

Writing 'Volksgemeinschaft' into 'Fact'

Letters from the National Socialist Labor Service (RAD)

Gero von Roedern (University of Graz)

1. Introduction

"The hard, unrelenting service doesn't affect me too much, because I always did a lot of sports,"¹ Friedrich Pohl wrote to his parents on June 18, 1940, after only four days in the National Socialist Labor Service (RAD).² Initially just intrigued by the choice of words, I started my investigation into Friedrich Pohl's letters with the assumption that the young man simply replicated discursive formations he may have picked up in the Labor Service. My scope then expanded to the hypothesis that the young author's reference to and replication of impressions from the Labor Service can be understood as participation in the organization's project of creating the avant-garde for the 'Volksgemeinschaft'.³ Konstantin Hierl, the man in charge of the RAD, asserted: "The Labor Service is the best tool to realize this national socialist demand for a people's community."⁴ Basing my work on a collection of a young man's letters stemming from his time in the organization, I investigate the RAD's claim of realizing the 'people's community' on a micro-level. In doing so, this study discusses the writing of 'facts' by Friedrich Pohl while also reflecting on its own perspective. I approach the letters with a combination of qualitative content analysis with inductive category-building⁵ and close reading.

1 Pohl 1940: June 18. All quotes from the diary are originally in German and translated into English by G.v.R. The same applies to translations from other primary sources or secondary literature in German.

2 *Reichsarbeitsdienst* or short: RAD.

3 The 'people's community.'

4 Hierl 1941: 201. Hierl, a former soldier and *völkisch*/national socialist functionary, since 1935 was officially the leader of the RAD [*Reichsarbeitsführer*].

5 Mayring 2015: 85–90.

Since the merit of operating with 'Volksgemeinschaft' as an analytical category has been debated by historical scholars for nearly two decades,⁶ it is critical to point out that the study at hand focuses on the social vision of the concept. As such, following historians Martina Steber and Bernhard Gotto, it entailed "a guideline for the actions both of private individuals and political leaders"⁷ and contained the promise of a social 'utopia' for those it included.⁸ At the latest *Historikertag* in October 2021, it was precisely this power of appeals to the "we", that formed the basis for a panel discussion on the making of collectives.⁹ For the purpose of this essay, I therefore define the concept of 'Volksgemeinschaft' as a place of ideal perfection and impractical scheme for social improvement as well as a vague guide on how to achieve this state. I argue that the analyzed letters not only picked up on such vague directives but on a micro- and meso-level actively participated in the attempts of creating a new social reality.

In developing the argument, my analysis identifies and works on and with five different facets of reality.¹⁰ Firstly, (1) the layer of historiography, on which I operate and on which I unfold 'facts,' which are intersubjectively comprehensible and verifiable but nevertheless characterized by my subjective emphasis and methodical approach to the sources.¹¹ Secondly, there is the (2) material aspect of the investigated letters,¹² whose text is a linguistic 'fact.' This text, however, does not need to resemble the (3) historical state of things in the Labor Service and national socialist Germany, which I understand as a product of historical relations¹³ that can only be approximated through research. Rather, the letters also reveal (4) references to as well as interpretations of

6 Janosch Steuwer composed a report on the debate, which still provides a helpful overview on the major positions. Since then, some rapprochement can be observed. (Cf. Steuwer 2013)

7 Steber/Gotto 2018: 3.

8 Or from a non-national socialist point of view rather: dystopia.

9 Historikertag 2021: *Das umstrittene Wir: Auf der Suche nach neuen Wegen zur historischen Erforschung von Kollektiven*.

10 My gratitude for the suggestion goes to Susanne Knaller, who outlines her considerations on "several levels of data and dimensions of reality" in the introduction of this volume.

11 For the historian's/narrator's "situatedness between factuality and fictionality" cf. Jaeger 2019: 336. What is critical in this analysis is that 'facts' in historiography are created in a dialogue between the object of research, the approach and its result.

12 Cf. Henzel 2020.

13 Cf. Daniel 2016: 385–387.

the reality encountered in the *RAD*.¹⁴ Such (re)actions in the letters may or may not be truthful, but as they can be interpreted both as indications and as parts of negotiating experiences,¹⁵ in this respect they can be considered reliable. As a fifth facet of reality, I discuss the question regarding (5) the effect of the letters as participation in the construction of a new social reality¹⁶ through language.¹⁷ Based on these five facets, I undertake a cultural reading of personal documents that is dedicated to the interface between textual and social reality. Therefore, I intend to contribute to the expansion of our understanding of the writing of 'fact' in history and historiography. My analysis can reveal how all five identified facets are in one form or another affected by the social vision of the 'Volksgemeinschaft' and the attempts of the *RAD* to realize it as social 'facts.'

