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# Embodying German Suffering: Rethinking Popular Hunger during the Hunger Years (1945-1949)

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*English abstract: Almost as soon as the Second World War was over, Germans began describing the Allied occupation as the ›Hunger Years‹. It was a time that was and still is imagined as dominated by the incessant demands of the body. This contribution uses postwar hunger as a way of approaching the history of the body in modern Germany, arguing that postwar hunger offered a bodily form of continuity with the Third Reich, while simultaneously framing German bodies in particularly postwar and anti-Nazi ways. Germans cast their own hunger as a redemptive expression of collective identity, while at the same time claiming that it connected them with the victims of Nazi barbarism.*

On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1947, Dr. Heinrich Wulf was called to the bedside of 49-year-old Henriette M. by her worried sister. Henriette lay huddled in her cot; according to the doctor's report, »she was completely, literally, only skin and bones; she could no longer speak from weakness, she could only gasp.« Her sister explained to the doctor that Henriette, although previously healthy, had taken to her bed three weeks ago, begun rejecting the food that her sister brought to her, and refusing to see a doctor,

»instead wanting only to die, so that the hunger would finally cease. When I told Ms. M that she had to be taken immediately to the hospital she sat up and coughed out with her last bit of strength: ›that is precisely what I want to avoid, in order that the hunger cease. Let me die here!‹ She had repeatedly said to her sister ›if only one morning I would not open my eyes [i.e. die]. We are simply starving here!‹<sup>1</sup>«

The doctor's diagnosis of hunger-disease resulted in the immediate application of heart strengtheners and the assigning of emergency rations. However, by the time the ambulance had arrived to forcibly take her to a hospital, Henriette was already dead.

The two unmarried M. sisters had shared an unheated room in the basement of Cologne's Leostrasse 31, where they had both been employed in the strenuous physical labor of rebuilding the destroyed city. Single, and apparently only with one another to care for, they were paradigmatic examples of the *Trümmerfrauen*, or rubble-women, who

1 »betr: Meldung über Hungerkrankheit«, in: Historisches Archiv der Stadt Köln 646 / 6.

were so iconic for postwar Germany's reconstruction. The misery, poverty, and hopelessness that defined the daily lives of so many women at this time frame the tragic scene of Henriette coughing out her life on a thin mattress in a chilly basement apartment. The winter of 1946-47 was one of the coldest in years, and food supplies were of a particularly poor quality.<sup>2</sup> The provisions that her sister brought her were meager, bad-tasting, and monotonous, her life dreary, and the prospects for a bright future small – or, as she described their situation, »we are simply starving«.

The disturbing story of Henriette M.'s death was meticulously recorded by her Cologne doctor in order to file it with the Allied occupation forces; her death was to become part of the endless struggles on the part of the German medical profession to document the severity of German civilian hunger. Indeed, her case was taken down so carefully because she was one of only two German deaths between 1945 and 1949 in the Cologne region directly attributable to starvation. Though Henriette was unusual insofar as she starved to death, her belief that life in occupied Germany could be reduced to the experience of »simply starving« was widespread. This was a time that was and still is imagined as dominated by the incessant demands of the body. The oft-expressed belief that the entirety of the population was consumed with the »stomach-question« suggests that bodies were central to German experiences during the immediate postwar years. Politics, ideology, economics, culture – all such concerns were temporarily put aside as men, women, and children occupied themselves exclusively with caring for their own bodies and those of their families and friends. While several recent studies have begun to show how misleading this narrative is, less attention has been paid to the claim itself, in particular in terms of what it can say about German bodies.<sup>3</sup>

2 The belief that hunger inevitably led to death was common amongst Germans in all four zones, particularly during times of extreme cold and restricted food supplies. Countless civilians wrote letters to local and zonal authorities complaining about their rations and claiming that their lives were at risk. See Landesarchiv Berlin B Rep 012 / 131.

3 For some new, more critical studies of the early postwar years, see Frank Biess, *Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in postwar Germany*, Princeton 2006; Dagmar Ellerbrock, »Healing Democracy«. *Demokratie als Heilmittel: Gesundheit, Krankheit und Politik in der amerikanischen Besatzungszone 1945-1949*, Bonn 2004; Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany*, Princeton 2007; Paul Steege, *Black Market, Cold War: Everyday Life in Berlin, 1946-1949*, New York 2007.

In this essay, I situate the German ›Hunger Years‹ within the rich historiography on the body in 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany.<sup>4</sup> As historian Kathleen Canning has noted, the study of the body has tended to emphasize either a discursive (collective/social body) approach, or one that focuses on real, lived experience (individual corporeal sensations).<sup>5</sup> The occupation years from 1945 to 1949, known popularly as the ›Hunger Years‹, are especially interesting precisely because sources from that era speak to both of these analytic levels. Individual Germans experienced and recorded their own bodily experiences, while simultaneously inserting these sensations into a larger discursive framework – a collective »age of hunger«. This short essay suggests some ways in which this transitional period in postwar history can be an especially rewarding place to explore the political and cultural power of the body. After first considering the ways in which hunger offers a useful lens for thinking about bodies, the essay then examines two historically specific ways in which hungry bodies mattered in the wake of World War II: hunger became synonymous with victimization at the hands of the Nazis, and it was particularly important in the construction of a new German *Völkskörper*, or collective body. By opening up these new ways of thinking about hunger, I hope to show that postwar hunger offered a bodily form of continuity with the Third Reich, while simultaneously framing German bodies in particularly postwar and anti-Nazi ways.

## Approaching Bodies through Hunger

Scholarship on the body has often looked to marginal or extreme bodily experiences as a way of grappling with the material form; it seems that the body realizes itself most clearly when it is confronted with its own limits. For example, literary scholar Elaine Scarry has argued that pain, in its resistance to communication and its ability to destroy the boundaries of self-hood – »as the content of one's world disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its

4 This literature is especially rich for the Weimar Republic, but has increasingly been addressing into the World Wars and the postwar era. See for example Michael Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: a Social History, 1890-1930*, Chicago 2003; Erik Jensen, *Body by Weimar: Athletes, Gender, and German Modernity*, Oxford 2010; Molly Johnson, *Training Socialist Citizens: Sports and the State in East Germany*, Leiden 2008; Maren Möhring, *Marmorleiber: Körperbildung in der deutschen Nacktkultur (1890-1930)*, Köln 2004; Chad Ross, *Naked Germany: Health, Race and the Nation*, New York 2005.

5 Kathleen Canning, *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class and Citizenship*, Ithaca 2006.

subject«,<sup>6</sup> – offers one way of exploring the borders of an individual body. In contrast, whereas pain can only be determined by the body that is actually suffering, illness is an interpretive – and thus communicative – bodily state. Illness situates the individual sick body in relationship to other similarly afflicted bodies; it is only by such acts of association that a body can be defined as sick, and diagnosed and potentially treated as a result. In the words of Sander Gilman: »like any complex text, the signs of illness are read within the conventions of an interpretive community that comprehends them in the light of earlier, powerful readings of what are understood to be similar or parallel texts.«<sup>7</sup>

Building off of such projects to conceptualize the body, this essay uses hunger as a way of approaching the history of the body. Like pain and sickness, hunger is both a real bodily experience, and subject to culturally and socially specific interpretation. Indeed, »hunger exemplifies the fact that the body is determined by its culture, because the meanings of starvation differ so profoundly according to the social context within which it is endured«.<sup>8</sup> As an experiential category, hunger is a universal and omnipresent component of life itself. It is present in every society, for every individual, every day. This means that every living body is intimately familiar with hunger of some sort or another. However, this kind of hunger is generally neither abnormal nor pathologized, but integrated into the structures of life, helping to organize our days and our social relations. On the other hand, hunger, if allowed to grow too much, becomes both painful and a sickness – a condition that, if untreated, inevitably ends in death. Hunger differs from other afflictions because the point at which it ceases to be normal and becomes pathological are individually and culturally determined. Doctors still lack a standardized definition of starvation: a diet on which one person can thrive can lead another to degeneration and death.

