

‘For a Genuine and Noble Nakedness’?

German Naturism in the Third Reich

Matthew Jefferies (*University of Manchester*)

British and American travellers during the 1920s were frequently moved to comment on the extent to which public nudity was becoming a feature of everyday life in Germany. In his memoirs the poet Stephen Spender recalled his first visit to the country in 1929:

The sun—symbol of the great wealth of nature within the poverty of man—was a primary social force in this Germany. Thousands of people went to the open-air swimming baths or lay down on the shores of the rivers and lakes, almost nude, and sometimes quite nude, and the boys who had turned the deepest mahogany walked amongst those people with paler skins like kings among their courtiers.¹

There were also many less celebrated observers who were so enthused by the naked lifestyle that they wrote books arguing for its adoption in their own countries: Dr. Maurice Parmalee, for instance, a Constantinople-born American sociologist who wrote *Nudity in Modern Life* (1927) after spending the years 1920–23 and 1926 in Germany;² or the Reverend C.E. Norwood, author of *Nudism in England* (1933), who visited Germany in 1928;³ or Harold C. Booth, who came back from 1920s Berlin to found the short-lived Gymnosophical Society.⁴ Indeed, the clothes-free lifestyle was so closely associated with Germans that the first nudist colony in Britain—a piece of Hertfordshire woodland purchased by Charles and Dorothy Macaskie in 1929—was given the name ‘Spielplatz’,⁵ even though it had no teutonic connections.

¹ Stephen Spender, *World within World* (Berkeley, 1966), p. 107.

² Maurice Parmalee, *Nudity in Modern Life. The New Gymnosophy* (London, 1929), p. 5.

³ C.E. Norwood, *Nudism in England* (London, 1933), p. 7.

⁴ Gymnosophy—from the Greek *Gymnos* (naked)—was one of many terms used by early advocates of a clothes-free lifestyle; others included *Lichtfreunde* (‘friends of the light’) or *Sonnenkinder* (‘children of the sun’). The two most common terms today, ‘nudism’ and ‘naturism’, are used synonymously throughout this essay, even though some authors have attempted to identify a difference between the two. Arnd Krüger, for instance, has suggested that for nudists ‘being in the nude was the most important issue’, whereas for naturists it was just one goal amongst many. This distinction is not, I think, very helpful. See Krüger, ‘There Goes This Art of Manliness: Naturism and Racial Hygiene in Germany’, *Journal of Sport History*, 18, 1 (1991), p. 150.

⁵ See Iseult Richardson, *No Shadows Fall: Born into Naturism. The Story of Spielplatz* (Scarborough, 1994).

At around the same time, a German émigré named Kurt Barthel was establishing the first nudist colony in the United States,⁶ and the American husband-and-wife team Frances and Mason Merrill were undertaking a wide-eyed and open-mouthed odyssey through the clubs and colonies of German naturism, later described in their book *Among the Nudists*.⁷

The apparent popularity of naturism and nude bathing in 1920s Germany is usually portrayed as an example of Weimar's liberated and cosmopolitan climate; a product of the short-lived 'dance on the volcano' between Wilhelmine authoritarianism and Nazi totalitarianism. Stephen Spender again:

Roofless houses, expressionist painting, atonal music, bars for homosexuals, nudism, sun-bathing, camping, all were accepted, and became like bright, gaudy, superficial colours in which the whole country was painted. Surrounded by this superficiality there were also serious artists, indignant Protestants, vengeful nationalists, Communists, many private tragedies, and much suffering. But such intense expressions of will and feeling were obscured by the predominant fashionableness of advanced attitudes. It was easy to be advanced. You only had to take off your clothes.⁸

All this, however, can be rather misleading. Firstly, as recent books by Karl Toepfer, Michael Hau, and Chad Ross have shown,⁹ German naturism was essentially a product of the Empire rather than the Republic, and was already well established as part of the wider lifestyle reform (*Lebensreform*) movement before 1914.¹⁰ Its separation into racist-reactionary and emancipatory-progressive strands was also apparent prior to World War I. Secondly, as this essay will indicate, naturism did not come to an abrupt halt in 1933. Indeed, it was actually during the years of National Socialist rule that German naturism passed some of its most important landmarks. Thus, although George Mosse's widely-read *Nationalism and Sexuality* suggests that the Nazis 'forbade nudism after their accession to power',¹¹ a closer examination of the fate of German naturism after 1933 reveals a more complex picture, which serves to highlight not only the limits of the régime's totalitarian aspirations, but also the naturist movement's own disparate and problematic heritage.

