

# Navigating through Discourses of Belonging: Letters of Complaint and Request during National Socialism

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## ABSTRACT

*National Socialism, one could argue, was all about belonging: belonging to the 'Volk' or the 'Volksgemeinschaft', belonging to the 'Aryan' or 'Non-Aryan race', belonging to the National Socialist 'movement', and so on. These categories of belonging worked both inclusionary and exclusionary and they were constituted, proclaimed and enacted to a great part through language. What is more, they had to be performed through communicative acts. For the normative side of National Socialist propaganda and legislation, this seems rather obvious and one-directional. On the side of the general population, however, this entailed a mixture of communicative need to position oneself vis-à-vis National Socialism (mostly in affirmative ways), but also the urge to do so willingly. When we look at the language use of 'ordinary people' in different communicative situations and texts during National Socialism, we have to focus on these dimensions of discursive collusion, co-constitution and appropriation. People during National Socialism, such is our hypothesis, navigated through discourses of belonging and by that made them real and effective. Besides diaries, war letters and autobiographical writings, one way to grasp this phenomenon is to analyse petitions, i.e., letters of complaint and request sent in large numbers by 'ordinary people' to public authorities of the party and the state. As I will show by some examples, letter-writers tried to inscribe themselves within (what they took for) National Socialist discourses of belonging in order to legitimate their claims. By doing so, they co-constituted and co-created the discursive realm of National Socialism.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS A HISTORY OF LANGUAGE USE UNDER NATIONAL SOCIALISM

How and in which contexts did ‹ordinary Germans›<sup>1</sup> use discursive elements of National Socialist ideology? In which situations was the linguistic display of ideological conformity and the emphasis on belonging to society moulded according to National Socialist criteria deemed to be important and advisable by citizens living in the Third Reich? And what does this use tell us about the spread and the subjective value of ‹speaking Nazi›? Questions like this<sup>2</sup> are posed by recent historiographical approaches which try to go beyond the – albeit still important and productive – analysis of rhetorical, stylistic and lexicographical peculiarities of *the* National Socialist language, often identified on the level of speeches and writings of the foremost representatives of National Socialism, i.e., Goebbels and Hitler. Without a doubt, studies of this kind have since the early works of Victor Klemperer<sup>3</sup>, Dolf Sternberger, Gerhard Storz and Wilhelm E. Süskind<sup>4</sup> as well as Eugen Seidel and Ingeborg Seidel-Slotty<sup>5</sup> provided important insights into the linguistic dimensions of the National Socialist regime<sup>6</sup>. However, there has been a general tendency to view the subject as quite closed and monolithic: *the* National Socialist language, with original vocabulary and specific meaning, installed by National Socialist propaganda and somehow imposed on the general population. Already in Klemperer, for example, we find the strong metaphor of poison that was somehow secretly infused to the people<sup>7</sup>.

Since the 1970s the view of *the* National Socialist language has for that reason been challenged, first within the discipline of linguistics itself<sup>8</sup>. Scholars such as

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‹ordinary Germans› is used here to describe those parts of the population during the Third Reich that were officially part of the German ‹people's community› as defined by the racist categories of National Socialism and that were not part of the top ranks of the National Socialist apparatus.

<sup>2</sup> See also W. Steinmetz, *New Perspectives on the Study of Language and Power in the Short Twentieth Century*, in *Political Languages in the Age of the Extremes*, W. Steinmetz (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 46f.

<sup>3</sup> V. Klemperer, *LTI. Notizbuch eines Philologen*, Stuttgart, Reclam, 2018 [1947].

<sup>4</sup> D. Sternberger, Dolf, G. Storz and W.E. Süskind, *Aus dem Wörterbuch des Unmenschen*, Hamburg, Claassen. 1957.

<sup>5</sup> E. Seidel, I. Seidel-Slotty, *Sprachwandel im Dritten Reich. Eine kritische Untersuchung faschistischer Einflüsse*, Halle an der Saale, Sprache und Literatur, 1961.

<sup>6</sup> See for example the recent work of C. Braun, *Nationalsozialistischer Sprachstil. Theoretischer Zugang und praktische Analysen auf der Grundlage einer pragmatisch-textlinguistisch orientierten Stilistik*, Heidelberg, Winter, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> V. Klemperer, *LTI. Notizbuch eines Philologen*, p. 26 and 74.

<sup>8</sup> For a good overview, see M. Marek, ‹Wer deutsch spricht, wird nicht verstanden!› *Der wissenschaftliche Diskurs über das Verhältnis von Sprache und Politik im Nationalsozialismus – ein Forschungsbericht*, in: ‹Archiv für Sozialgeschichte› 30: 1990, pp. 454-492.

Peter von Polenz<sup>9</sup>, Gerhard Voigt<sup>10</sup>, Wolfgang Werner Sauer<sup>11</sup> and Utz Maas<sup>12</sup> have pointed to the continuities of discourses linking the 1930s and 1940s to the preceding period which contradicted the proclaimed novelty and originality of National Socialist language. In addition, it has been criticized that many «classical» accounts tended to overemphasize the persuasive power of language on the one hand as well as the power Nazi officials possessed over language use on the other hand. Utz Maas therefore proposed to speak of «language relations» within National Socialism instead of a «language of National Socialism» or «National Socialist language». In his own work, he shed light on the polyphonic nature of official National Socialist texts which could transport different messages, threats of exclusion as well as offers of inclusion, for different audiences at the same time. Especially the identificatory potential was stressed by him in what he called a «ferry function», meaning that many National Socialist texts used elements of traditional (conservative, socialist, nationalist, youth movement) discourses in order to «transport» the addressees to the National Socialist communicative space<sup>13</sup>.