Hunger is also a preeminently bodily sensation. Though experienced as an internal sensation (gnawing in the belly, stomach ache, etc.), hunger also completely remakes the external appearance of the body. Indeed, judgments of the severity of an individual's level of hunger usually rely on changes to the appearance of the body rather than self-reported symptoms. In other words, a starving body must look starving to actually be starving – ›feeling‹ like you are starving is not enough. Important-

6 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York 1985, p. 35.

7 Sander Gilman, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS*, Ithaca 1985, p. 7.

8 Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment*, Cambridge 1993, p. 4.

ly, there is a general consensus on the appearance of a starving body: skinniness, protruding bones, sunken eyes etc.. Few other afflictions are similarly standardized and summarized by means of a representative pathological body.<sup>9</sup> Primo Levi, reflecting on his experiences in Auschwitz, singled out the absolute nature of this hunger as definitional not only to the Holocaust, but to the horrors of modernity in general:

»If I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head dropped and shoulders curved, on whose face and in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen.«<sup>10</sup>

Hunger thus creates a universalized, absolute, and apolitical bodily identity. Personality and individuality are erased, subsumed by the experience of hunger, which in turn remakes the body of the sufferer.

While Nazi concentration camps provided perhaps the most theorized model of modern starvation, they were by no means the only site of mid-twentieth century hunger. During and after the Second World War, huge portions of the world suffered under severe food shortages as well as downright famine. Within Europe, especially in Southern and Eastern Europe, starvation was widespread. Hunger was also probably the most universally acknowledged aspect of everyday life in occupied Germany. It has been central to postwar memory and historical consciousness for Germans who lived through it, across the political spectrum and from all walks of life. Postwar hunger was both a material reality and a sort of embodied Zero Hour, revealing that the collapse of the Third Reich had forced Germans to begin anew, starting from scratch and with empty stomachs. This essay approaches hunger differently – not as an objective and external reality defined by widely recognizable experiences like standing in bread lines, scrounging for food, stealing, negotiating empty shop shelves, nor as a medical fact determined by a particular caloric intake or birthrate. Instead, it tries to approach hunger as a form of body politics. By claiming and experiencing hunger as a definitional component of their identities, postwar Germans engaged in an elaborate process of exploring and redefining their individual and collective bodies in the aftermath of the war. In this context, hunger became a widely recognized and impactful expression of postwar suffering and victimization.<sup>11</sup>

9 Jenny Edkins has written brilliantly on the ways in which Western society has created a new ethical framework for understanding, and thus treating, modern hunger. Jenny Edkins, *Whose Hunger?: Concepts of Famine, Practices of Aid*, Minneapolis 2002.

10 Quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive*, New York 2000, p. 44.

11 The past several years have seen an explosion of interest in the memory and reality of German suffering during and immediately after the war, focusing especially on Al-

By the time the Second World War finally came to an end in Europe, hunger had already established itself as a key issue in Germany's public sphere and private memory. The British Hunger Blockade that had devastated the civilian population during and immediately after the First World War, was only twenty five years in the past; the majority of adults alive during the occupation had at least some personal recollection of those earlier ›Hunger Years‹. That first homefront hunger had inspired a near-universal interwar discourse casting Germany as the victim of international hunger-conspiracies. During those years, not only the Nazis but the rest of the world as well believed that the primary cause of Germany's defeat in the First World War was the infamous Blockade. In the typical words of a Nazi pundit, »in the [First] World War, our weapons remained unvanquished; it was hunger that made the Volk cave in.«<sup>12</sup> Throughout the Third Reich, hunger was continually being re-defined and renegotiated in the attempt to convince the population that it was well-fed, and, simultaneously, that the Nazis were the only defense against a global plot for mass German starvation. Omnipresent rhetoric informed the population that the central goal of the Allied forces was to starve the German people; a 1944 article from a professional nutrition journal provocatively titled »Germany gave Europe more to eat, UNRAA means famine« warned its German readers that

»all the promises of the British, Americans and Bolsheviks, all supposed stores of foods set aside, have proven to be empty words. [...] Not only has none of the promised food aid materialized [in the liberated countries, A.A.W.], but the Allies insist on feeding their troops off of the occupied territories, and they have opened the door to the black market, usury, inflation, in short to the exploitation of the masses.«<sup>13</sup>

As the war was finally nearing its end, the collapsing Nazi state had invoked the threatening specter of future hunger as its final act. The leaked information in late 1944 of Roosevelt's approval of the Morgenthau Plan provided one of the Nazi regime's most successful propaganda weapons. The Morgenthau Plan, initially supported by Roosevelt but never actually enacted, called for the deliberate de-industrialization of Germany and its transformation into an agricultural nation. It was inten-

lied fire bombings, expulsion from the East, and mass rapes by Soviet forces. William Niven and Helmut Schmitz have edited two important recent collections on the topic. William Niven (ed.), *Germans as Victims: Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany*, Basingstoke 2006; Helmut Schmitz (ed.), *A Nation of Victims? Representations of German Wartime Suffering from 1945 to the Present*, Amsterdam 2007.

12 Quoted in Hans-Erich Volkmann, *Landwirtschaft und Ernährung in Hitlers Europa, 1939-45*, in: *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 35 (1984) 1, pp. 9–74, quote p. 9.

13 *Deutschland gab Europa mehr zu essen. Unrra bedeutet Hungersnot*, in: *Gemeinschaftsverpflegung/Zeitschrift für Volksernährung* 20 (1944).

ded to permanently prevent Germany from ever posing a military threat to the world, and, simultaneously, to make the nation a net food exporter rather than food importer. Referred to by Nazi propaganda as the »Jewish Murder Plan« (it had been designed by the US Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, who was Jewish), the plan, according to Goebbels, represented the Allies' primary desire should they win the war — to starve the German people.<sup>14</sup>

This long tradition of experiencing and anticipating starvation had primed the population of defeated Germany to be attuned to the state of their stomachs. Food seemed their primary vulnerability, and hunger their most familiar and most feared form of suffering. It was also synonymous with defeat. Both historical precedent and ideological rhetoric had established that the only way to satiety was total victory — and the consequence of military collapse would be starvation. By definition, the hungry body is exclusive, existing only in opposition to an assumed and necessary counter-part: the well-fed body. In defeated Germany, however, it was also inclusive. Unlike other forms of suffering, being hungry was a state of being that had especially fluid boundaries. This was an affliction that could be claimed by every member of the German Volk regardless of age, gender, or national origin. In the aftermath of the Third Reich and the Holocaust, ruled by the conflicting powers of the Americans, Soviets, British, and French, and dependent upon foreign food aid while convinced of their own imminent starvation, the people of Germany were obsessed with their hunger. As they compulsively documented their shifting food supplies, they struggled to understand the shape and meaning of their new, hungry, bodies. These bodies provided them with a venue for experiencing and representing their relationship to the just-past war, as well as offering a canvas for exploring new and potentially viable German identities in the wake of military defeat and economic, political, and cultural collapse. In order to understand the bodies of postwar Germans, one must start with the bodies that existed before Germany's surrender in May 1945. Those bodies

14 In October 1944, Goebbels famously announced that the plan would mean that »industrialized Germany should be literally turned into a huge potato field.« Quoted in Jeffrey Olick, *In the House of the Hangman: the Agonies of German Defeat, 1943-1949*, Chicago 2005, p. 31. Despite the fact that the Morgenthau Plan had been abandoned by the Allies before the war even ended, during occupation its mention immediately invoked profound and absolute suffering. Across the political spectrum, postwar Germans saw the Plan as, in the words of the liberal German émigré economist Karl Brandt »a scene of ruthless, undisguised vengeance and the most extreme effort made in the course of history to take permanent punitive action against a conquered nation.« Karl Brandt, *Germany: Key to Peace in Europe*, Claremont 1949, p. 26.

however, constructed and valorized by the Third Reich, were shaped not by hunger but by experiences of violence, hierarchy, and war: the realities of life in a genocidal racial state.