Mosse was, of course, by no means alone in viewing National Socialism as a petty bourgeois movement, whose 'respectable' middle-class mentality was intrinsically hostile to naturism, pornography, and 'all printed material

⁶ Krüger, 'There Goes This Art of Manliness', p. 136.

⁷ Frances and Mason Merrill, *Among the Nudists* (London, 1931).

⁸ Spender, *World within World*, pp. 108–109.

⁹ Karl Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy. Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture 1910–1935* (Berkeley, 1997); Michael Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History, 1890–1930* (Chicago and London, 2003); Chad Ross, *Naked Germany: Health, Race and the Nation* (Oxford, 2004). Unfortunately the latter was published too late to be discussed in this essay.

¹⁰ For an overview see Matthew Jefferies, *Imperial Culture in Germany 1871–1918* (Basingstoke, 2003), Ch. 5. Also Wolfgang Krabbe, *Gesellschaftsveränderung durch Lebensreform* (Göttingen, 1974); Eva Barlösius, *Naturgemäße Lebensführung. Zur Geschichte der Lebensreform um die Jahrhundertwende* (Frankfurt/Main and New York, 1997); Kevin Repp, *Reformers, Critics and the Paths of German Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

¹¹ George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York, 1985), p. 171.

that ... could produce an erotic effect'.¹² Dagmar Herzog writes that 'scholars from the 1960s to the present have repeatedly assumed that the Third Reich was "sex-hostile", "pleasureless", and characterized by "official German prudery"',¹³ notwithstanding the contrary impression conveyed by the numerous images gathered in Udo Pini's 1992 pictorial compendium *Leibeskult und Liebeskitsch*.¹⁴ Indeed, Pini's own commentary suggested that 'whatever Weimar had thought and partially practised as progress, was radically denied or terminated' after 1933,¹⁵ and the Mosse view is still readily apparent in Stefan Maiwald and Gerd Mischler's recent mass-market paperback *Sexualität unter dem Hakenkreuz*.¹⁶ Yet, as Elizabeth Heinemann has noted, 'the last twenty-five years have seen remarkable advances in our understanding of sexuality under Nazism': the Third Reich, she suggests, was an era of 'sexual opportunity as well as sexual repression'.¹⁷ Naturists have, of course, always been quick to downplay the sexual aspects of their lifestyle—emphasizing the de-eroticizing effect of full, 'natural' nudity—yet there can be no doubt that a growing interest in the history of sexuality has helped to stimulate interest in the history of naturism too. In Germany, the emergence of *Körpergeschichte*¹⁸—a fashionable cocktail of medical, sexual and gender history—has also made a contribution, most notably in Maren Möhring's *Marmorleiber*, which offers a highly theoretical treatise on gender constructions in early German nudism.¹⁹ The closest English-language equivalent, Michael Hau's aforementioned *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany*, is primarily a work of medical history but has much to say on gender, race and class too. Both of these engaging studies, however, make a conscious decision to stop in 1930, and at the time of writing the historiography on Third Reich naturism remains limited to a few short chapters and articles, either providing a general overview,²⁰ or focusing on prominent individuals, such as

¹² Mosse quoted by Dagmar Herzog, 'Hubris and Hypocrisy, Incitement and Disavowal: Sexuality and German Fascism', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 11, 1/2 (2002), p. 6.

¹³ Herzog, 'Hubris and Hypocrisy', pp. 3–4.

¹⁴ Udo Pini, *Leibeskult und Liebeskitsch. Erotik im Dritten Reich* (Munich, 1992).

¹⁵ Quoted in Herzog, 'Hubris and Hypocrisy', p. 6.