2. The *RAD*-Letters

In today's academic research, several lines of inquiry into the many facets of the *RAD* can be identified, which all contribute to the conception of this essay. Important studies into the institutional history of the Labor Service have, for instance, provided valuable insight into the size, composition, and political relevance of the organization.¹⁸ They allow for the creation of a general framework that contributes to the contextualization of Friedrich Pohl's letters. Relatively early research into the *RAD* was undertaken by the Educational

14 Cf. Susanne Knaller's contribution in this volume for the underlying constructive model, traced to Immanuel Kant's theory of cognition.

15 The primacy of discourse or experience is subject to major debate in historical analysis. For the central positions, cf. Scott 1999 and Canning 1994. My use of "experience" touches on the issue, but as my focus is on negotiations in the letters, I avoid the summary of a lengthy polarizing and quasi-ontological debate.

16 Cf. Berger/Luckmann 1972.

17 Cf. Marszolek 2013.

18 For an overview of the Labor Service for the male youth (*RADm*) cf. Patel 2005; for the Labor Service for the female youth (*RADw*), cf. Stephenson 1982. For practical purposes, in this paper I speak only of the *RAD*.

Sciences, which investigated educational practices¹⁹ in the organization.²⁰ Furthermore, the research of cultural anthropologist Manfred Seifert²¹ and historian and cultural scholar Heidrun Zettelbauer²² contribute to my own approach.

The focus of my investigation is directed at the Labor Service's role as the setting for an ideological project, which meant to create the avant-garde for the national socialist 'Volksgemeinschaft'.²³ From June 1935 onwards, (initially) 200,000 young men had to undergo this process per year.²⁴ In the organization "work, after-work [activities], local history, state education, folk culture and the nationalist interpretation thereof"²⁵ as well as incessant drilling and monitoring by the leaders²⁶ were dedicated to the cultivation of "innate abilities," which "require[d] training, namely self-education."²⁷ Even after the outbreak of World War II there existed units of the Labor Service that were particularly drilled in representative purposes such as performing at the *Reichsparteitage*. Friedrich Pohl was selected for such tasks and physical labor or the war remained only side topics in his letters.²⁸ In contrast, drill and

19 Cf. Tenorth 1989: 277. Following Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, the term education is used impartially in this paper. Tenorth argues that holding educational practices of the national socialist regime to the standard of pedagogics would render their investigation pointless. See also Langewiesche/Tenorth 1989: 111–144.

20 A still indispensable overview on educational theories provides: Lingelbach 1987.

21 Seifert 2012; Seifert 1996.

22 Zettelbauer 2018.

23 It is to be made explicit, however, that this was just one facet of the organization. The RAD was, among other things, a tool for combating mass unemployment, a source of manpower, a place for pre- and para-military training and a link in the chain of national socialist organizations dedicated to capture the hearts and minds of the German youth.

24 *Reichsgesetzblatt I* 1935: 769–772. Up until the year 1939, the number steadily increased to a peak of 370,000 men. (Cf. Seifert 2012: 105)

25 Zettelbauer 2018: 556.

26 Cf. Patel 2013: 317. Kiran K. Patel emphasizes the arrangement of the barracks, whose doors could all be monitored from a single viewpoint.

27 Hierl 1942: 131. Hierl voiced these notions in 1929, by then still coined for the training of military leaders. He later directly applied these thoughts to the Labor Service. (Cf. Hierl 1941: 265)

28 Entirely different was the case for young men and women in RAD units that were charged with the construction of defenses, production of armaments or work in the agricultural sector. As many of their letters – which form part of the corpus of my dissertation – demonstrate, the economic necessity of their work, stationing, or the sub-

(self-)education were central themes in his impressions of life in different camps of the RAD and are of central importance for this essay.²⁹

The analyzed corpus of communication covers the time span from June 16 to October 2, 1940. In total it consists of 49 pieces of writing. 41 of these were sent by Friedrich Pohl to his family and eight were addressed to him and written by his mother and father.³⁰ My work is primarily based on the digitized correspondence and some other documents which were temporarily entrusted to the NS-Documentation Center of the City of Cologne by a niece of the author in the year 2010. As the youngest of eight children, Friedrich Pohl was born in Cologne on January 26, 1920. He left junior high school in Cologne in 1936 with his intermediate degree and then started to work in an architectural firm in his home city. When he was drafted into the RAD on June 14, 1940, he had finished his apprenticeship and had been gathering practical experience on construction sites for nearly a year. After having been discharged from the RAD on September 28, 1940, the young man was drafted directly into the Wehrmacht, in which he served until he was killed on July 24, 1942 on the Eastern Front.

The better part of the young man's letters in one form or another contain requests for daily necessities. However, many of them emphasize the good provisions and Friedrich Pohl's overall well-being in the camp. His letters can be read somewhat analogous to the signs of life encountered in most letters from the front, usually meant to put the recipients at ease. Requests for food for "[...] the time between dinner and going to sleep [which] is so long that one gets hungry"³¹ and multiple bouts of homesickness underline the likely soothing, and not necessarily straightforward side of his regular assurances. The biggest challenge to the young man's efforts to continue his social life as much as possible through letters may be identified in the lack of time for

ordination of RAD units under the command of the Wehrmacht could make a huge difference in the individual experience of the Labor Service.