## The Aftermath of War: Violence, Race, and German Bodies

By definition, wars threaten, modify, and destroy bodies. Unsurprisingly then, the First World War has been a major topic of scholarship on the body. This literature generally focuses on the ›fragmentation‹ of the male or soldier's body as a result of new technologies of warfare and of medicine. During that war, the numbers of the dead were dwarfed by those of the wounded; two million Germans died in the war, but 2.7 million were injured.<sup>15</sup> What historian Joanne Bourke claimed for Great Britain was equally as true for Germany: »the most important point to be made about the male body during the Great War is that it was *intended* to be mutilated.«<sup>16</sup> Missing limbs, maimed faces, and other forms of severe disfigurement became common-place amongst young and previously healthy men. Sabine Kienitz has argued that, in the wake of the War, only the flesh of the human body – specifically that of the injured soldier – was capable of effectively depicting and reflecting what was understood at the time as the »truth« of the war.<sup>17</sup> The scars of war thus transformed the bodies of former soldiers into potent symbols of a new sort of identity politics, giving soldiers an unprecedented, though relatively short-lived, social power.<sup>18</sup> In this model, the physical body revealed authentic sacrifice. At the same time, other forms of less visible suffering (illness, psychological distress etc) declined in significance; the war became synonymous with a particular, and graphically marked, body.<sup>19</sup> However, this was not the only form of body that was shaped by the war.

15 Sabine Kienitz, *Beschädigte Helden: Kriegsinvalidität und Körperbilder 1914-1923*, Paderborn 2008, p. 11.

16 Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, Chicago 1996, p. 31.

17 Kienitz, *Beschädigte Helden*, p. 35.

18 Kienitz, *Beschädigte Helden*, p. 306.

19 Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, p. 59. In fact, the majority of soldiers who survived the war did not lose a limb or suffer other major forms of permanent bodily transformation. In both England and Germany, for example, the majority of men applying for disability pensions suffered from nervous disorders, neurological disturbances, psychological problems, and other ›invisible‹ afflictions. Nonetheless, the iconic ›fragmented‹ body of the soldier continued to be the standard image of the war. Robert Weldon Whalen, *Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War, 1914-1939*, Ithaca 1984, p. 56.

In Germany, the homefront and the warfront experienced the war differently, and it shaped their bodies in quite different ways. Soldiers returned from the front with a body that was judged to be either fragmented or intact. The homefront displayed different sorts of bodily damage. Among civilians, especially among the women who bore the brunt of the British hunger blockade, deprivation and severe weight loss was the norm; it was common for women to report losing up to 25% of their weight as a result of food shortages and increased physical demands.<sup>20</sup> Those who died on the homefront usually died of hunger-related diseases and accidents, while violent deaths were relatively uncommon. In contrast, returning soldiers had suffered bodily harms in countless and devastating ways – but, generally, hunger was not one of them. Different forms of suffering thus marked different bodies in different ways. In the wake of the bodily catastrophe that was the war, most European states worried about their future as a people, race, or nation. Interwar culture idealized a fitter, stronger, and more aesthetic body, »sleek, streamlined, and engineered for maximum performance.«<sup>21</sup> Klaus Theweleit's brilliant analysis of the fantasies of the *Freikorps*, the right-wing paramilitary groups that roamed the streets of interwar Germany, emphasizes in particular the movement's fetishization of a »mechanized body.«<sup>22</sup> These bodies were, in the glorifying words of World War I veteran Ernst Jünger, »supple [...] lean and sinewy, striking features, stone eyes petrified in a thousand terrors beneath their helmets.«<sup>23</sup>

These varied German bodies – soldiers, paramilitary fighters, and women on the homefront, each represented a specific subsection of the German people. It was not until the Third Reich that a model of an ideal body was universalized to all Germans, a process achieved through the evocation of the category of race. The Third Reich created and celebrated the so-called Aryan body – large, blond, powerful, disciplined, and fertile. At the same time, this racialized collective body [*Volkskörper*] required the creation of a Jewish body to act as its counterpart, enabling a symbolic system of grotesque interdependence in which the beauty of the one form became visible only through contrast to its hideous opposite. In this dualistic model, the Aryan body was the location of all positive attributes, while the Jewish body contained all weakness, sickness, and inferiority. The Third Reich organized countless programs to optimize both of these fantasy bodies: sports programs for German youth, racial education, reproductive regulation, but also torture, disfigure-

20 Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, p. 73.

21 Jensen, *Body by Weimar*, p. 5.

22 Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies* (2 vol.), Vol. 2, Minneapolis 1987, p. 206.

23 Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 159.

ment, and murder. To put it simply, racial difference was actively embodied; Nazi policies sought to make immediately visible which bodies were ›Jewish‹ or ›Aryan‹.<sup>24</sup> Whether by consolidating (and thus de-individualizing) Jews, by forcing them to wear visual identifiers, or by imprisoning, beating, and starving them, Nazi ideology was as invested in creating and perfecting the Jewish body (the only good Jew is a dead Jew) as it was in the Aryan body.

The vast body-projects of the Third Reich, emphasizing the glories of mass spectacle and synchronized collectivity, focused on these corporeal polarities of ›Aryan‹ and ›Jew‹, in the process always perceiving individual bodies as parts of a larger *Volkskörper*.<sup>25</sup> The very vitality of this ›Aryan‹ *Volkskörper*, however, coexisted alongside a constant and haunting sense of vulnerability, weakness, and persecution; the German collective body was a victimized body – threatened by the weak and inferior body of the Jew.<sup>26</sup> This vulnerability was epitomized in Hitler’s belief that the Jew was, by definition, parasitic; the 1933 *ABC des Nationalsozialismus* taught its followers that the Jews »have lodged themselves in each and every people, live at the expense of the *Volkskörper*, weakening this body, just as every parasite-caused sickness debilitates the body of the host, causing a constant feeling of discomfort and discontent.«<sup>27</sup> Thus, the oppositional relationship between ›Jewish‹ and ›Aryan‹ body not only contrasted strong with weak – it also defined (strong Aryan) victim and (sickly Jewish) perpetrator.<sup>28</sup>

While ›parasitic Jews‹ needed to be eliminated to protect the health of the ›Aryan race‹, individual ›Aryan‹ bodies were openly subordinated to

24 Uli Linke, *German Bodies: Race and Representation after Hitler*, New York 1999, p. 179.

25 Boaz Neumann, *The Phenomenology of the German People’s Body (Volkskörper) and the Extermination of the Jewish Body*, in: *New German Critique* 106 (2009), pp. 149-181, p. 156.

26 Historians of the body have noted that, by the late nineteenth century, the rise of modern society was accompanied by a new perception of criminality and violence as threats to the social body, rather than to the body of the sovereign or the individual victim. In Nazism, this collective interpretation of social threats was organized racially; all criminals were raced (as Jewish), and their crime (simply existing) was a direct threat to the ›Aryan Volkskörper‹.