¹⁶ Stefan Maiwald and Gerd Mischler, *Sexualität unter dem Hakenkreuz. Manipulation und Vernichtung der Intimsphäre im NS-Staat* (Munich, 2002).

¹⁷ Elizabeth Heinemann, 'Sexuality and Nazism: The Doubly Unspeakable?', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 11, 1/2 (2002), pp. 23 and 31.

¹⁸ See Maren Lorenz, *Leibhaftige Vergangenheit. Einführung in die Körpergeschichte* (Tübingen, 2000); or Clemens Wischermann and Stefan Haas (eds), *Körper mit Geschichte* (Stuttgart, 2000).

¹⁹ Maren Möhring, *Marmorleiber. Körperbildung in der deutschen Nacktkultur, 1890–1930* (Cologne, 2004).

²⁰ Dietger Pforte, 'Zur Freikörperkultur-Bewegung im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland', in M. Andritzky and T. Rautenberg (eds), *'Wir sind nackt und nennen uns Du'. Von Lichtfreunden und Sonnenkämpfern. Eine Geschichte der Freikörperkultur* (Giessen, 1989), pp. 136–45; Oliver König, 'Nationalsozialismus und Nachkriegszeit', Ch. 4 in his *Nacktheit. Soziale Normierung und Moral* (Opladen, 1990); Ulrich Linse, 'Sonnenmenschen unter der Swastika. Die FKK-Bewegung im Dritten Reich', in M. Grisko (ed.), *Freikörperkultur und Lebenswelt* (Kassel, 1999), pp. 239–96.

Adolf Koch or Hans Surén.²¹ Empirical studies of naturism in specific localities during the Nazi era are in particularly short supply.²² This essay, which draws on the magnificent archival collections of the privately-run Internationale FKK-Bibliothek (IFB) at Baunatal near Kassel, will attempt to fill some of the gaps.²³

When Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor in 1933 German naturism consisted of a myriad of rival associations. The three main bourgeois naturist groups—the Imperial Association for Free Physical Culture (Reichsverband für Freikörperkultur, RFK); the Imperial League for Free Physical Culture (Reichsbund für Freikörperkultur, AFK); and the League for a Free Way of Life (Liga für freie Lebensgestaltung, LffL)—had admittedly been consolidated into one loose confederation under the RFK banner in 1931, but many smaller associations still existed outside this umbrella, and there was also an entirely separate socialist naturism, united since 1928 under the heading Proletarian Lifestyle Reform und Free Physical Culture within the labour movement's People's Health Association (Verband Volksgesundheit).²⁴ The comparatively modest membership totals of these various organizations (maybe 25,000 for the bourgeois groupings; 60,000 for the socialist ones²⁵) were dwarfed by the far larger number of Germans who simply enjoyed nude bathing and were not affiliated to any organization. During the 1920s the appeal of naturism had moved beyond the zealous *Lebensreformer* and cultish sects of the Wilhelmine period, and into the wider population. This occurred through various channels, including the wartime experience of soldiers—for whom nude bathing in rivers and streams became a definitive experience, passed on through periods of home leave and letters from the

²¹ See for example Giseler Spitzer, 'Die "Adolf-Koch-Bewegung". Genese und Praxis einer proletarischen Selbsthilfe-Organisation zwischen den Weltkriegen', in Hans Joachim Teichler (ed.), *Arbeiterkultur und Arbeitersport* (Clausthal-Zellerfeld, 1985); or Spitzer's 'Gymnastik und Parademarsch? Die Rolle Hans Suréns für die Einführung der Leibesübungen in der Frühzeit des nationalsozialistischen Arbeitsdienstes', in G. Spitzer and D. Schmidt (eds), *Sport zwischen Eigenständigkeit und Fremdbestimmung* (Bonn, 1986).