In the context of the linguistic turn and a stronger focus on the history of the everyday life of «ordinary people» within historiography in general, historical research has only really started considering the linguistic dimensions of National Socialism from the 1990s onward<sup>14</sup>. Since then, it has added important modifications and differentiations to the subject:

Firstly, several contributions have shown that National Socialist ideology (and the language connected with it) was less closed, unambiguous and all-encompassing than often portrayed<sup>15</sup>. While central concepts or discursive elements such as «*Volk*», «*Volksgemeinschaft*», «*Führer*» or «*Rasse*» served of course as strong

<sup>9</sup> P. von Polenz (ed.), *Geschichte der deutschen Sprache*, 7, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1970.

<sup>10</sup> G. Voigt, *Bericht vom Ende der «Sprache des Nationalsozialismus»*, in: «Diskussion Deutsch» 5, 1974, pp. 445-464.

<sup>11</sup> W. W. Sauer, *Der Sprachgebrauch von Nationalsozialisten vor 1933*, Hamburg, Buske, 1978.

<sup>12</sup> U. Maas, «*Als der Geist der Gemeinschaft eine Sprache fand*». *Sprache im Nationalsozialismus. Versuch einer historischen Argumentationsanalyse*, Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1984.

<sup>13</sup> See G. Bauer, *Sprache und Sprachlosigkeit im «Dritten Reich»*, 2. rev. ed. Köln, Bund, 1990, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed overview see S. Scholl, *Für eine Sprach- und Kommunikationsgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus. Ein programmatischer Forschungsüberblick*, in: «Archiv für Sozialgeschichte», 59, 2019, pp. 409-444.

<sup>15</sup> L. Raphael, «*Pluralities of National Socialist Ideologies. New Perspectives on the Production and Diffusion of National Socialist Weltanschauung*», in *Visions of Community. Social Engineering and Private Lives*, Martina Steber and Bernhard Gotto (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 73-86; M. Steber, *Regions and National Socialist Ideology: Reflections on Contained Plurality*, in *Heimat, Region, and Empire. Spatial Identities under National Socialism*, Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann and Maiken Umbach (ed.), Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, pp. 25-42; C. C. Szejnmann, *National Socialist Ideology*, in *A Companion to Nazi Germany*, Shelley Baranowski, A. Nolzen and C. C. W. Szejnmann (ed.), Hoboken/Chichester, Wiley Blackwell, 2018.

reference points, their meaning was not fix, but it was debated, sometimes heavily, and filled with diverging semantic ascriptions. Thomas Pegelow Kaplan<sup>16</sup>, for instance, has shown that even in the main National Socialist journal *Der Völkische Beobachter* the category of ‹race› in relation to ‹Jewishness› was all but clear. Rather, the denominations oscillated between racial and religious attributions for a long time. As late as in November 1938, the term ‹German Jew› could be found in an editorial article written by Goebbels<sup>17</sup>.

Secondly, new (groups of) actors and speakers were taken into consideration besides leading politicians or ideologists. As Geraldine Horan has aptly formulated:

Ironically, despite apparent homogeneity due to regulation of public utterances, the speech community under National Socialism was in fact fragmented, consisting of a variety of groups and niches, with loyal, compliant, semi-compliant/-oppositional and oppositional discourses co-existing, even employed by the same individual or community of practice<sup>18</sup>.

In her study *Mothers, Warriors, Guardians of the Soul*, she shows how female supporters of National Socialism developed a specific group discourse through processes of «semantic inheritance», rather than through patriarchal persuasion or manipulation, thus taking the actors serious as co-producers and -performers of discourses<sup>19</sup>. Oppositional speech acts and group discourses have also recently been the subject of investigation<sup>20</sup>. Other important studies have attempted to enquire the language of the victims of National Socialism, both within the ghettos as well as the concentration camps<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> K. T. Pegelow, *The Language of Nazi Genocide. Linguistic Violence and the Struggle of Germans of Jewish Ancestry*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Ivi, p. 127f.

<sup>18</sup> G. Horan, «*Er zog sich die ‹neue Sprache› des ‹Dritten Reiches› über wie ein Kleidungsstück: Communities of Practice and Performativity in National Socialist Discourse*», in: “Linguistik Online” 30 (1): Accessed May 9, 2022, 2007, p. 61.

<sup>19</sup> G. Horan, *Mothers, Warriors, Guardians of the Soul: Female Discourse in National Socialism 1924-1934*, Berlin/New York, De Gruyter, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> I. Richter, *Faced with Death: Gestapo Interrogations and Clemency Pleas in High Treason Trials by the National Socialist Volksgerichtshof*, in: *Political Languages in the Age of the Extremes*, W. Steinmetz (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 151-167; B. M. Schuster, *Heterogene Widerstandskulturen zwischen 1933 und 1945 und ihre sprachlichen Praktiken*, in *Sprachliche Sozialgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus*, H. Kämper and B. M. Schuster (ed.), 27-49, Bremen, Hempfen; F. Markewitz, *Das sprachliche Widerstehen Hermann Kaisers. Zur linguistischen Aufarbeitung des Widerstands im Nationalsozialismus*, in “Sprachwissenschaft” 43, 2018, pp. 425-453.

