessness and despair. Once deportations and the systematic mass murder of Jews began, however, SS guards severely punished individuals attempting to commit suicide as it “was an expression of self-determination” that “ran counter to the Nazi total claim over the lives and bodies of the inmates” (115).

Goeschel’s most interesting argument is that the wartime suicides among non-Jewish Germans discounts the model of an overwhelmingly collaborative population with the Nazi
regime. Instead, Goeschel suggests that examining individual suicides offers a stark reminder of the regime’s apparatus of terror, as the legal system became an instrument of extermination. Although Hitler and the Nazis enjoyed massive popular support in the early stages of the war, Stalingrad, Allied bombings, and increasing privations as the country mobilized for total war gave rise to new waves of suicides as Germany’s loss became inevitable. Resistance to the regime was ruthlessly repressed. As late as spring 1945, Hitler, and particularly Goebbels, encouraged the use of suicide missions, which they viewed as an honorable suicide, as these deaths were acts of heroic self-sacrifice in their efforts to destroy completely their racial and political enemies. Many Nazi leaders used this notion of heroic self-sacrifice when they themselves chose suicide. More generally, suicide levels in Berlin peaked in April 1945 as Berliners faced a Russian invasion and imminent defeat.

Goeschel fails to provide a comparative analysis of suicides in other European countries during similar time frames (particularly, during the Depression, those countries under fascist or dictatorial rule and among other belligerent nations), which would strengthen his argument that there was an unusually high number of suicides in Germany throughout these periods. Additionally, Goeschel’s claim that suicide notes serve “as the final communication between suicide and society” and can, therefore, help “us to study the circumstances under which people took their lives” is not supported by psychological literature (7). Nevertheless, his examination of national suicide statistics (available until 1939), regional suicide statistics, media coverage, police investigations and an array of personal suicide notes constructs a unique framework for social history. Suicides are often interpreted as deeply private and individual acts, but his adoption of Durkheim’s interpretation of suicide as a result of anomie lends these deaths social and political significance. He does not suggest, of course, that all suicides in Weimar or Nazi Germany were the result of political and social dissatisfaction, economic hardships, or later, political oppression. Yet, placing suicides within an historical context, which Goeschel sensitively and eloquently accomplishes, can offer a broader understanding of the social and political realities affecting the German population during this time period, thus making Suicide in Nazi Germany a significant contribution to the sometimes contentious historiographical debates in modern German history.