- 29 As part of such an unusual unit, the *Nürnbergzüge*, Friedrich Pohl was transferred multiple times. He served in Immenhausen near the city of Kassel, then in Türkismühle, 50 km to the north of the city of Saarbrücken. Afterward he was sent to Hermeskeil, a small town 25 km to the West and later returned to Türkismühle. Eventually he was assigned to a construction detail in the village of Ehr, 30 km south of Koblenz.
- 30 The frequency of mail sent remained quite constant for the first ten weeks, in September it dropped significantly. On average, Friedrich Pohl's letters are about 1.5 pages of handwriting (approximately 200–300 words).
- 31 Pohl 1940: June 23.

writing. Hierl's demand "In the Labor Service not a single quarter hour may be 'idled away', every single one has to serve for purposeful labor or intended relaxation and recuperation"³² clearly shows in nine of the analyzed letters: "There is no time left to write at all. I am so tired. I can barely stand. [...] On Saturday or Sunday, I'll write more. I'm simply finished. I'm done."³³ Rigorously repetitive daily schedules and the "time-hysterical" (Seifert) frenetic activism complemented physical isolation, control and functionalization of social relationships as well as the removal of spaces to withdraw to:³⁴ "I lie in my bed and write. there [sic!] is no other time. Although it is forbidden."³⁵ Despite the many challenges, Friedrich Pohl attempted to still participate in his family's life and also mentions communication with at least two other individuals outside his family. He demanded to stay in the loop and used the letters as substitute for everyday communication as well as on special occasions and often begged for information on life at home.

3. Negotiation and Integration

When investigating the negotiation and narration of experiences in the letters (4) at their interface with the program of the *RAD*, the analysis needs to consider the difficult situation for writing while serving in the Labor Service as well as some unique properties which make letters distinct from most other texts. Private letters are conceptualized to fit a common frame of reference³⁶ and anticipate a particular reception by the addressee. Assumptions about who may read a letter and knowledge of their convictions, fears and one's relationship to them influences the text often in at least as much as the individual desire to share certain aspects of life with them.³⁷ "How do you, as an old soldier, like my posture in the picture, where we line up."³⁸ Friedrich Pohl for

³² Hierl 1941: 245.

³³ Pohl 1940: September 19.

³⁴ Seifert 1996: 143–144.

³⁵ Pohl 1940: June 16.

³⁶ As this frame of reference is not necessarily shared by me as a historiographer, private or secrete implications in the letters can be overseen and time-specific meanings lost. Additionally, my account of (4) experience as the fourth facet of reality of the letters is subject to and filtered through (1) my own perspective, knowledge and background.

³⁷ Cf. Dobson 2009: 57.

³⁸ Pohl 1940: July 7.

example asked his father, who, a veteran, responded positively and jokingly: “[...] I’m going to have the entire column stand at attention when I come for a visit. [...] Well, a bit of fun is essential. Always keep your head up.”³⁹ Possible censorship in the RAD is also to be considered. While the extent of it is all but certain, it is clear that in Friedrich Pohl’s unit received mail was centralized and given out after the daily ceremony of saluting the flag.⁴⁰ “I’m waiting every evening. But mostly in vain.”⁴¹ Compared with other authors writing such letters, the young man’s criticism of his experience is very moderate. Although there is no clear indication of external censorship having been carried out by RAD officials in the unit, one can hold for certain that some form of self-censoring⁴² influenced the young man’s writing. These considerations are compounded by the social, cultural, and individual limitations of being able to formulate something which restrict all forms of communication.⁴³

Addressing his life in the RAD, Friedrich Pohl’s letters reveal both homesickness and dauntless optimism to rise to the task at hand. Approaching the sources from the field of *Erfahrungsgeschichte*, one may state that the young man drew on a store of societal knowledge. Knowledge, he acquired through primary and secondary socialization which to a great extent became routinized and turned into a frame of reference for making sense of things. When he successfully negotiated new challenges while in the Labor Service with knowledge obtained during his previous socialization, he was able to make experiences.⁴⁴ This makes the letters, as a space in which home and camp could be mediated, all the more important. Through fervent repetition the education in the camp was meant to facilitate a deep internalization of “[...] a kind of National Socialist consciousness [...] as well as ideological patterns of thinking, reasoning and causal relations.”⁴⁵ For Friedrich Pohl, writing his letters and negotiating in them seems to have been both part and emblematic of this process.

When relating selected events of his everyday life in the RAD, he sometimes appears to have invested particular effort in attempts at making existing

³⁹ Ibid.: July 9.

⁴⁰ At least when stationed in camps in Immenhausen and Türkismühle.

⁴¹ Pohl 1940: August 27.

⁴² Cf. Dobson 2009: 62.