<sup>21</sup> See for example J. Riecke, *Schreiben im Ghetto. Annäherungen an den Sprachgebrauch der Opfer des Nationalsozialismus*, in: “Sprache und Literatur” 97, 2006, pp. 82-96; A. Garbarini, *Numbered Days. Diaries and the Holocaust*. New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2006; A. Löw, *Tagebücher aus dem Ghetto Litzmannstadt: Autoren, Themen, Funktionen*, in «*Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten*». *Tagebücher und persönliche Zeugnisse aus der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus und des Holocaust*, F. Bajohr and S. Steinbacher (ed.),

Thirdly, and in line with the former two aspects, new sources have been detected that are more appropriate to evaluate the question of how ‹ordinary people› wrote and talked during National Socialism and to what degree they used and made sense of a specific vocabulary or argumentative patterns. Seminal research has been done on war letters, describing how soldiers (and their relatives on the ‹home front›) used linguistic elements of nationalism, racism, anti-Semitism, but also more subcutaneous cultural matrices such as the idea of ‹cleanliness› in order to explain the war and to construct themselves within it<sup>22</sup>. Another important group of sources that has recently gained attention are autobiographical writings, namely in the form of diaries<sup>23</sup>. Here, Janosch Steuwer<sup>24</sup> has provided us with a thorough account of the way ‹ordinary Germans› made sense of their time and their own relationship to it, even if it does not go deep into a more specific linguistic analysis. But he too stresses the aspect of co-constitution of meaning: ‹The abundance of ideological demands and concepts required an active role of the individual contemporaries: Amongst a wide spectrum of translations that transferred National Socialist worldviews in models of every day conduct, they had to choose and refer them to their own living›<sup>25</sup>.

From 2018 to 2021 a joint research group at the Institute for German Language in Mannheim and at the university of Paderborn carried out further research in this field with a specific focus on specific text types, key concepts and communicative acts used or performed by different actors during National Socialism<sup>26</sup>. Thus, in line with the recent historiography on National Socialism that looks for the heterogenous and often ambiguous patterns of behaviour, individual interpretations and appropriations of the social and political world during National Socialism, the project assumed that the members of the ‹people's community› were far more than passive recipients of National Socialist discourses, but

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Göttingen, Wallstein, 2015; D. Schröder, ‹Niemand ist fähig das alles in Worten auszudrücken›. *Tagebuchschriften in nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern 1939-1945*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> K. Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten – nationalsozialistischer Krieg? Kriegserlebnis – Kriegserfahrung, 1939-1945*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 1998; M. Humberg, *Das Gesicht des Krieges. Feldpostbriefe von Wehrmachtssoldaten aus der Sowjetunion 1941-1944*. Opladen/Wiesbaden, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998; S. O. Müller, *Deutsche Soldaten und ihre Feinde. Nationalismus an Front und Heimatfront im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, München, S. Fischer, 2007; M. Kipp, "Großreinemachen im Osten". Feindbilder in deutschen Feldpostbriefen im Zweiten Weltkrieg, Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> F. Bajohr, S. Steinbacher (ed.), ‹Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten›. *Tagebücher und persönliche Zeugnisse aus der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus und des Holocaust*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2015; J. Steuwer, G. Rüdiger (ed.), *Selbstreflexionen und Weltdeutungen. Tagebücher in der Geschichte und der Geschichtsschreibung des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> J. Steuwer, ‹Ein Drittes Reich, wie ich es auffasse›. *Politik, Gesellschaft und privates Leben in Tagebüchern 1933-1939*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Ivi, p. 214 [translation by myself].

<sup>26</sup> H. Kämper, *Sprachliche Sozialgeschichte 1933 bis 1945 – ein Projektkonzept*, in: "Sprachliche Sozialgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus", H. Kämper, B. M. Schuster (ed.), Bremen, Hempen, 2018, pp. 9-25.

that they individually interpreted, co-constituted and/or contradicted them. As Maiken Umbach has phrased it, besides asking what National Socialism did with people, it has to be asked what people did with National Socialism<sup>27</sup>. What comes to the foreground, then, are layers of discursive participation and collusion, of active individual endeavours to position oneself to and within National Socialism. Especially for the vast majority of the population that was not stigmatized and persecuted for reasons of 'race' or political affiliation, it has to be taken into account that the «use and effectiveness» of National Socialist discourse «is best measured not only in terms of persuasiveness and manipulation, but rather in the population's willingness and ability to use it»<sup>28</sup>. This use could be voluntary, strategic or coerced and it was certainly marked by strong asymmetries of power. Yet, it discloses National Socialist discourses as «collective efforts»<sup>29</sup>.

It is in line with this perspective that we aim at looking at yet another type of sources in the following, that is petitions, or more concretely: letters of request and complaint sent by ordinary people to state and party authorities on the local, regional and state level.

## 2. PETITIONS DURING NATIONAL SOCIALISM: SELF-POSITIONING AND CLAIMS OF BELONGING

While historical research on other periods has extensively dealt with these instances of communication between parts of the population and the authorities<sup>30</sup>, they have only occasionally been taken into consideration by the historiography on National Socialism<sup>31</sup>. This is all the more deplorable, because these sources

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<sup>27</sup> M. Umbach, *(Re-)Inventing the Private under National Socialism*, in: *Private Life and Privacy in Nazi Germany*, Elizabeth Harvey, Johannes Hürter, Maiken Umbach and Andreas Wirsching (ed.), Cambridge/New York, Cambridge University Press, 2019, p. 130.

<sup>28</sup> G. Horan, *«Lieber, guter Onkel Hitler»: A Linguistic Analysis of the Letter as a National Socialist Text-Type and a Re-evaluation of the «Sprache im/des Nationalsozialismus» Debate*, in: *New Literary and Linguistic Perspectives on the German Language, National Socialism, and the Shoa*, P. Davies and A. Hammel (ed.), Rochester/New York, Camden House, 2014, p. 56.

<sup>29</sup> G. Horan, *«Er zog sich die «neue Sprache» des «Dritten Reiches» über wie ein Kleidungsstück»: Communities of Practice and Performativity in National Socialist Discourse*, in: "Linguistik Online" 30 (1), 2007, p. 69.