27 Quoted in Neumann, *The Phenomenology of the German People’s Body*, p. 171.

28 The idea that the *Jewish Volkskörper* was abusing and attacking the *German Volkskörper* by sucking its life-blood (extracting its resources) gave a clear framework to the long-standing trope of German victimization, a belief that had become especially widespread with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. A more general feeling of abuse at the hands of the Allies, along with the nebulous but powerful narrative of the ‘stab-in-the-back,’ acquired its cohesive and community-making power when Hitler transformed it into a core component of the collective identity of the nation.

the health and vigor of the larger *Volkskörper*.<sup>29</sup> German citizens were asked to compromise personal desires and needs in the service of the community; at the same time, mass rallies, public displays of physical fitness, and other projects of coordination and synchronicity implied that the way to achieve ideal bodies was through submission to the collective. As part of this program, inadequate individual bodies were to be voluntarily sacrificed in the interest of collective vitality. This tenet was most dramatically expressed in the infamous, and ultimately repealed, *Action T4*, the Nazi euthanasia program intended to eliminate »useless eaters« from the social collective, including many people considered racially ›Aryan«. Targeting physically and mentally handicapped children, the program asked parents to voluntarily give their children to the state – where they were murdered through starvation, gas, or lethal injection. This program was based on the idea that the health of the collective body demanded the sacrifice of inferior bodies – even those of loved ones and relatives. Thus, the preservation and strengthening of the Aryan *Volkskörper* required both the annihilation of the Jewish collective body and the sacrifice of individual Aryan bodies. The constant and extreme pressures placed upon individual bodies in the service of the *Volkskörper* ensured that the body was, as Paula Diehl has argued, crucial for both visualizing and experiencing the Nazi social collective.<sup>30</sup>

During the Third Reich, Hitler's eugenicist project to realize German superiority through bodily manipulation found resonance outside of the country's borders. In France, the United States, Great Britain, and most other European countries, anti-Semites had long associated Jews with inferior bodies, and Western Europeans of varied racial categories with superior bodies. Many observers admired Hitler's ambition to strengthen the *Volkskörper* by means of improving or eliminating individual bodies. The international success of the 1936 Munich Olympics, when Germany won more medals than any other participating nation, seemed to confirm the effectiveness of the Nazi body regime. Avery Brundage, President of the US Olympic Committee during the Games, advocated that America »follow [the] example of Germany«, attributing the country's remarkable athletic success to »the good physical condition of the

29 Geoffrey Cocks, *Modern Pain and Nazi Panic*, in: Paul Betts/Greg Eghigian (eds.), *Pain and Prosperity: Reconsidering Twentieth Century German History*, Stanford 2003, pp. 88-109, p. 98. A similar argument was made by David Horn about the creation of the social body in Fascist Italy: »The defense of this body was imagined ... to require the subordination of the needs and interests of its constituent parts, the male and female bodies that constituted its ›cells.« David Horn, *Social Bodies: Science, Reproduction, and Italian Modernity*, Princeton 1994, p. 14.

30 Paula Diehl, *Körperbilder und Körperpraxen*, in: Paula Diehl (ed.), *Körper im Nationalsozialismus: Bilder und Praxen*, Paderborn 2006, pp. 9-30, p. 19.

German athletes, the perfect national organization, the intensive training and the almost supernatural desire to win« that were all the products of the Third Reich.<sup>31</sup> Once the war began, the Allies continued to perceive Nazi Germany as synonymous with strong, healthy, and attractive bodies. The German army's terrifying success on the battlefield, especially their novel *Blitzkrieg* strategy, seemed proof of the superiority of their bodies; a French POW admiringly noted the »magnificent physical humanity« of his captors.<sup>32</sup> Impressions of German bodily superiority only increased over the course of the war, as the growing poverty and misery of occupied Europe highlighted the strength and beauty of the ›Aryan‹ form. Howard Kershner, chairman of the *Committee on Food for the Small Democracies of Europe*, warned in 1943 that »the proud boast of the Nazis that they are a superior race is coming true. Those who have enough to eat are indeed superior to the tuberculosis-ridden, undersized, misshapen bodies of the starved inhabitants of the occupied countries.«<sup>33</sup>

Ultimately, it was these »undersized and misshapen« bodies, rather than hyper-powerful Nordic soldiers, that would dominate the public sphere after May 1945. Upon Germany's defeat, it was the bodies of victims – photographed, filmed, interviewed, and painstakingly documented and described – that represented the scale and horror of the just-past conflict. This had been the case with World War I as well. However, then the victims had been the damaged bodies of former soldiers – bodies which possessed a universal and explicitly non-national humanity. All maimed soldiers, be they British, French, or German, were equally victims of the same tragedy. Their damaged bodies suggested that all participant nations had suffered equally. Young men's bodies had paid the price for militarism, and their scars were both a metaphor for and a depiction of the social and individual harms of the war. In the Second World War, abused bodies did not show that a person had fought in the war; instead, they marked guilt or innocence. Culpability for the war was corporealized; the way that individual bodies looked correlated not simply to what they had done during the war, but to their general moral state. When the Jewish American businessman Ira Hirschmann, special inspector for the *United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration*,

31 National Physical Training Urged by Brundage for U.S. Athletes, in: *New York Times* August 19, 1936, p. 27.

32 Joan Tumblety, *Remaking the Male Body: Masculinity and the Uses of Physical Culture in Interwar and Vichy France*, Oxford 2012, p. 218.

33 *We Starve Our Friends*, in: National Committee on Food for the Small Democracies, Box no. 98, Hoover Institution Archives.

toured defeated Germany immediately after surrender, the appearance of Germans' bodies reflected the moral categories of the war:

»The contrast between the normal, healthy life of the German and that of their neighbors was overwhelming. Who won the war, I asked myself as I saw obviously well-fed Germans [...] The plumpness of the German hausfrau in her tailored black suit was the healthy plumpness of the adequately nourished; that of the Jewish women in the camps, in their shabby cotton dresses and ragged sweaters, was the unhealthy bloatedness of the ill-fed.«<sup>34</sup>

The horrors of the Third Reich had culminated in an inverted moral universe wherein the guilty were attractive and healthy, and the innocent sickly and starved.

Thus, abused human bodies – which, after World War I, had marked the senselessness and horror of war in general – now revealed the cruelty and perversion of Nazism in particular. In this Second World War, whole peoples were killed, entire cities demolished. The horror of the war was not simply violence or suffering per se, but the profound devaluing of the individual body. Photos of concentration camp victims displayed stacks or piles of the dead – people reduced to nameless and faceless heaps of bodies. Similar visual tropes were used in depicting other horrors of the war, including the unearthing of mass graves and the victims of fire-bombings. This total disregard for human bodies (abused, starved, tossed in a pile) meant that protecting and respecting the individual body seemed a crucial component of rejecting Nazism – and of reconstructing Europe after its defeat.

This interpretation of the war was largely the result of early Allied contact with Nazi concentration camps. Photographs and film footage of these camps, produced during and immediately after liberation, shaped the public's understanding of the Third Reich.<sup>35</sup> Such images, as Habbo Knoch described in his masterful study of photographs of the Holocaust, established tropes for imagining the victims of the Nazis, tropes which, in both their imagery and their textual captions, cast concentration camps as the primary sites of Nazi crimes, suggested that starvation was the primary cause of inmate death, and that the camps themselves could be best understood as »hunger camps«.<sup>36</sup> Such imagery reinforced the

34 Ira Hirschmann, *The Embers Still Burn: an Eye-Witness View of the Postwar Ferment in Europe and the Middle East and our Disastrous Get-Soft-With-Germany Policy*, New York 1949, p. 99.

35 Cornelia Brink, *Ikonen der Vernichtung: öffentlicher Gebrauch von Fotografien aus nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern nach 1945*, Berlin 1998; Habbo Knoch, *Die Tat als Bild: Fotografien des Holocaust in der deutschen Erinnerungskultur*, Hamburg 2001.

36 Knoch, *Die Tat als Bild*, p. 142.

impressions of the Allies upon initial contact with victims of the Third Reich: they were people who, regardless of individual experience and cause for incarceration, all shared a common and definitional experience: hunger. Thus, hunger – rather than violence, disease, or the other multitude forms of physical and mental torture that defined life in the camps– became the experience that transformed people into paradigmatic victims of the war, erasing individuality as it remade individual bodies.