⁴³ Cf. Schuster 2020: 25.

⁴⁴ Cf. Latzel 1997: 13–14.

⁴⁵ Zettelbauer 2018: 555.

and newly acquired knowledge fit.⁴⁶ In doing so, his letters picked up on one of the central demands of the concept of 'Volksgemeinschaft' – to integrate. "I am the most senior cadet in the room [*Stubenältester*] of the first squad. Even though I'm one of the youngest. Well, the sports helped a lot. Because of it, the hard and fast service doesn't affect the legs as much."⁴⁷ The young man repeatedly connected the rigorous drills in the RAD to his past experience with sports. Frequently he displayed a sportsmanlike attitude towards the harsh living conditions, characterized by a strong disregard for individual needs or privacy, constant stress and arbitrary harassment. But the missing separation between work and spare time, privacy, and shared life⁴⁸ clearly also affected him when he wrote to his mother: "I often go into the great silent pine-forest and dream of home. Those are my best hours."⁴⁹ Sometimes in the letters he also displayed anger or frustration: "Because of the reluctance towards this whole operation I, in fact, do not know what to write."⁵⁰ Considering these effects of life in the Labor Service on his writing, a likely explanation for his usually positive characterization of "[...] locker check, stool construction,⁵¹ bed-making, inspection of the boots and all the other [tasks] that make life difficult for us"⁵² as sports challenges is that it helped the young man to make sense of the routine. Thereby, it would have on the one hand provided him with a mode of dealing with the harassment, on the other hand of presenting himself to the family members as up to the challenge. Through the analogy

46 As the RAD was only a link in the chain of national socialist institutions devoted to seizing the hearts and minds of the German youth, it isn't always possible to determine whether an ideological pattern of thinking was learned in the organization or already existed before the Service. This makes no difference for my argument, since the RAD and its education provided context and content for the letters, which makes its contribution to the internalization unequivocal.

47 Pohl 1940: June 23.

48 Cf. Seifert 1996: 170.

49 Pohl 1940: August 23.

50 Ibid.: September 11.

51 A peculiarity of the Labor Service, for the "stool-construction" [Schemelbau] "the young men had to take off their clothes and to arrange them on their stool according to a precisely defined scheme. [...] The least bit of real or alleged deviation or disorder provided a pretext for harassment by the leader, especially in the form of the so called Budenzauber, which referred to unscheduled cleaning and scrubbing of the barracks as a form of punishment." (Patel 2005: 225)

52 Pohl 1940: September 4.

of sports, the narration of life in the Labor Service could be formed and formulated according to the expectations of those who had not lived through something similar. This way he could convey these things to others and make them and himself comprehend without burdening the readers too much. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu "in the service of a general intention, [Friedrich Pohl] selected significant events and created own connections between them to make them coherent."⁵³ Supposing that fitting in, performing well or, in short, integration formed at least part of Friedrich Pohl's 'general intention,' in his letters he (5) actively integrated the education in the Service in his own biography. In writing, the social vision, underlying the ideological project, was woven into the events experienced in the RAD (4) and simultaneously as text turned into (2) material 'fact' in the form of letters.

4. Writing 'Volksgemeinschaft' into 'Fact'?

Did letters like these also affect the German society at the time? Did they contribute to turning a social vision into 'fact'? Following the premises of sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman,⁵⁴ every act of corresponding with another person entails some reflection on oneself and a response to the world which one finds oneself living in and reacts to. Friedrich Pohl then was, on the one hand, a product of social contexts and conditions. On the other hand, as a 'bridge' home, Friedrich Pohl's letters did not just represent attempts to continue his social life. Rather, through living and writing in a certain way, he himself influenced the society he lived in.⁵⁵ From the RAD camps as laboratories for the Volksgemeinschaft,⁵⁶ text flowed to Friedrich Pohl's family outside. I do not mean to disguise that the lack of sources makes it nearly impossible to quantify the effect of this or to even say much about the reaction of Friedrich Pohl's parents. Nevertheless, the letters, in another way, appear to have (5) participated in the attempt of constructing a new social reality.

To reiterate: The Labor Service was supposed to form young people into the avant-garde of the 'people's community,' to (contribute to) turn the na-

53 Bourdieu 1990: 76.

54 Cf. Berger/Luckmann 1972.

55 Traceable to a micro-level of engaging with his family and a meso-level of being a functioning part of an organization.

56 Cf. Patel 2013: 323.

tional socialist vision of the 'Volksgemeinschaft' into social reality. The organization based its education on a three-step-practice: "Demonstrating [Vorleben], experiencing [Erleben] and imitating [Nachleben]."⁵⁷ The focus lay on creating a practical experience, which not only created knowledge but equally trained body and character. Youths were to be made fit into the 'people's community' and to put individual needs aside.⁵⁸ The process attempted to achieve deindividuation and the deprivation of individuality in favor of the 'Volksgemeinschaft'.⁵⁹ To be successful, the organization required the young people to live through its program, to replicate it and to apply it to their life. Therefore, when Friedrich, in writing his letters, actively tried to fit into the community and reproduced the education in the Labor Service, I interpret it as participation in the making of the 'Volksgemeinschaft' – the construction of social reality through writing.