<sup>30</sup> See for example A. Gestrich, *German Pauper Letters and Petitions for Relief. New Perspectives on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Poor Relief*, in: *Poverty and Welfare in Modern German History*, L. Raphael (ed.), New York, Berghahn Books, 2017, pp. 49-77; F. Mühlberg, *Bürger, Bitten und Behörden. Geschichte der Eingabe in der DDR*, Berlin, Dietz, 2004; M. Fenske, *Demokratie erschreiben. Bürgerbriefe und Petitionen als Medien politischer Kultur 1950-1974*, Frankfurt am Main/New York, Campus, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Only in two thematic fields research on National Socialism has rather intensively dealt with letters of complaint and request: On the one hand, most of the studies on forced sterilization include strategies of protest and complaint used by those concerned and their families. See for example G. Bock, *Zwangsterilisation im Nationalsozialismus. Studien zur Rassenpolitik und Frauenpolitik*, Opladen, Westdeutscher

promise to give us new insights about the use of ideologically-laden language and the way ordinary men and women – party-members and non-party-members alike – referred to and thus co-constituted discursive nodal points in order to legitimize their claims or complaints when writing to public authorities during National Socialism. As Robert Gellately mentioned marginally some twenty years ago, «requests, supplications, and complaints were made to the authorities» from «all over the country [...]. Even when such entreaties to Party and state proved fruitless they were repeated endlessly or sent elsewhere»<sup>32</sup>. Unlike the impression that could be gained from the popularity of editions of letters to the *Führer*<sup>33</sup>, Hitler was by far not the only addressee. People sent their requests to all levels of the Nazi party, government and administration, from the *Kreis-* and *Gauleiter*, mayors and administration officials up to the heads of the *Reich* Ministries and Hitler. This practice, Gellately suggests, proves that citizens in the Third Reich «acted in the new opportunities that opened up and were not merely passive, dependent, or powerless»<sup>34</sup>. Valuable contributions by John Connelly, Moritz Föllmer, Florian Wimmer and Anette Blaschke<sup>35</sup> have already pointed to the strategic usage of the rhetoric of the «people's community» (*Volksgemeinschaft*) and other elements of National Socialist discourse within the communication by letter between the population and local authorities. Also, Birthe Kundrus and

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Verlag, 1986; H. W. Heitzer, *Zwangsterilisation in Passau. Die Erbgesundheitspolitik des Nationalsozialismus in Ostbayern (1933-1939)*, Köln/Weimar/Wien, Böhlau, 2005, pp. 306–316; C. Braß, *Zwangsterilisation und «Euthanasie» im Saarland 1935-1945*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 2004, pp. 156–169; J. Vossen, *Gesundheitsämter im Nationalsozialismus. Rassenhygiene und offene Gesundheitsfürsorge in Westfalen, 1900-1950*, Essen, Klartext, 2001, pp. 271–324; A. Christians, *Amts Gewalt und Volksgesundheit. Das öffentliche Gesundheitswesen im nationalsozialistischen München*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2013, pp. 189–197; on the other hand, important contributions have analyzed discursive strategies that people categorized as Jews or *Mischlinge* employed when writing to state and Party organizations in order to better their fate. See for example K. T. Pegelow, *The Language of Nazi Genocide. Linguistic Violence and the Struggle of Germans of Jewish Ancestry*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 86–93, 150–159, 202–218; B. Meyer, «Jüdische Mischlinge». *Rassenpolitik und Verfolgungserfahrung 1933-1945*, Hamburg, Dölling und Galitz, 1999, pp. 103–108.

<sup>32</sup> R. Gellately, *Denunciation as a Subject of Historical Research*, in: “Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung” 26 (2-3), 2001, p. 25.

<sup>33</sup> H. Eberle (ed.), *Briefe an Hitler. Ein Volk schreibt seinem Führer. Unbekannte Dokumente aus Moskauser Archiven – zum ersten Mal veröffentlicht*, Bergisch Gladbach, Lübbe, 2007; T. Ebeling, M. Heidrich, J. Kai (ed.), «Geliebter Führer». *Briefe der Deutschen an Adolf Hitler*, Berlin, Vergangenheitsverlag, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> R. Gellately, *Denunciation as a Subject of Historical Research*, p. 26.

<sup>35</sup> J. Connelly, *The Uses of the Volksgemeinschaft. Letters to the NSDAP Kreisleitung Eisenach, 1939-1940*, in: “The Journal of Modern History” 68, 1996, pp. 899-930; M. Föllmer, *Wie kollektivistisch war der Nationalsozialismus? Zur Geschichte der Individualität zwischen Weimarer Republik und Nachkriegszeit*, in: *Kontinuitäten und Diskontinuitäten. Der Nationalsozialismus in der Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, (ed.) B. Kundrus, S. Steinbacher, Göttingen, Wallstein. 2013, p. 39f; F. Wimmer, *Die völkische Ordnung der Armut. Kommunale Sozialpolitik im nationalsozialistischen München*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2014, pp. 213-222; A. Blaschke, *Zwischen «Dorfgemeinschaft» und «Volksgemeinschaft». Landbevölkerung und ländliche Lebenswelten im Nationalsozialismus*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 2018.

Nicole Kramer<sup>36</sup> have shown how self-confidently women and widows during wartime wrote to the administration and used propaganda terms such as ‘heroic death’ (*Heldentod*) to legitimize their requests for provision. Despite the existence of these studies, a systematic and thorough analysis of the role of petitions during National Socialism, and especially the communicative and linguistic dimensions of these letters, still needs to be carried out.

In particular, such an approach would further amplify recent perspectives and findings within the historiography of National Socialism which emphasize that the positioning practices of contemporaries formed a central part of the National Socialist dictatorship of consent and participation<sup>37</sup>. These practices reached from the display of the ‘Hitler salute’<sup>38</sup>, flagging of houses with swastikas to the writing of ideologically ‘correct’ essays at school or entries in a diary. As Martina Steber and Bernhard Gotto explain, contemporaries had to constantly (re-)affirm their legitimate place within the ‘people’s community’ through symbolic and discursive acts<sup>39</sup>. Similarly, Armin Nolzen<sup>40</sup> has noted the existence of a mixture of (forced) pressure and (voluntary) urge to express commitment and loyalty during the National Socialist regime. Since the criteria of belonging were in many ways incoherent and ambiguous, these acts could open up space for maneuver and negotiation, for example complaining about the behavior of an employer or a *Gauleiter* with reference to National Socialist buzz words or promises made in the past. It is important to note, however, that these acts of self-positioning and claiming belonging were of course not open for everyone on equal terms. For example, it was far easier to claim affiliation and ideological determination for a long-term party-member than for someone who had been member of an op-

<sup>36</sup> B. Kundrus, *Kriegerfrauen. Familienpolitik und Geschlechterverhältnisse im Ersten und Zweiten Weltkrieg*. Hamburg, Wallstein, 1995, pp. 273-295; N. Kramer, *Volksgenossinnen an der Heimatfront. Mobilisierung, Verhalten, Erinnerung*. Göttingen, Wallstein, 2011, pp. 229-245.