This pictorial strategy of representing the horrors of the war offered a misleading vision of concentration camp conditions and mortality. The vast piles of starved bodies scattered through half-abandoned camps, the »walking skeletons« clad in striped suits, were not typical for the war experience on the whole, but rather a product of the rapid collapse of the Third Reich in its final months. The millions of Jews who died of gas or of bullets in the villages, ghettos, and extermination camps of Eastern Poland had never been reduced to those stereotypical bodies of hunger. Nonetheless, when the world imagined the suffering inflicted by the Third Reich, they imagined, in the words of a massive 1948 comparative medical study of former concentration camp inmates, those »destroyed, completely starved forms [...] from whom everything in body and soul that made up the honor and worth of a human being had been taken.«<sup>37</sup> A British doctor stationed at Bergen-Belsen described thousands of former camp inmates as all possessing »an appallingly thin face. The eyes were sunken and the cheek bones jutted out. These extreme changes made all the patients look alike, so that it became difficult to distinguish one from another.«<sup>38</sup> In this context, hunger transformed individuals into a mass of collective suffering; experts confirmed that »in the final phase of severe starvation, a general familial similarity emerges: aged beyond their years, starving bodies, brown wrinkled skin, mummy-like expressions, hunger edema.«<sup>39</sup> The cruelty and inhumanity of Nazism itself was expressed in the distorted and dehumanized bodies of its victims – and hunger was the method by which this destruction took place.

37 A. Hottinger, *Hungerkrankheit, Hungerödem, Hungertuberkulose: historische, klinische, pathophysiologische und pathologisch-anatomische Studien und Beobachtungen an ehemaligen Insassen aus Konzentrationslagern*, Basel 1948, v.

38 P. L. Mollison, *Observations on Cases of Starvation at Belsen*, in: *British Medical Journal* Jan 5, 1946.

39 Hottinger, *Hungerkrankheit, Hungerödem, Hungertuberkulose*, 234.

## Occupation and the Hungry Volk

In 1945, in the wake of a devastating war and in the face of a massive global food shortage, hunger meant different things to different people.<sup>40</sup> In occupied Germany, a focal point of postwar interest and intervention, hunger was especially contested. Many diplomats and economists perceived Germany's food crisis as part of a larger landscape of poverty and shortage that spread across most of Europe and Asia. Allied government officials saw German hunger as an unavoidable consequence of the economic and physical destruction of Central Europe; former victims of Nazism and German Communists saw hunger as a just punishment for the crimes committed in the name of Hitler. German civilians, doctors, and politicians, on the other hand, cast their own hunger as a redemptive and constructive expression of collective identity. In their eyes, hunger transcended individual bodily experience, becoming an attribute of simply living through the ›Hunger Years‹. It served, in its universality and fluidity, as a sort of communal glue, linking Germans together and distinguishing them from an external and hostile world. Hunger separated Germans from the Allies, Displaced Persons, and former forced laborers who lived alongside them in the ravaged postwar landscape, and whom many Germans accused of having more to eat than they did. Hunger at the same time connected German civilians with the victims of Nazi barbarism. Assertions of hunger provided a way for large segments of the German population to engage with the language of the Allied condemnation of their nation's past, enabling them to accuse their own accusers. Thus, the accused guilty collective of Germany's civilian population seized upon hunger's ability to transform its wearer's body into, in the words of literary scholar Maud Ellmann, a »living dossier of its discontents« where the »injustices of power are encoded in the savage hieroglyphics of its sufferings«.<sup>41</sup>

In a corporeal legacy of the Third Reich, individual bodily experiences acquired meaning and power through extension into the collective; physical sensations were translated into a racialized imaginary of the *Volkskörper*. Relentless Nazi indoctrination had demanded that Germans interpret the physical state of their bodies as representative and constitutive of racial health and collective vitality.<sup>42</sup> During the Third Reich,

40 See Nick Cullather, *The Foreign Policy of the Calorie*, in: *The American Historical Review* 112 (2007) 2, pp. 337-364 for the postwar food crisis as a transnational concern.

41 Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists*, p. 17.

42 In the allied Axis power Japan, in similar but distinct ways, »the body gained official attention not only as the basis of national production and reproduction, but also as the medium, through which the official ideology for the nation could be material-

constructing the *Volkskörper* had been largely a project of excluding the weak, the sick, and the inferior since the ›Aryan‹ collective body was not capable of incorporating them.<sup>43</sup> The loss of the war, the collapse of the Third Reich, and the occupation and division of the country, profoundly challenged this *Volkskörper*. Throughout the war, Hitler had continually reiterated that collective defeat meant individual death, either in battle or in suicide. In his eyes, the death of the *Volkskörper* demanded the death of its individual components. Thus, the bodies of German citizens at the moment of Germany's defeat were caught in an existential crisis. With the defeat and death of the collective ›Aryan‹ body, individual sickness, weakness, and physical pain no longer needed to be denied by individual Germans. However, they also could not be interpreted as a worthy sacrifice to a gloriously invulnerable *Volkskörper*. As a result, Germans experienced their bodies as wholly subsumed in physical experiences of marginality and misery. Germany's collapse revealed the irreconcilability of the imagined glory of the ›Aryan‹ superior form and the misery of life in a defeated country – the gap between »the ideal and the real, individual experience of corporeality«.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, one of the most powerful discursive tropes surrounding defeated Germany was that the nation was sick, infirm, or wounded: as Jennifer Kapczynski put it, the defeated country was »a German Patient.«<sup>45</sup> Given the widespread physical and psychological distress throughout Europe at the end of the war, a fixation on weakened health is no surprise. However, as the Swiss theologian Karl Barth explained, even »among all the others, the German people seem to be the most seriously ill.«<sup>46</sup> The source of Germany's sickness seemed clear; Nazism itself, along with militarism, racism, and self-aggrandizement, had attacked the previously healthy German people. For some observers, disease had so profoundly compromised the German collective body that recovery was unsure. A skeptical Hans Morgenthau reminded his readers that there was »no certainty that Germany will be fully restored to health.«<sup>47</sup> The ›Aryan‹ *Volkskörper* that had previously seemed invulner-

ized«. Yoshikuni Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory: Narratives of War in Postwar Japanese Culture, 1945-1970*, Princeton 2000, p. 48.

43 Dagmar Ellerbrock, *Zur Übersterblichkeit Arischer Männerkörper*, in: Diehl (ed.), *Körper im Nationalsozialismus*, pp. 281–305, p. 291.

44 Ellerbrock, *Zur Übersterblichkeit Arischer Männerkörper*, p. 291.

45 Jennifer Kapczynski, *The German Patient: Crisis and Recovery in Postwar Culture*, *Ann Arbor* 2008, p. 2.

46 Karl Barth, *The Only Way. How can the Germans be cured?* New York 1947, p. 3.

47 Hans Morgenthau, *Germany and the Future of Europe*, Chicago 1951, p. 5.

able was suddenly revealed as definitionally sick.<sup>48</sup> By way of contrast, postwar Japanese people also experienced defeat and occupation in and through their bodies. However, here »ordinary citizens celebrated the end of the war as the liberation of their bodies«<sup>49</sup> from a brutal wartime »regime of repression.« In Germany after the war, average German people's bodily sensations were shaped not by a sense of freedom or liberation from the war; instead, they were overwhelmed by sensations of loss, pain, and misery – all of which were encapsulated in the devastating sensation of hunger.