Considering that subordination and disciplining of the recruits "was the signature element of the Labor Service,"⁶⁰ Friedrich Pohl's preoccupation with the drills and his reactions to them are important. The combination of drill and physical exercise was meant to foster obedience and to instill qualities identified as essential for the 'people's community' and military service. The ability to take initiative and responsibility, to make decisions and to unswervingly stick to them were regarded equally important to self-control and the willingness to self-sacrifice oneself for one's people.⁶¹ The already discussed characterizations of the drills as sports challenges show that the young man concerned himself with the drills. In his writing he tried to make sense of them and, in doing so, made and replicated the experiences of the daily events. He tried to make them fit with existing knowledge, with himself – and simultaneously made himself fit better into the (3) community of the RAD. He did so according to the guidelines of the social vision, but in his unique way. The letters speak of his *Eigensinn* (Lüdtke),⁶² his very own take on the events in the RAD, negotiating (4) the reality of his experience in his letters and giving it a particular twist. It is the transformative, even subversive

57 Cf. Seifert 1996: 180–181; Zettelbauer 2018: 555 speaks of "demonstration, practice, imitation."

58 Cf. Hierl 1942: 201, 219; cf. ibid. 1941: 274.

59 Cf. Hierl 1941: 297.

60 Patel 2005: 225.

61 Cf. Hierl 1941: 196, 205, 267–270.

62 Cf. Lüdtke 2015.

power of this twist which stands at the core of historian Alf Lüdtke's concept. Friedrich Pohl's interpretation of the drills (5) did change a fraction of the social reality but rather through integration and subordination in an organization in which no "[...] private sphere, no space which could escape the law of the community"⁶³ was meant to remain. His acts of subscribing to the RAD's rules in his letters can, for instance, be observed when they affirmed the "[...] principle of achievement [which was] fully affirmed by our [national socialist] worldview,"⁶⁴ as Hierl put it. When, e.g., planning his home leave, Friedrich Pohl judged: "No comrade gets leave on Sunday. It very much depends on the conduct."⁶⁵ [...] As goes the work, so goes the reward."⁶⁶ Thus, the young man characterized the particular decision, the underlying principle as well as the power of the leader to decide such matters as just.

The process of subordination becomes especially perceptible where it is aligned with self-education. "Whatever may come, I am strong enough to take everything upon myself. Only one [person] can be victorious and that's me. Ha Ha Ha!", Friedrich Pohl wrote in a letter, in which he also mentioned his homesickness: "Homesickness comes in an ever-recurring wave. Then one is good for nothing. Maybe tomorrow it passes again for a couple days."⁶⁷ The proximity of the expressed homesickness to the boundless optimism of the previous quote in the same letter make it seem likely that the process of writing helped him in reassuring and educating himself. Actions demanded by the RAD: "Without the willingness of every individual to respond to the educational influences and to work on himself, there is no educational success."⁶⁸ In replicating the behavior required and putting it into writing, the young man did his part to (5) fit into the envisioned new society in the making and thereby partook in trying to create it. This also becomes apparent in efforts of reevaluation and re-formation of experiences in retrospect. Even particularly negative events and phases are made compliant with the guidelines of the Labor Service and purpose is attributed in hindsight: "The service may be tough but by far not as tough as that in Immenhausen. I am glad now to have

63 Krüger 1937: 99. Quoted in Seifert 1996.

64 Hierl 1941: 273.

65 "Führung," which could also be translated as leadership.

66 Pohl 1940: July 27.

67 Ibid.: August 27.

68 Hierl 1941: 265.

been there.”⁶⁹ While this statement can also be read as him being glad to have been ‘hardened’ before joining the new unit, the bottom-line is the same: The young man asserted to acknowledge the merits of his education and created a narration that appeared to make sense. Thereby, in the letters he assumed the role the RAD had intended for him in the ‘people’s community’: “You can be pleased with your workingman [*Arbeitsmann*].”⁷⁰

Other central elements of the RAD’s ideological project were also reproduced throughout the letters. One statement in particular, connected to the *topos* of ‘challenge’ in Friedrich Pohl’s letters, is noteworthy: “I always wished for the tough, unrelenting service. If you are healthy and strong, you can make it. Otherwise however, it is nearly impossible.”⁷¹ The quote conveys more than self-praise as it corresponds strongly to a cornerstone of the Labor Service’s agenda: biological selection. Selection was exercised in a two-pronged approach in the RAD. On the one hand, access to the Labor Service was denied on “Social Darwinian, political, and racist” grounds. “Community aliens” [*Gemeinschaftsfremde*] such as “Non-Aryans” or people married to them, individuals with a criminal record and the mentally or physically unfit were excluded.⁷² On the other hand, Hierl’s organization strove to select future leaders for the community: “Selection, which in turbulent revolutionary times is implemented by battle, in quieter times must be carried out by [...] human management [...] in order to prevent mediocrity and mechanical thinking to gain the upper hand in the leadership of the community.”⁷³ In this process, attitude and character were regarded as being more important than theoretical knowledge or technical ability.⁷⁴