<sup>37</sup> F. Bajohr, *Die Zustimmungsdiktatur. Grundzüge nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft in Hamburg*, in: *Hamburg im «Dritten Reich»*, (ed. by) the Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2005, 69-121; S. Reichardt, *Beteiligungsdiktaturen in Italien und Deutschland. Vergleichende Anmerkungen zur ‘Volksgemeinschafts-Debatte*, in: *Der Ort der ‘Volksgemeinschaft’ in der deutschen Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, D. Schmiechen-Ackermann, M. Buchholz, B. Roitsch, C. Schröder (ed.), Paderborn, Schöningh, 2018, pp. 118-133;

see also M. Wildt, *Das Ich und das Wir. Subjekt, Gesellschaft und ‘Volksgemeinschaft’ im Nationalsozialismus*, in: *Der Ort der ‘Volksgemeinschaft’ in der deutschen Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, D. Schmiechen-Ackermann, M. Buchholz, B. Roitsch C. Schröder (ed.), Paderborn: Schöningh, 2018, pp. 37-49.

<sup>38</sup> K. H. Ehlers, *Der ‘Deutsche Gruß’ in Briefen. Zur historischen Soziolinguistik und Pragmatik eines verordneten Sprachgebrauchs*, *Linguistik online* 55 (5), 2012, pp. 3-19.

<sup>39</sup> M. Steber, B. Gotto, *Volksgemeinschaft im NS-Regime. Wandlungen, Wirkungen und Aneignungen eines Zukunftsversprechens*, in: “Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte” 62 (3), 2014, pp. 440f.

<sup>40</sup> A. Nolzen, *Zum Sagen gezwungen? Janosch Steuwer liest Tagebücher aus der NS-Zeit und lotet Selbstreflexionen der Zeitgenossen aus*, in: “literaturkritik.de”, 2019. <<https://literaturkritik.de/steuwer-ein-drittes-reich-wie-ich-es-auffasse-zum-sagen-gezwungen,25801.html>>.



posing political current. Also, we have to bear in mind that the «correct» use of discursive elements, specific terms or argumentative patterns ascribed to National Socialism was not always clear to those writing to the authorities. Thus, we propose here to describe the practice of the letter-writers as a sort of navigation through National Socialist discourses of race, nationalism, loyalty and belonging.

### 3. EXAMPLES: NAVIGATING THROUGH DISCOURSES OF BELONGING

In order to give a more detailed and nuanced impression of the way these practices of navigating through discourses of belonging manifested themselves in petitions, we have chosen three exemplary cases that will be discussed in the following.

#### 3.1. A FORMER FREEMASON CLAIMING HIS NATIONAL SOCIALIST CONVICTION

The first letter that we will analyse more in detail stems from a civil service employee (W. T. 1937). In June 1937, he sent a request to Rudolf Heß, the so-called «deputy of the Führer» (*Stellvertreter des Führers*) and leader of the party office. As it turns out from the introductory lines of his letter, he was about to be promoted in his job. By way of precaution, he wanted to «smooth out all eventual constraints and provide the requirement for a quick execution»<sup>41</sup>. The background for this was that for employment and promotion in the civil service (as in other circumstances), political assessments were compiled by party organizations in which information about the person's former party affiliations and political leanings, practical engagement within National Socialist organizations as well as the general attitude towards the National Socialist state were gathered<sup>42</sup>. A negative evaluation could lead to dismissal or the denial of promotion. In the case presented here, the letter-writer seems to know that one feature of his past could pose a problem for his political assessment: He had been member of a Masonic Lodge. Within Nazi Germany, Freemasonry was openly fought, because it was seen as «Un-German» and equated with «Jewish». In 1935, Masonic Lodges were eventually forbidden. It is thus against this background that W. T. tried to explain his Freemasonic past and at the same time assert his loyalty to National Socialism. The letter, or as he calls it at the end: his «confession of faith», is seven pages long, so only some passages can be quoted here.

Right after describing his reason to write, he states:

<sup>41</sup> All translations from German to English were done by me. For longer passages, the German original will be quoted in the footnotes.

<sup>42</sup> K. Thieler, «*Volksgemeinschaft*» unter Vorbehalt. *Gesinnungskontrolle und politische Mobilisierung in der Herrschaftspraxis der NSDAP-Kreisleitung Göttingen*, Göttingen, Wallstein, 2014.

As a National Socialist who not only talks about commitment to the National Socialist movement, but who is recognized and respected as a National Socialist through his actions, I do not have to fear that the information gathered about me could be unfavourable. However, there lies a risk in the generalization of some views about Freemasonry expressed within the party but also in official decrees which are true when it comes to *world* Freemasonry, but which are hurting many former *German* Freemasons» (emphasis in the original)<sup>43</sup>.

Thus, very explicitly, he identifies as a «National Socialist», even it stays unclear whether he actually was a member of the NSDAP at that moment – in the head of the letter, he only gives a «former membership number». But more interestingly, he tries to back up his self-identification by introducing a characteristic differentiation within National Socialist discourses of belonging and commitment, namely the one between those who only «talk» and those who really «act» in National Socialist ways, of course positioning himself on the «acting» side. In the second part of the quote, he then makes another differentiation between «world Freemasonry» and «German Freemasons», insinuating that national belonging played an important role when judging Freemasonic membership.