During the Third Reich, the ideal ›Aryan‹ body had been male. Nazism's deeply rooted masculinity and misogyny shaped social policy and daily life as well as determining body discourses; male bodies, and especially fighting male bodies, were the ideal and the standard by which health, beauty, and racial purity were measured. As a result, nothing reflected Germany's shocking reversal in fortunes as dramatically as the bodies of the soldiers who straggled home in the wake of capitulation. These bodies acquired their particular postwar meaning through contrast with another, better-fed form: that of the robust and »plump« American occupier. German citizens' initial impressions of the Allied occupation forces inevitably described American soldiers as »blooming, healthy and well-fed«, descending in German towns »equipped up to their teeth, these well-fed faces. [...] The contrast between them and our own scrawny and starving, pathetically equipped, pitifully desperate soldiers was indescribable.«<sup>50</sup>

The shock and horror with which German civilians viewed the broken bodies of their sons, fathers, and brothers reflects not only the actual suffering of these men, but the depths to which German citizens had believed in the invulnerability of the German *Volkskörper*. Along with the collapse of the Third Reich itself, those bodies that had been the most powerful during the war (male soldiers) were suddenly the most likely to starve, sicken, and die.<sup>51</sup> Doctors reported that most postwar sicknesses and forms of bodily weakness befell men more frequently and with more severity than women or children; medical studies regularly noted the surprising resilience of women's bodies – in direct counter-

48 Dagmar Ellerbrock discusses the particular role that medicine and sickness played in the American occupation project in her excellent book, see Ellerbrock »Healing Democracy«.

49 Igarashi, *Bodies of Memory*, p. 52.

50 Quoted in Ellerbrock, »Healing Democracy«, p. 95.

51 Ellerbrock, *Zur Übersterblichkeit Arischer Männerkörper*, p. 302.

distinction to German men, who were wasting away with terrifying rapidity.<sup>52</sup>

Nobody represented the pitiability of the defeated soldier more powerfully than the German POW held in the USSR. With the collapse of the Third Reich, these men's misery proved particularly useful as a comparative figure to the Third Reich's most famous victims: concentration camp prisoners.<sup>53</sup> Both populations were camp inmates, both were considered »innocent« or »apolitical« prisoners, and both had been subjected to collective starvation. Indeed, hunger was crucial to how German medical experts and the public sphere understood the German POW experience in the East.<sup>54</sup> The diagnosis of dystrophy or »hunger-disease« was applied near-automatically to all German soldiers returning home from the Soviet Union. With this diagnosis, German medical experts relied upon an equation of »starved person« with »victim of Nazism«; Ernst-Günther Schenck, who had served as the nutritional expert of the SS and subsequently was found guilty of performing starvation experiments on Russian POWs, served as »Reparation-Expert for Starvation-Damages« for the *League of Homecomers*.<sup>55</sup> In this capacity, Schenck authored a massive study titled »Human Misery during the Twentieth Century«, which focused on mass starvation during and after the Second World War. Rather than focusing on the connection between Nazi concentration camps and hunger, Schenck argued that it was the German POW who best encapsulated what he thought of as a peculiarly modern form of suffering; according to Schenck, »all other forms of suffering faded in contrast to the significance of hunger in the Russian camps.«<sup>56</sup> Hunger became more associated with the German former soldier than the Jewish camp inmate.

52 See for example Dr. Brock, *Erhöhte Hungerresistenz der Jugendlichen?*, in: *Ärztliche Wochenschrift* 1 (1946) 13/14, pp. 200-202; Karl Egen, *Die Bedeutung der Gewichtsprozentbestimmung in der Praxis und ihre Endung zur Feststellung des Untergewichts aller Altersklassen beiderlei Geschlechts*, in: *Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift* 74 (1949) 14, pp. 434-437; Gerhart Thienhaus, *Über die Hungerfettsucht Junger Mädchen*, in: *Ärztliche Wochenschrift* 3 (1948) 3, pp. 48-51.

53 Biess, *Homecomings*, p. 53.

54 This trope continued in the German popular imagination through the 1950s and 1960s. See for example: *Stäbchen gegen den Hunger*, in: *DER SPIEGEL* Jan. 12, 1955, pp. 40-41.

55 Ernst Klee, *Deutsche Medizin im Dritten Reich: Karrieren vor und nach 1945*, Frankfurt 2001, p. 187. »Homecomers« (Heimkehrer) was the term used in the FRG to describe those German POWs held in the USSR, especially those held in camps after 1949.

56 Ernst Günther Schenck, *Das menschliche Elend im 20. Jahrhundert. Eine Pathographie der Kriegs-, Hunger- und politischen Katastrophen Europas*, Herford 1965, p. 218.

Indeed, it was images of starved bodies that most persuasively aligned concentration camp victims with German POWs. In an early postwar novel documenting the suffering of Germans in Allied POW camps, the German author described an elderly German inmate who

»had practically no flesh left on his bones or under his skin. He was really only a skeleton. I said to him that he should pose next to the photos from Mauthausen which the camp commander had nailed on the barrack wall. [...] In regards to the art of starvation he could match the victims of the Mauthausen concentration camp.«<sup>57</sup>

An emphasis on the significance and scope of POW hunger also underscored and validated the suffering of the German civilian population, who were themselves living lives shaped by hunger. In other words, hunger set German POWs apart from non-German victims at the same time that it linked German POWs with German civilians, in what historian Frank Biess has described as a »language of shared victimization.«<sup>58</sup>

Transformed through hunger from a nazified people's community [*Volksgemeinschaft*] to a pitiable »community of need« [*Notgemeinschaft*], the entire population, regardless of class, gender, or political allegiance, possessed hunger as his or her own.<sup>59</sup> As a dramatic letter from an amateur economist to the Dresden city government asserted: »I belong to the people, not to the satiated but to the hungry ones, and I know that my suffering is that of all the others, my thinking is the same as theirs.«<sup>60</sup> Despite often contradictory or unclear results, German medical studies on the nutritional state of German civilians inevitably claimed to reveal that »all levels of society are now succumbing to hunger.«<sup>61</sup> The German *Volk* was remade as a community not joined by links of blood and soil or a shared experience of war and defeat but rather by the common experience of hunger: »the hunger disease today has attacked our entire Volk and knows no social distinctions.«<sup>62</sup> In fact, this model of a common and universal experience of hunger, much as it

57 Quoted in Gregor Streim, *Germans in the ›Lager‹. Reports and Narratives about Imprisonment in Post-War Allied Internment Camps*, in: Schmitz (ed.), *A Nation of Victims?*, pp. 31-49, p. 38.

58 Biess, *Homecomings*, p. 65.

59 Quoted in Günter Trittell, *Hunger und Politik: die Ernährungskrise in der Bizone (1945-1949)*, Frankfurt 1990, p. 74.

60 *Denkschrift für die deutsche Wirtschaftskommission f.d. sowj. Besatzungszone zu Ernährungsfragen und zum Kartensystem*, in: *Stadtarchiv Dresden 11393 / 321*.

61 Helmut Gillmann, *Beitrag zum Problem der Unterernährung aus den Erfahrungen einer ärztlichen Prüfstelle an Hand von 123425 Fällen*, in: *Ärztliche Wochenschrift 3* (1948), 7/8, p. 123.

62 Ferdinand Bertram, *Über Ernährungsschäden vom Standpunkt der zentralen Regulationen Teil II*, in: *Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift 73* (1948) 5/08, pp. 68-74, p. 68.

might have been believed by those claiming it, was largely rhetorical. Rather than being homogenous, occupied Germany presented a remarkably hierarchical, diverse, and fluid landscape; even during the worst food shortages of the ›Hunger Years‹, German people ate radically different foods in radically different quantities and contexts.