In the letters, Friedrich Pohl’s competitiveness, his praise of toughness and relentlessness can be read as manifestation of this agenda of selection. However, it becomes most apparent when he decidedly distanced himself from a comrade: “‘Friend’ Rösgen has three days special detention. He fell asleep while on guard duty. He isn’t mentally accountable. He is the camel of the unit. He is always just writing to his ‘Billa’. He isn’t in my room anymore.

69 Pohl 1940: August 18.

70 Ibid.: July 7.

71 Ibid.: July 9.

72 Cf. Patel 2005: 129–32. Quote on p. 129.

73 Hierl 1941: 274.

74 Cf. ibid.: 273.

He was too bad at his duties. He isn't on the pictures either.”⁷⁵ Friedrich Pohl's comment on mental unfitness does not necessarily refer to Social Darwinian selection, but it certainly corresponds to the processes of selection within the organization. As the Labor Service counted on 'education' by the peers,⁷⁶ one may assume that in (3) historical reality the pressure on comrade Rösgen and the consequences for him would have gone beyond not being in a photograph. The letter reiterates the clear-cut distinction between those adjusting to the norms in the Service and those not fitting in. In doing so, it (5) reproduced and asserted the norms of the 'Volksgemeinschaft' in the making and contributed to increasing the pressure on those not meeting the standard. In contrast to the inappropriate behavior of his comrade, Friedrich Pohl displayed the appropriate determination in his letters: "Tomorrow we'll go to work with a hurray. Nothing can unsettle us."⁷⁷ This now definitely was in accordance with what Hierl desired: "[...] the Labor Service needs men of action."⁷⁸

5. Conclusion

If there is one thing most historians who work with and on the concept of 'Volksgemeinschaft' seem to be able to agree to, it is that the 'people's community' never came to exist in the form the national socialists vaguely and opaquely promised. Nevertheless, the social vision managed to affect all five facets of reality discussed in this analysis.

This influence on (1) historical research and historiography is obvious. For roughly two decades, 'Volksgemeinschaft' – both as an object of research but mostly as an analytical category – has been fiercely debated. While already "in the Weimar Republic almost no party was willing to refrain from the term,"⁷⁹ it is chiefly the complex relationship of national socialist propaganda, the effects of 'Volksgemeinschaft' as or on the historical reality, and considerations of approaching the two which give historians pause. The term is used as a

75 Pohl 1940: July 16.

76 Cf. Hierl 1941: 264. This is precisely where creating 'Volksgemeinschaft' on the meso-level of an institution like the RAD comes into play.

77 Pohl 1940: July 14.

78 Hierl 1941: 273.

79 Wildt 2011: 104.

reference to changed power relations, for the depiction of inclusion and exclusion or, as in my analysis, for the investigation of “the mobilizing force of the vision of a better community.”⁸⁰

The results of my analysis underline the value of focusing on the social promise of the discourse of the ‘Volksgemeinschaft,’ since “[...] in the mobilization lay its political power.”⁸¹ Cultural historian Inge Marszolek argued that “the NS-Volksgemeinschaft in all its aspects is generated again and again through communication, or, spoken with Foucault, that processes of cumanitization [Vergemeinschaftung] [...] were parts of the microphysics of power.”⁸² Following this view, the specific effect of Friedrich’s letters on his parents, which due to a lack of sources cannot be ascertained anyhow, does not need to be measured. Rather, it is the revealed integration of the RAD into (4) the young man’s experiences, his narration of self and biography which points to processes of participation and deindividuation. His subordination under and reiteration of the norms of the service contributed (5) to the actualization of an incomplete version of the ‘Volksgemeinschaft’ through communication – to the making of a community in the making. Allowing to investigate mobilization through an ideological project without reverting to dichotomies can be a significant benefit of using the concept of ‘Volksgemeinschaft’ as a social vision. With this approach, the ‘fact’ that it is possible to observe the intricate relationship of vision and effects is quite the opposite of a dilemma.⁸³

Of course, the (3) historical reality of life in the RAD and in the German Society under the rule of national socialism as a whole was dependent on many factors. Also, aspects other than the “new social practice which served to symbolically emphasize the ideologically propagated community of all ‘Volksgenossen’, while excluding those discriminated as community aliens or those politically distanced.”⁸⁴ But it is exactly this new social practice which Friedrich Pohl’s letters were part of. A practice which did not turn the national socialist vision into ‘fact’ but nonetheless had very real effects – not the least of which was the reproduction of itself as well as the vague shadow of a community. It is precisely the driving forces inherent to the