He goes on proclaiming that while in general he was not even convinced that the official decrees against «German» free masons were justified at all, especially for his own person, an exception clearly had to be made. He reiterates: «I am able to count myself to those German men who championed the same goals even long before the National Socialist movement was born, and this not with thoughts and words, but with my whole life and work». His attitude towards National Socialism, he explained, could not be brushed aside by saying that «this could be claimed by anyone who (as the phrase goes so well) has only found his National Socialist heart after the takeover». This objection, W. T. wrote, could only be made to «those whose attitude was not in line with their past being and actions». But it did not count for him, as he tried to «prove» by generating a list of actions and character traits that were supposed to show that he had always lived according to National Socialist «principles». Within this list, he firstly referred to social aspects which for him seemed to fit in the National Socialist concept of the «people's community». Already as a young attorney, he claimed, he had always cared about the neediest in a «fatherly» way, he had always struggled for «social balance and peace», and, especially towards employers, he had always tried to remind them of their social duties. Besides, in his own office, he had «realized the claim of a real work commu-

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<sup>43</sup> «Als Nationalsozialist, der nicht nur bloß das Bekenntnis zur n.-s. Bewegung im Munde führt, sondern gewiß sein darf, in allem seinem Handeln als Nationalsozialist erkannt und anerkannt zu werden, brauche ich nicht zu befürchten, daß die in der Angelegenheit einzuholenden Auskünfte der zuständigen Parteidienststellen ungünstig lauten könnten. Eine Gefahrenquelle liegt jedoch in der viele ehemalige *deutsche* Freimaurer verletzenden Verallgemeinerung mancher richtiger Erkenntnisse über das *Weltfreimaurertum*».

nity [*echte Arbeitsgemeinschaft*]). Secondly, in his list of credentials, he appropriated major concepts of enemies as defined by National Socialism: Already as a school student, he had been aware of the «danger of Judaism» and he had disseminated this idea. Also, he had «resolutely fought the danger of ultramontanism», i.e., the Catholic Church, «and tried to recruit fellow combatants». Thirdly and finally, he connected to the National Socialist and agrarian discourse of blood and soil by presenting himself as a «land reformer» who had always promoted the idea that every member of the «people's community» [*jeder Volksgenosse*] should have access to the «soil of the fatherland» and that the legal system should be changed in order to prohibit any «abuse of the soil». The fact that plans for land reform were long abandoned by the National Socialist regime when W. T. wrote his letter in 1937 is not decisive here. Rather, it underscores the argument that petitioners took out of the conglomerate of National Socialist discourses whatever seemed to match their own personal story. In the case of W. T., his whole letter consists of trying to prove his belonging to the National Socialist community. In a later passage, he summarizes: «The only reason why I did not enter the National Socialist party when I first came in contact with National Socialism in 1932 [...] was that I already had fought for the same goals, so that the sheer formal membership within a movement, that I already belonged to, seemed negligible to me». So, even if he cannot show a long-term membership and he instead has to explain his membership in a Freemasonic lodge, he tries to engage in what he thinks are markers of National Socialist identity: living according to National Socialist principles instead of only paying lip service to it or instead of only being a formal party member, having fought against the proclaimed enemies of National Socialism, in this case Jews and Catholics, etc.

In sum, the letter shows that navigation through National Socialist discourses in petitions was not always easy and smooth, because it depended on the petitioner's status within the social categories established by National Socialism as well as on the petitioner's perception and interpretation of National Socialist discourses.

### 3.2. A NATIONAL SOCIALIST DEFENDING A 'JEWISH' BUSINESS

The petitioner of our second case seemingly started from a better initial position, since he identifies himself as an old member of the National Socialist party<sup>44</sup>. Right at the beginning, he positions himself as «an old party comrade [*alter Parteigenosse*] who stood loyal on the side of his Führer Adolf Hitler during his first

<sup>44</sup> «Anonymous letter to the Reich's Office, the Reich's Economic Department, the Reich's Department of the Interior and the Federal Government of Braunschweig, 26.11.1934», in: *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933-1945. Band 1: Deutsches Reich, 1933-1937*, W. Gruner (ed.), München: Oldenbourg, 2008, 386-388.

fight for power», by which he supposedly meant the attempted coup in 1923. With this long-term membership, he would fall within the category of an «old fighter», even the «old guard» (*alte Garde*), a group of members of the National Socialist party that had high official standing within the party folklore and, indeed, was granted special benefits for some time<sup>45</sup>. In November 1934, he sent his letter to several high authorities at once: the *Reich's* office (*Reichskanzlei*), the *Reich's* economic department, the department of the interior as well as the Braunschweig federal state government. The reason for his writing, however, was quite delicate and surprising and this might explain why he chose to write anonymously: He sought for help on behalf of all employees of «Jewish firms» in Braunschweig. As he complained, local Nazi activists organized boycotts against Jewish stores and the local police as well as the local government did nothing against it, even when, as he claims to have read in the newspapers, every overt action against Jewish businesses was officially prohibited. So here, we have the case of a long-term National Socialist party member who questions one of the central tenets of National Socialism, i.e., to «take action» against «the Jews». Quite astonishingly, he does this by discursively appealing to National Socialist «ideals». In a rather straightforward way, he asks:

What do you plan to do when despite your order people who are doing harm to our National Socialist idea and worldview, but are calling themselves National Socialists, are disturbing the population? [...] Should employees of Jewish firms and party members defend themselves against these agitators? Should they become traitors of a cause, for which many of our fellow party members have fought in Jewish firms only to be mocked by people who have found their National Socialism only after the revolution? Should they show to these parasites what our Führer expects from a true National Socialist?<sup>46</sup>

Once again, as in the first letter, we find here the important differentiation made between «true» National Socialists and latecomers respectively people who are only «calling themselves National Socialists». This differentiation, together with

<sup>45</sup> F. Bajohr, *Parvenüs und Profiteure. Korruption in der NS-Zeit*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 2001, pp. 17-21; C. Schmidt, *Zu den Motiven «alter Kämpfer» in der NSDAP*, in *Die Reihen fast geschlossen. Beiträge zur Geschichte des Alltags unterm Nationalsozialismus*, edited by Detlev Peukert and Jürgen Reulecke, 21-44. Wuppertal, Hammer, 1981.