While each of the four occupied zones developed distinct rationing plans, all of them insured that some segments of the population were better fed than others (usually favoring children and workers and disadvantaging housewives and the elderly.) Frequently former Nazis, because of connections, wealth, or skills, continued to enjoy the privileged lifestyles that they had under Hitler – often to the outrage, disgust, or jealousy of their neighbors. For example, Heinrich Levy, a German Jewish man who had survived the war in various concentration camps, complained to the food distribution office of Berlin that the renowned composer Clemens Schmalstich, who had joined the NSDAP in 1931 and enjoyed close relations with several leading Nazis, had been granted high rationing status due to his musical talents; in several increasingly agitated letters, Levy argued in vain that »impoverished old people who had nothing to do with Nazi politics must waste away with the [lowest rationing, A.A.W.] Card V while this former Party Member receives privileges of a kind allotted to few mortals.«<sup>63</sup>

Even greater gaps existed between the diets of rural and urban populations, as being a food producer was suddenly more powerful than possessing material wealth. Huge quantities of goods flowed from cities into the countryside, as people traversed near-by farms to purchase or barter for foodstuffs. On the other hand, zonal governments often created policies that favored urban workers, as they were seen as the economic backbone of reconstruction. Such tensions were reflected in a May 1946 regional report from Saxony:

»The special Christmas allotment of sugar exists only on paper. The rural population feels in this context disadvantaged in relation to the urban population, where the allotments *were* distributed. The often substantial quantities of [extra] butter and quark that are returned to the farmers inspire tremendous resistance amongst the workers, and frequent cases of theft and profiteering have been observed.«<sup>64</sup>

In sum, in the words of an Upper Bavarian report on the popular mood from April 1947, »Germans, whose only sense and purpose is exclusively directed at the acquisition of vital foodstuffs, are becoming increasingly

63 Betr: Gewährung der Karte I an Parteigenossen, in: Landesarchiv Berlin B Rep 209/1551.

64 Ausschnitte aus einem Informationsbericht des Kreisnachrichtenamtes, in: Dresden Stadtarchiv 11393/211.

irritated with each other and grow jealous that someone else receives something that has not been allotted to him.«<sup>65</sup> Despite such acute experiences of division and conflict, however, the voices of German civilians, politicians, doctors and public figures all insisted repeatedly: »we hunger all together [*wir hungern doch alle gemeinsam*]«.<sup>66</sup> Grafted onto every individual body, whether young or old, male or female, loyal Nazi or resistance fighter, hunger served as a basis for a new form of community.

Medical discourse echoed this collapse between individual and collective bodies. Hunger threatened both individual health and the future of the *Volk*. In a situation of crisis and chaos, doctors in occupied Germany officially described their function as the »reconstruction of a healthy *Volkskörper*.«<sup>67</sup> A public resolution from the medical profession released in 1947 claimed that »chronic under-feeding has already led to the substantial destruction of the bodily substance of the German people«, warning that the whole world was complicit in »the destruction of the spiritual and bodily substance of a great *Volk*.«<sup>68</sup> Leading nutritional physiologist Heinrich Kraut, who had developed his expertise on the relationship between labor productivity and diet with experiments on Soviet POWs and concentration camp inmates, wrote in a 1948 article that inadequate caloric intake »leads with absolute certainty to a reduction in bodily substance.«<sup>69</sup> Like many German doctors, Kraut worried that postwar food shortages would have particularly devastating impacts on German health because Germans had already begun going hungry during the war: »the first phase, the destruction of fat, is already behind us. The great mass of the German people had already during the war used up all expendable body fat in the maintaining of the economy.«<sup>70</sup> Specialists warned that »as a consequence of the years of hunger and malnutrition, the medical profession's concepts of normal have changed. Today we often term a bodily state as adequate which, in the prewar years, we would have termed less good or even as poor.«<sup>71</sup>

65 Quoted in Paul Erker, *Ernährungskrise und Nachkriegsgesellschaft: Bauern und Arbeiterschaft in Bayern 1943-1953*, Stuttgart 1990, p. 141.

66 Quoted in Trittel, *Hunger und Politik*, 110.

67 Informationsbericht Nr. 23: Zittaus Ärzte Helfen mit Aufbauen, in: *Stadtarchiv Dresden* 11391/1759.

68 Resolution der deutschen Ärzte zur deutschen Ernährungslage, in: *Landesarchiv Berlin B Rep 012/131*.

69 Heinrich Kraut, *Der Nahrungsbedarf des körperlichen Arbeitenden*, in: *Ärztliche Wochenschrift* 3 (1948), 31/32, p. 4.

70 *Ibid.*

71 Heinrich Berning, *Die Dystrophie*, Stuttgart 1949, pp. 1-2.

By asserting this powerful and internationally relevant form of suffering, these German voices documented in painful detail the degeneration of their bodies in order to display their innocence and powerlessness, at the same time that these performances of suffering forged new bonds of shared victimization. The very experience of hunger was equivalent to being ›victims of totalitarianism‹; not Hitler but »simply the hunger, nothing more than hunger« was, in the words of a Cologne newspaper, the »very worst dictator.«<sup>72</sup> At the same time, German hunger became equivalent to rejecting Nazism – a bodily state became an ideology. In this way, the hunger of the ›Hunger Years‹ offered Germans a chance to trade roles with the primary figure of postwar victimization – the hungry innocent.<sup>73</sup>

German people's hunger became part of a larger narrative of suffering that had begun during the end of the Third Reich and only worsened with its collapse. When seen through the lens of German hunger, Allied narratives of the horrors of the Third Reich and the glories of liberation were reversed. A March 1947 article from the newly formed newsmagazine *DER SPIEGEL*, ironically titled »Jubilee of Hunger«, commemorated the 100<sup>th</sup> food rationing distribution since the program's beginning »out of the blue« in 1939. Claiming that »even anti-Nazis remember with pleasure the 700 grams of meat and 420 grams of fat per week« allotted by those initial Third Reich rationing cards, the article waxed nostalgic: »as long as the swastika sun was in the ascension, the food distribution held steady«. Only when Germany started losing the war did Germans begin to hunger, and, damningly, it was »with the Allied troops that calories marched into Germany.«<sup>74</sup> According to this logic, the end of the war and the collapse of the Third Reich meant that hunger ended for some – Jews, camp inmates, Poles etc. – only to begin at an even more destructive level for others – Germans – of all ages, genders, and professions. German suffering picked up where non-German suffering came to a close.

72 Quoted in Rainer Gries, *Die Rationen-Gesellschaft: Versorgungskampf und Vergleichsmentalität: Leipzig, München und Köln nach dem Kriege*, Münster 1991, p. 11. See also Hans Schulten, *Die Hungerkrankheit*, Berlin 1946, pp. 9-10.

73 For this reason, at the same time that hunger was experienced as near-universal amongst the German population, German children became the primary symbolic bodies of the postwar hunger. Although it was the elderly who suffered the most from food shortages, descriptions of hungry Germans inevitably emphasized children, who were assumed to be apolitical and guiltless. An anonymous postcard sent in April 1946 hyperbolically warned the Saxon Prime Minister that »ultimately you will be called to task if thousands of people, especially children, continue to die of hunger.« Postkarte von Georg Schulze, in: Stadtarchiv Dresden 11393/211.

74 Hunger-Jubiläum: es fing so harmlos an, in: *Der Spiegel* March 29, 1947.

## Conclusion: Embodying Hunger and Satiety

The landscape of Germany immediately after surrender in May 1945 was full of damaged, dead, and dying bodies. These bodies, male and female, young and old, and from across Europe, displayed a remarkable diversity of wartime experiences and a horrifying range of suffering. Slave laborers, camp inmates, and those who had gone into hiding, but also soldiers and civilians, all possessed bodies in various states of distress, marked by the war and the Holocaust in myriad ways. Amidst these varied forms of bodily misery, however, hunger acquired special significance.