80 Cf. Kershaw 2011: 3–9. Quote on p. 3.

81 Wildt 2011: 103–104.

82 Marszolek 2013: 67.

83 As stated by: Gruner 2018: 75.

84 Schmiechen-Ackermann 2012: 14.

social vision which are reflected in the sources and condensed in my analysis. When separating the different facets of reality, the simultaneity of vision and impact becomes discernible and becomes downright fundamental for the mechanism of the ideological project Friedrich Pohl underwent in the Labor Service.⁸⁵

Friedrich Pohl wrote the national socialist social vision of a 'people's community' as text of letters into (2) material 'fact.' He made it 'fact' in (4) narrating his experiences and took part in an ideological project that influenced the German society. Even when the effects of his letters cannot be ascertained, I reason that the concept of 'Volksgemeinschaft' (5) had an impact on the (3) historical reality in becoming communicative and therefore social practice. The best example of its impact is to observe the driving force this social vision developed in Friedrich Pohl's letters.

Considering historian Wolf Gruner's caveat not to dismiss possible ambivalences in the experience of communization,⁸⁶ I do not claim that Friedrich Pohl subscribed unconditionally or entirely to the RAD's attempt to realize the social vision. I offer no more and no less than a reading of his letters as negotiations of and participation in an organization he at other times wrote very disapproving of. As presented in this paper, it was not simply the mobilizing capacity inherent to the national socialist vision which affected the young author of the analyzed letters. Rather, his texts speak of the cumulative effect of social promise and rigorous discipline, drill and (mutual) supervision in an ideological project. The realities of life in a prototypical community aiming for deindividuation created a setting that urged not only to obedience but also to self-education. A setting that demonstrated the importance of becoming a valuable part of the 'Volksgemeinschaft.'

Since for Hierl "[...] the regard for the collective" had to "[...] outrank the regard for the individual"⁸⁷ it is somewhat ironic that it is precisely in the writing of an individual that the effects of this social vision become evident. In Friedrich Pohl's letters, composed under difficult circumstances, substituting for other forms of interaction and serving various functions, the education in the RAD showed its effects: In and through the young man's writing the

85 The RAD served as a catalyst for existing knowledge and/or made new experiences available. Whether in the case of some individual letters only one of the two applies makes no difference for my argument.

86 Gruner 2018: 78–79.

87 Hierl 1941: 274.

mobilizing potential became 'fact' – something the 'Volksgemeinschaft,' as envisioned by the national socialists, never achieved.

Bibliography

Berger, Peter L./Luckmann, Thomas (1972): *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Harmondsworth.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1990): "Die Biographische Illusion", in: BIOS - Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History 7/1, 75–81.

Canning, Kathleen (1994): "Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn. Historicizing Discourse and Experience", in: *Signs* 19/2, 368–404.

Daniel, Ute (2016): *Kompendium Kulturgeschichte. Theorien, Praxis, Schlüsselwörter*, Frankfurt am Main.

Dobson, Miriam (2009): "Letters", in: id./Ziemann, Benjamin (eds.): *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History*, London/New York, 57–73.

Gruner, Wolf (2018): "Das Dogma der 'Volksgemeinschaft' und die Mikrogeschichte der NS-Gesellschaft", in: Schmiechen-Ackermann, Detlef et. al. (eds.): *Der Ort der "Volksgemeinschaft" in der deutschen Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, Paderborn, 71–90.

Henzel, Katrin (2020): "Materialität des Briefs", in: Strobel et. al (eds.), *Handbuch Brief. Von der Frühen Neuzeit bis zur Gegenwart*, 222–231.

Hierl, Konstantin (1942): *Ausgewählte Schriften und Reden*. vol. 1, ed. Herbert Freiherr von Stetten-Erb, München.

— (1941): *Ausgewählte Schriften und Reden*. vol. 2, ed. Herbert Freiherr von Stetten-Erb, München.

Jaeger, Stephan (2019): "Factuality in Historiography/Historical Study", in: Fludernik, Monika/Ryan, Marie-Lauren (eds.): *Narrative Factuality. A Handbook*, Berlin/Boston, 335–349.

Kershaw, Ian (2011): "Volksgemeinschaft": Potenzial und Grenzen eines neuen Forschungskonzepts", in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 59/1, 1–17.

Krüger, Alfred (1937): "Arbeit und Gemeinschaft. Zur Entwicklung der Arbeitsdienstidee", in: *Deutschlands Erneuerung* 21, 96–100.

Langewiesche, Dieter/Tenorth, Heinz-Elmar (eds.) (1989): *Handbuch der deutschen Bildungsgeschichte, vol. 5: 1918–1945. Die Weimarer Republik und die nationalsozialistische Diktatur*, München.

Latzel, Klaus (1997): "Vom Kriegserlebnis zur Kriegserfahrung. Theoretische und methodische Überlegungen zur erfahrungsgeschichtlichen Untersuchung von Feldpostbriefen", in: *Militärgeschichtlichen Mitteilungen* 56/1, 1–30.