<sup>46</sup> «Was gedenken Sie aber zu tun, wenn trotz ihrer Anordnungen Schädlinge unserer nationalsozialistischen Idee und Weltanschauung, die sich Nationalsozialisten nennen, Maßnahmen ergreifen, die nur dazu angetan sind, Unruhe unter der Bevölkerung Braunschweigs zu entzünden? [...] Sollen sich die Angestellten der jüdischen Geschäftshäuser und Parteigenossen gegen diese Provokateure zur Wehr setzen und zur Selbsthilfe greifen? Sollen sie Verräter einer Sache sein, für die zahllose unserer Parteigenossen in jüdischen Betrieben gekämpft haben, um von denen verhöhnt zu werden, die ihren Nationalsozialismus erst nach der Revolution entdeckt haben? Sollen sie diesen Schmarotzern vor Augen halten, was unser Führer von einem wahren Nationalsozialisten verlangt?»

the reference to official proclamations that prohibited ‹disturbances› of the public order, allows the letter-writer to qualify the troublemakers as ‹parasites› who supposedly acted against the ‹will of the Führer›.

He then concludes his letter with the following sentences:

As a party member, I will not give this letter to the foreign press. As a member of a people's community, however, I demand that this crying injustice will be venged. Put a stop on every boycott of Jewish firms, then you will have worked towards the great goal that our Führer has set, that is, to create jobs for every people's comrade and to keep them. Heil Hitler, an old party member.<sup>47</sup>

Again, we can clearly discern key elements of National Socialist discourses, crystallized in specific terms (‹people's community›, ‹our Führer›, ‹people's comrade›) and argumentative patterns (‹work[ing] towards the great goal that our Führer has set›, ‹create jobs for every people's comrade›). Of course, since this letter is anonymously written, we cannot know if it really stems from a long-term party member. However, it is not totally unthinkable, since we have other letters like this in our collection. But for the argument that petitioners navigated through discourses of belonging when writing to the authorities, it is not even that important, because even if it was written by somebody else, it shows how this person thought he could combine his criticism of anti-Semitic actions with trying to present a loyal attitude towards National Socialism. What is crucial here is that he – similar to the writer of the first letter – creates a difference between ‹true National Socialists›, this time proven by long membership, being in line with the ‹Führer›, and local agitators who are harming the National Socialist project by their actions and who are presented as latecomers to the National Socialist cause.

### 3.3. A NATIONAL SOCIALIST SUPPORTING HIS 'JEWISH' FRIEND

The third letter presented in this article differs from the first two examples insofar as it is written by a National Socialist working within the party bureaucracy in support of a close friend – a Jewish lawyer who has been banned from practising his job because of his status of a ‹Jew› (E. V. 1933). The context of this letter, written in early April 1933, is one of the first anti-Semitic laws that banned ‹non-Aryans› from working in the civil service and the legal system, the so-called *Gesetz*

<sup>47</sup> «Als Parteigenosse habe ich keine Veranlassung, diesen Brief der Auslandspresse zuzuleiten. Als Mitglied einer Volksgemeinschaft fordere ich aber, daß man dieses schreiende Unrecht sühnt. Veranlassen Sie, daß jeglicher Boykott jüdischer Geschäftshäuser unterbleibt, dann haben Sie an dem großen Ziel, das sich unser Führer gesteckt hat, mitgearbeitet, allen Volksgenossen Arbeitsplätze zu schaffen und zu erhalten. Heil Hitler. Ein alter Parteigenosse».

zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums<sup>48</sup>. In many cases, persons concerned by this law tried to protest by writing letters to public authorities. As Thomas Pegelow Kaplan explains, «thousands of German-Jewish civil servants and members of other professions sought exemptions from the regime's racial legislation like the Civil Service Law»<sup>49</sup> by petitioning government and party bodies<sup>50</sup>. In some of these cases, persons with a better «status», i.e., «Aryans», tried to help their colleagues or friends in this effort<sup>51</sup>.

In our example, the author makes this clear right in the beginning of his letter: «In order to legitimate my supplication, let me tell you that I am purely German [*rein deutschstämmig*]. I am 53 years old, was a member of the German emperor's navy for 20 years until 9th November 1918 and I am an official member of the NSDAP since September 1930». So, these are his credentials of belonging – and they are quite compelling within the discursive space of National Socialism: «purely German», member of the Nazi party since 1930, former soldier in the navy during World War I<sup>52</sup>. He then passes on to his request on behalf of his friend that he was closely related with «since birth», as he tells. He describes him as follows: «C. stems from a Jewish, but ever since strictly national family, loyal to the King. At a time, when there was no talk of a Jewish movement in Germany, C. converted to the Protestant church out of inner conviction».<sup>53</sup> He then describes his friend's service in the army during the First World War, where he had been honoured with the iron cross, one of the highest decorations of war. After the war, «[t]he revolution of 1918 hit C. as hard as it can hit someone who feels German to the core. He was not able to come to terms with the new regime»<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. H. Göppinger, *Juristen jüdischer Abstammung im «Dritten Reich»*. *Entrechtung und Verfolgung*, 2. ed. München, C. H. Beck, 1990.

