

READING

Spying on Family and Friends

As the Nazis worked to consolidate their power and build a cohesive “national community,” suppression of dissent played a key role. In 1933, the Nazis issued a decree that required Germans to turn in anyone who spoke against the party, its leaders, or the government. That decree, “For the Defense against Malicious Attacks against the Government,” stated:

1. Whoever purposely makes or circulates a statement of a factual nature which is untrue or grossly exaggerated or which may seriously harm the welfare of the Reich or of a state, or the reputation of the National government or of a state government or of parties or organizations supporting these governments, is to be punished, provided that no more severe punishment is decreed in other regulations, with imprisonment of up to two years and, if he makes or spreads the statement publicly, with imprisonment of not less than three months.
2. If serious damage to the Reich or a state has resulted from this deed, penal servitude may be imposed.
3. Whoever commits an act through negligence will be punished with imprisonment of up to three months, or by a fine.¹

To enforce the decree, the Nazis set up special courts to try people who were accused of “malicious attacks.” In December 1934, the government replaced the decree with the “Law against Malicious Attacks on State and Party,” adding a clause that criminalized “malicious, rabble-rousing remarks or those indicating a base mentality” against the Nazi Party or high-ranking government or party officials.

Alfons Heck, then a member of the Hitler Youth, recalled the effects of the law. In 1938, he was living with his grandparents when his father came to visit.

In retrospect, I think it was the last time my father railed against the regime in front of me. . . . He wasn’t much of a drinker, but when he had a few too many, he had a tendency to shout down everyone else, not a small feat among the men of my family. “You mark my

¹ Quoted in Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919–1945*, vol. 1 (New York: Schocken, 1984), 478.

words, Mother," he yelled, "that goddamned Austrian housepainter is going to kill us all before he's through conquering the world." And then his baleful eye fell on me. "They are going to bury you in this goddamned monkey suit [his Hitler Youth uniform], my boy," he chuckled, but that was too much for my grandmother.

"Why don't you leave him alone, *Du dummer Narr* [you stupid fool]," she said sharply, "and watch your mouth; you want to end up in the *KZ* [the German abbreviation for *concentration camp*]?"

He laughed bitterly and added: "So, it has come that far already, your own son turning you in?" My grandmother told me to leave the kitchen, but the last thing I heard was my father's sarcastic voice. "Are you people all blind? This thing with the Jews is just the beginning."

In thinking about the incident, Heck wrote:

My grandmother had every reason to warn him about talking loosely, for his classification as "politically unreliable" surely would have sent him to a *KZ* had anyone reported his remarks, even within the family. But there were also two of our farmhands at the table, and Hans, the younger of the two, had recently announced his decision to apply for party membership. He had ambitions to attend an agricultural school and knew full well [that] party membership would help him get in. Perhaps luckily for my father, Hans was getting pretty drunk himself, although I doubt he would have reported my father had he been stone sober. Despite the fact that I later attained a high rank in the Hitler Youth, which required me to be especially vigilant, I never considered my father to be dangerous to our new order. I merely thought him a fool who had long since been left behind.²

² Alfons Heck, *A Child of Hitler: Germany in the Days When God Wore a Swastika* (Renaissance House Publishers, 2001), 29–30.

Connection Questions

1. What kinds of actions did the “Malicious Attacks” law forbid? What policies did the government put in place to enforce the law? Why do you think the government made this law?
2. How does Alfons Heck describe the effect of the law on his family? To what extent did the law succeed in changing their behavior? To what extent did it fail?
3. What do you think the overall impact of the law might have been in German society as a whole?
4. What are some examples of political criticism or dissent that you have seen? What were the effects? What were the consequences?