²² Curiously, two of the exceptions focus on the same town: Stephanie Sell, 'Aspekte der Freikörperkultur in den zwanziger und dreißiger Jahren in Göttingen', in H. Langenfeld and S. Nielsen (eds), *Beiträge zur Sportgeschichte Niedersachsens*, vol. 2 (Hoya, 1998); and an unpublished Göttingen University dissertation by Fabian Krüger, 'Die Lebensreform-Bewegung und Naturismus in Göttingen. Die wechselvolle Entwicklung der organisierten Freikörperkultur in der Weimarer Zeit und im Nationalsozialismus' (1999).

²³ This research was made possible by a Small Research Grant from the British Academy, to whom I am indebted.

²⁴ See Franz Walter, Viola Denecke and Cornelia Regin, *Sozialistische Gesundheits- und Lebensreformverbände*, vol. 2 (Bonn, 1991).

²⁵ Although *Lebensreform* and naturism in particular are often considered to be typically *bürgerlich*, in the 1920s approximately two-thirds of Germany's organized naturists belonged to socialist associations. The figure of 60,000 is given by Merrill, *Among the Nudists*, p. 184; Giseler Spitzer in *Der Deutsche Naturismus. Idee und Entwicklung einer volkserzieherischen Bewegung im Schnittfeld von Lebensreform, Sport und Politik* (Ahrensburg, 1983), p. 139, and others.

front²⁶—and the youth movement. As Wilfried van der Will has observed, however, it was also ‘a telling symptom of the degree of material uncertainty and mental anxiety then prevailing that human beings felt compelled to return to the most basic point of orientation, the body, in order to redefine their perception of society and their relation to it.’²⁷

In their sensationalist 1931 book, the Merrills cited a Berlin newspaper headline of 10 August 1930 that some three million Germans were ‘now practising nudity’.²⁸ This was probably an exaggeration, but the figure was certainly large and growing. It was no longer necessary to travel to the island of Sylt, or to the remoter beaches of the Baltic coast, to bathe in the nude. However, such spontaneous or ‘wild’ nudity also posed problems for organized naturists, who feared their dedicated efforts to stress the ethical and disciplined aspects of their lifestyle would be compromised by the antics of exhibitionists and sun-worshippers. Such distinctions meant little to the Catholic Church and the Centre party, which formed the principal opposition to Germany’s burgeoning ‘naked culture’ (*Nacktkultur*). The Catholic Volkswartbund,²⁹ in particular, fought a vigorous and unstinting struggle against naturist publications and associations. It was a Catholic civil servant, Franz Bracht (1878–1933), who as Prussian Minister of the Interior in the undemocratic von Papen ‘commissariate’ of 1932 was responsible for introducing the infamous ‘gusset decree’ of 28 September. This rather comical piece of legislation introduced a 150-mark fine for nude bathing, and stipulated clear rules for the wearing of bathing costumes:

Women may only bathe in public if they are wearing a bathing costume that covers the bosom and the front of their upper-body completely, is secured firmly under the arms, and is cut with legs and a gusset. The cut of the bathing costume at the rear may not go below the lower end of the shoulder blades. Men may only bathe in public if they are wearing a bathing costume that is provided with legs and a gusset.³⁰

At the height of the Great Depression, with more than six million Germans unemployed, such legislation was a gift to satirists but brought few prosecutions. More serious was an earlier decision by Bracht to ban the Adolf Koch

²⁶ In vol. 1 of his *Male Fantasies* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 422, Klaus Theweleit quotes an extract from Ernst Jünger’s *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*, describing soldiers bathing in the nude. Theweleit adds: ‘There are many similar bathing scenes in the works of these men. Most occur along rivers; during lulls in the fighting, all those powerful, naked bodies plunge right in.’

²⁷ Wilfried van der Will, ‘The Body and the Body Politic as Symptom and Metaphor in the Transition of German Culture to National Socialism’, in B. Taylor and W. van der Will (eds), *The Nazification of Art* (Winchester, 1990), p. 21.

²⁸ Merrill, *Among the Nudists*, p. 184. The leading socialist naturist, Adolf Koch, made the same claim. See Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, p. 36.

²⁹ The Cologne-based *Volkswartbund*, founded in 1898, retained considerable influence in Germany until the 1960s.