<sup>49</sup> K. T. Pegelow, *The Language of Nazi Genocide. Linguistic Violence and the Struggle of Germans of Jewish Ancestry*, p. 89.

<sup>50</sup> For another detailed analysis of such a letter see S. Scholl, *Beschwerde- und Bittschreiben von Mannheimer Bürgern während des Nationalsozialismus: Eine Analyse alltagsprachlicher Kollusion anhand von ausgewählten Beispielen*, in: «Sprachreport. Informationen und Meinungen zur deutschen Sprache» 35 (4): <<https://pub.ids-mannheim.de/laufend/sprachreport/sr19-4.html>>, 2019. pp. 11-14.

<sup>51</sup> Later on, this phenomenon was fiercely attacked by anti-Semitic National Socialist propagandists who criticized that many «Germans» would still believe that the «Jew» they personally knew was a «descent Jew»; see M. Dang-Anh, S. Scholl, *Zur kommunikativen Hervorbringung von Moral zur Zeit des Nationalsozialismus*, in: *Diskurs – ethnisch*, H. Kämper and I. Warnke (ed.), Bremen, Hemen, 2020, p. 40.

<sup>52</sup> That he explicitly mentions the 9<sup>th</sup> November 1918 as the date of his retirement from the navy is also quite telling, since this date had a special place within the National Socialist's narrative of Germany's «defeat from within».

<sup>53</sup> «C. entstammt einer jüdischen, aber von jeher streng nationalen, königstreuen Familie. Zu einer Zeit, als in Deutschland von einer Judenbewegung noch nicht die Rede war, trat C. aus innerster Überzeugung der evangelischen Landeskirche bei».

<sup>54</sup> «Die Revolution 1918 [...] traf C. so schwer, wie das nur bei einem bis ins Innerste deutsch-fühlenden Manne möglich ist. Mit dem nun einsetzenden Regime konnte er sich nicht abfinden».

According to the letter's author, this was also the reason why his friend left the civil service and instead became a lawyer. To depict the political attitude of his friend, he adds further descriptions:

In view of his political attitude, I can say that C. had been member of the conservative party and then after the war belonged to the German National People's Party. With the appearance of our Führer, C. in his inside belonged to our movement. Quite often, he has expressed his grief that he was not allowed to become a member of the party because of his descent. No man of pure German blood could have felt the liberation of 30th January 1933 more gratefully towards the Führer than him. [...] This man of extraordinary spiritual and moral integrity, even compared to core German standards was crushed down by the decree banning lawyers of foreign race. The feeling of having always given the best to the fatherland, of having always felt, thought and acted German as a true German, of having been a loyal advisor to his clients, a benefactor for all those without means seeking legal help, and now suddenly being excluded is terribly hard for this man<sup>55</sup>.

To be sure, it is not the purpose here to judge the writings that victims of National Socialist stigmatization and persecution or, in this case, people trying to help them, addressed to Nazi authorities. In many instances, it was one of the last things they could do to better their fate. Rather, it points to the fact that the challenge of navigating through National Socialist discourses of belonging was just as important, but also more difficult for this group of people, because they did not belong to the racially defined 'people's community' according to National Socialism. And yet, in many cases, in their petitions they tried to inscribe themselves at least into a German national conservative community. That is why, in our example, the writer repeatedly points to the 'inner Germanness' of his friend as well as his service in the army during World War I which significantly ended with the revolution of 1918. Even more, and this is something we do not find frequently in petitions from people labelled as 'Jews', the letter-writer portrays his friend as a supporter of National Socialism: He allegedly had been against the Weimar Republic, he had welcomed the National Socialist movement and had

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<sup>55</sup> «Bezüglich seiner politischen Gesinnung ist zu sagen, dass C. früher der Konservativen, nach dem Kriege der Deutschnat. Volkspartei angehört hat. Mit dem Auftreten unseres Führers hat er innerlich unserer Bewegung angehört. Oft hat er mir seinen Kummer darüber zum Ausdruck gebracht, dass er infolge seiner Abstammung der Partei nicht beitreten könne. Kein rein-deutscher Mann kann die Befreiung am 30. Januar 1933 tiefer und mit heisserem Dank gegen den Führer empfunden haben als C. [...] Diesen auch für kerndeutsche Verhältnisse auf ungewöhnlicher geistiger und moralischer Höhe stehenden Manne hat die Verordnung über die Entfernung fremdstämmiger Anwälte niedergeschmettert. Das Gefühl, dem Vaterlande stets das Beste gegeben zu haben, nur deutsch wie ein Deutscher gefühlt, gedacht und gehandelt zu haben, ein treuer, selbstloser Berater seiner Klienten, ein Wohltäter besonders für rechtsschutzsuchende Mittellose gewesen und jetzt plötzlich ausgestoßen zu sein, ist für diesen Mann furchtbar hart».

wished to be part of it, he had celebrated the National Socialist takeover of power and suffered now because of his exclusion from his job, but moreover from the German «people's community».

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Petitions to public authorities during the Third Reich tell us a lot about the way «ordinary people» linguistically adopted and appropriated elements of National Socialist discourses of belonging. However, when looking at the language used in these letters, we have to keep in mind that these texts were embedded in a specific communicative setting marked by asymmetries of power – people who addressed government or party bodies wanted or needed something from them and they had to legitimate their demands. In addition, we have to take account of the variety of different writers' positions within the social categorizations of National Socialism and thus their ability of taking up specific elements of National Socialist discourses. They did so quite creatively, because they had to reconcile them with their positioning within National Socialist categories, and because National Socialist discourses were not that fixed. Thus, within the letters that people sent to public authorities during National Socialism, we can see that, by navigating through discourses of belonging, people made use of and thereby co-constituted National Socialist discourses. A more thorough and systematic look on the linguistic dimensions of petitions during the Third Reich could thus help us to further comprehend the discursive conditions of the political communicative space during National Socialism and the role language use played in it.



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