Lingelbach, Karl-Christoph (1987): *Erziehung und Erziehungstheorien im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland. Ursprünge und Wandlungen der 1933–1945 in Deutschland vorherrschenden erziehungstheoretischen Strömungen, ihre politische Funktion und ihr Verhältnis zur außerschulischen Erziehungspraxis des "Dritten Reiches"*, Frankfurt am Main.

Lüdtke, Alf (2015): *Eigen-Sinn. Fabrikalltag, Arbeitererfahrungen und Politik vom Kaiserreich bis in den Faschismus*, Münster.

Marszolek, Inge (2013): "Verhandlungssache. Die 'Volksgemeinschaft' – eine kommunikative Figuration", in: von Reeken, Dietmar/Thießen, Malte (eds.): *"Volksgemeinschaft" als soziale Praxis. Neue Forschungen zur NS-Gesellschaft vor Ort*, Paderborn, 65–77.

Mayring, Philipp (2015): *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Grundlagen und Techniken*, Weinheim.

Patel, Kiran K. (2013): "Volksgenossen und Gemeinschaftsfremde. Über den Doppelcharakter der nationalsozialistischen Lager", in: Jahr, Christoph/Thiel, Jens (eds.): *Lager vor Auschwitz. Gewalt und Integration im 20. Jahrhundert*, Berlin, 311–334.

— (2005): *Soldiers of Labor. Labor Service in Nazi Germany and New Deal America, 1933–1945*, Cambridge.

Pohl, Friedrich (1940): *Briefwechsel*, NS-Documentation Centre of the City of Cologne, N 3126.

Reichsministerium des Inneren (1935): Reichsarbeitsdienstgesetz vom 26. Juni 1935 und Erlass des Führers und Reichskanzlers über die Dauer der Dienstzeit und die Stärke des Reichsarbeitsdienstes vom 27. Juni 1935, in: *Reichsgesetzblatt 1935/I*, 769–772.

Schmiechen-Ackermann, Detlef (2012): "Volksgemeinschaft". Mythos der NS-Propaganda, wirkungsmächtige soziale Verheißung oder soziale Realität im 'Dritten Reich'? Einführung", in: id. (ed.): *"Volksgemeinschaft". Mythos, wirkungsmächtige soziale Verheißung oder soziale Realität im "Dritten Reich"? Zwischenbilanz einer kontroversen Debatte*, Paderborn, 13–53.

Schuster, Britt-Marie (2020) "Linguistik" in: Strobel et. al (eds.), *Handbuch Brief. Von der Frühen Neuzeit bis zur Gegenwart*, 19–39.

Scott, Joan W. (1999): "The Evidence of Experience", in: McDonald, Terrence J. (ed.): *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, Ann Arbor, 379–406.

Seifert, Manfred (2012): “‘Ehrendienst am deutschen Volke’ und ‘Schule der Volksgemeinschaft’. Der Reichsarbeitsdienst (RAD)”, in: Becker, Stephanie/Studt, Christoph (eds.): *Und sie werden nicht mehr frei sein ihr ganzes Leben: Funktion und Stellenwert der NSDAP, ihrer Gliederungen und angeschlossenen Verbände im ‘Dritten Reich’*, Berlin, 105–140.

— (1994): *Kulturarbeit im Reichsarbeitsdienst. Theorie und Praxis nationalsozialistischer Kulturflege im Kontext historisch-politischer, organisatorischer und ideo-logischer Einflüsse*, Münster/New York.

Steber, Martina/Gotto, Bernhard (2018): “‘Volksgemeinschaft’. Writing the Social History of the Nazi Regime”, in: id. (eds.): *Visions of Community in Nazi Germany. Social Engineering and Private Lives*, Oxford, 1–25.

Stephenson, Jill (1982): “Women’s Labor Service in Nazi Germany”, in: *Central European History* 15/3, 241–265.

Steuwer, Janosch (2013): “Was meint und nützt das Sprechen von der ‘Volksgemeinschaft’? Neuere Literatur zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte des Nationalsozialismus”, in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 53, 487–534.

Strobel, Jochen et. al. (eds.) (2020): *Handbuch Brief. Von der Frühen Neuzeit bis zur Gegenwart*, Berlin/Boston.

Tenorth, Heinz-Elmar (1989): “Erziehung und Erziehungswissenschaft von 1930–1945. Über Kontroversen ihrer Analyse”, in: *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 35/2, 261–280.

Wildt, Michael (2011): “‘Volksgemeinschaft’. Eine Antwort auf Ian Kershaw”, in: *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 8/1, 102–109.

Zettelbauer, Heidrun (2018): “Unwanted Desire and Processes of Self-Discipline. Autobiographical Representations of the Reichsarbeitsdienst Camps in the Diary of a Young Female National Socialist”, in: *zeitgeschichte* 45/4, 537–574.