The emotional valence of hunger made it a particularly appealing political-moral condition in post-Nazi Germany. German hunger was an answer to early accusation of collective guilt, a form of internalized denazification, and an embodied process of ›coming to terms with the past‹. Cast as the great equalizer, hunger promised to wipe the slate clean at the same time that it provided a language of communality both familiar and powerful. As an affliction of too little, rather than too much, it is impossible to blame the hungry for their condition; indeed, the very existence of hungry bodies implies an external source of responsibility and therefore of blame.<sup>75</sup> The classic symptoms of hunger – skinny body, deep-set eyes, protruding joints, weakness, apathy, and depression – are non-threatening and passive, making their bearer the opposite of the powerful, aggressive, and expansive Aryan bodies of Nazi ideology. An insistence on the unique scale of their hunger, on the suffering of the innocent and apolitical, and on the moral imperative of the global community to not ›stand by and watch‹ as millions of Germans starved to death, all contributed to a discursive analogy between the Holocaust and the German ›Hunger Years‹. During the Third Reich, Germans had been encouraged to interpret themselves in bodily terms; after the war, rather than blond hair, blue eyes, or a muscular physique, German-ness was defined by a distinct level of underweight. The enemy body was similarly recast; the former racial enemy was imagined as possessing a fat belly, full with the foods that would properly have been allotted to German civilians.

This is why German civilians refused sympathy for non-German sufferers and resented accusations of guilt or responsibility. Surveys revealed that the majority of the German population denied responsi-

75 British historian James Vernon traces the development of societal attitudes toward the hungry, changing from accusations of laziness to a Malthusian celebration of the weeding out of the weak to a consensus that hunger is an unnecessary and undesirable evil. James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History*, London 2007.

bility for feeding the displaced persons and former camp inmates within Germany's borders after war's end – even the sympathetic Military Governor of the US Zone General Lucius Clay recalled in his memoirs that he

»was shocked with a German recommendation to lower the ration of displaced persons to the German level. It was necessary to remind the *Länderrat* that other nations were sending in the additional food for the displaced persons and that Germany was fortunate not to be forced to assume the entire burden of support for these unfortunate people who were there through no fault or desire of their own but as a result of ruthless Nazi action.«<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, the majority of Germany's non-Jewish citizenry believed that their suffering exceeded that of other postwar populations of hungry people. Rather than perceiving Jewish survivors of the camps as themselves victims of hunger, popular opinion in the occupied zones saw Jews as part of a larger conspiracy to destroy Germany through hunger. Food emerged as an important space of conflict between the (categorically hungry) Germans and the (categorically non-hungry) foreigners.<sup>77</sup> Disinterested in ›foreign‹ hunger, German civilians resented the perceived ›special treatment‹ allotted Jews and other camp survivors. Those Germans living near to DP camps believed that the inmates, especially the Jewish DPs, received more international sympathy and especially more food aid than they did.<sup>78</sup> In addition, Jews and ›Slavs‹ were held responsible for the black market, which in turn was blamed for German hunger. A contemporary report complained in typical language that »our women with infants and young children have no butter, but there [in the DP camp, A.A.W.] it is sold on the black market in huge quantities«.<sup>79</sup>

During occupation, civilian hunger occluded all other concerns, consuming both public and private consciousness. A multi-year British study of the food situation in the city of Wuppertal recognized the expansive interpretation of individual hunger among its participants, concluding that

76 Lucius Clay, *Decision in Germany.*, Garden City 1950, p. 100.

77 Atina Grossmann's fascinating book traces the complex ways in which food served as a site of negotiation between Displaced Persons, non-Jewish Germans and the occupation authorities, as various hungry peoples competed for recognition of past and present suffering. See Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies*.

78 For a discussion of the postwar German denial of non-German hunger during occupation, see Alice Weinreb, »For the Hungry have no Past nor do they belong to a Political Party«: Debates over German Hunger after World War II, in: *Central European History* 44 (2012) 1, pp. 50-78.

79 Quoted in Jutta Heibel, *Vom Hungertuch zum Wohlstandsspeck: die Ernährungslage in Frankfurt am Main 1939-1955*, Frankfurt a.M. 2002, p. 192.

»the great majority [of civilians interviewed, A.A.W.] stated that their chief worry was the shortage of food. [...] To the majority, however, hunger meant much more than a desire for food to satisfy a temporary physiological need. It represented a threat to their well-being, and was associated with frequent appraisals of the degree of undernutrition that they could tolerate, and the fear that they might not survive.«<sup>80</sup>

As one US Military survey from 1947 tactfully put it, »those factors [of the food crisis, A.A.W.] which are under German control are not as frequently mentioned as the more remote factors outside their control.«<sup>81</sup> The socialist-leaning British journalist Gordon Schaffer, who toured the Soviet Zone shortly after the end of the war, worried that »the hunger and the [food, A.A.W.] shortages conceal from most people in the Zone the very real progress that has been made.«<sup>82</sup> Struck like so many observers by the self-absorption of Germans, Schaffer echoed the concerns of Communist leaders and bemoaned the fact that »Germans in the Soviet Zone, as in all the other zones, are much more ready to pity themselves than to recognize their guilt and to join in an effort to make amends to the nations they wronged and to purge their life of the fascism that brought all their suffering.«<sup>83</sup> Frustrated with the constant insistence on their own suffering, a German Communist pamphlet passionately attacked the »most widespread opinion« that »there has never been a people anywhere in the world who has experienced anything similar to that of Germany, and there is no place in the world where there is ›such a hunger‹ as currently in Germany.«<sup>84</sup>

In fact, the sorts of suffering that the German population experienced during and immediately after the war were varied and often extreme. Unlike the situation during the First World War, German civilians had not been spared violent bodily harm during this war. For urban women and children, this violence had been inflicted by Allied bombing. For the millions of expellees pouring into the occupied country, it included assault, rape, and flight. Former German soldiers returning from Allied POW camps had experienced imprisonment, forced labor and physical torment, and disease. Philosopher Karl Jaspers noted, in an essay on defeated Germany, that »in such a disaster everyone may let himself be made over for rebirth, without fear of dishonor.«<sup>85</sup> Germans seized upon

80 University of Cambridge, *Studies of Undernutrition*, Wuppertal, 1946-9, London 1951, pp. 161-162.

81 Office of Military Government, *Opinion Surveys Branch, German Understanding of the Reasons for the Food Shortage*, Berlin 1947, p. 3.

82 Gordon Schaffer, *Russian Zone of Germany*, New York 1947, p. 25.

83 Schaffer, *Russian Zone of Germany*, p. 19.

84 *Grundfragen unserer Ernährungs-Wirtschaft im Zweijahresplan*, Berlin 1948, p. 6.

85 Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, New York 1947, p. 18.

this opportunity to be reborn – not only individually but collectively. And the only thing that seemed to link these diverse German bodies was the experience of hunger.

The years between the defeat of Nazi Germany and the official division of the country in 1949 demarcate a time and a place that was defined by an intimate relationship to hunger; almost as soon as the war was over, Germans began describing this time as the ›Hunger Years‹. German men and women in all four zones experienced collective and individual hunger as inseparable from military defeat, reconstruction, denazification, and all the other conceptual framings that marked these years as the transition between a Nazi dictatorship and a capitalist or socialist society. By fixating on their hunger at the expense of all other medical, political, and ethical concerns, Germans actively inserted themselves into larger transnational debates over human rights, development theory and modernity. Hunger functioned as a visual, medical, and experiential sign, marking Germans variously as victims, non-Nazis, innocent and morally righteous, and as racially and culturally German. Hunger also provided a way for Germans to create a community out of a defeated and divided nation, forging continuity with a common German past within an ethically appropriate and internationally acceptable framework. In their own scrawny bodies, Germans saw an expression of their own limitless suffering; at the same time, it seemed that their connections to Nazism and the horrors of the war melted away with any and all excess flesh.

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