³⁰ Quoted by Hans Peter Duerr, *Nacktheit und Scham. Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozeß* (Frankfurt/Main, 1994), p. 106.

schools, the most high-profile section of the socialist naturist movement.³¹ Since the early 1920s Koch (1897–1970), a Berlin school teacher who joined the SPD in 1920, had been running naked gymnastics classes, first at a state school in the working-class district of Moabit, and then—after a well publicized court case³²—in his own Adolf Koch Physical Culture School. A network of thirteen private schools followed, from Berlin to Breslau, Hamburg to Mannheim, financed by donations and subscriptions, which were levied at 5% of wages for those in employment. These schools offered naked gymnastics on a mixed basis, together with lectures, sex education, and outdoor activities. The banning of the Koch schools in Prussia in July 1932 prompted an outcry from many bourgeois naturists as well as from within labour movement. For a time the ban was lifted, but it was re-imposed across Germany early in 1933.

The naturist solidarity displayed in the autumn of 1932 was conspicuously absent in the spring and summer of the following year, when the whole future of naturism in Germany appeared to hang in the balance. A decree issued in the name of the Prussian Minister President and Interior Minister Hermann Goering, and circulated to police chiefs on 3 March 1933, stated:

One of the greatest dangers for German culture and morality is the so-called ‘naked culture movement’. Whilst it is to be welcomed in the interest of public health that ever greater numbers of our population, particularly in the cities, are striving to apply the healing power of the sun, fresh air and water to their bodies, the naked culture movement must be rejected as a cultural aberration. The naked culture movement deadens the woman’s natural sense of shame, removes men’s respect for women, and thereby destroys the conditions for any genuine culture. Therefore I expect from all police authorities that—in support of the spiritual powers developed by the National Movement—they will take all measures necessary to exterminate the so-called naked culture movement.

In particular, I order the following:

- i. Naked culture associations are to be kept under the closest watch ...³³

After 1945 it suited German naturists to portray 3 March 1933 as ‘Black Friday’: the beginning of a protracted period of persecution and resistance. However this tells, at best, only half the story. For a start, Goering’s decree contained an inherent contradiction: while ‘naked culture’ was to be ‘exterminated’, the associations were only to be kept under the ‘closest watch’. The use of the term ‘naked culture’, which had already fallen into disrepute in naturist circles because of its association with sleazy nightclubs, also gave the opportunity for the RFK to issue a swift response, claiming that it too condemned

³¹ See Giselher Spitzer, ‘Die Adolf-Koch-Bewegung’; also Spitzer, ‘Nackt und Frei. Die proletarische Freikörperkulturbewegung’, in H. J. Teichler and G. Hauk (eds), *Illustrierte Geschichte des Arbeitersports* (Bonn, 1987), pp. 175–82; Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, pp. 35–36.

³² Although Koch was careful to obtain full parental permission before allowing children to participate in naked activities, this did not stop his right-wing opponents from accusing him of corrupting the young, and even of paedophilia.

³³ Quoted in Hermann Wilke, ‘Aufstand des Leibes. Eine Geschichte der Freikörperkultur’, unpublished manuscript from 1965, IFB 1141.

Nacktkultur, which had nothing to do with the ethical 'free physical culture' (*Freikörperkultur*) practised by its members.³⁴

What happened next has been portrayed in two subtly different ways. Some have argued that on 23 April 1933 a putsch occurred within the RFK.³⁵ While its Chairman, Professor Walter von Hauff, was still attempting to deal with the Goering decree, a small clique of self-appointed 'commissars' under the leadership of the Berlin naturist and former fighter-pilot Carl Almenroeder (1896–1956) seized control of the organization, with the aim of securing a voluntary *Gleichschaltung*. Other accounts, however, suggest that von Hauff and the RFK board chose to entrust its business to the pro-Nazi 'commissars', in the hope that this would safeguard naturism from further government intervention.³⁶ In fact, the minutes of the crucial 23 April meeting reveal a considerable degree of panic and uncertainty.³⁷ While the 57-year old Hauff was indeed party to the decision to nominate commissars, he was undoubtedly placed under considerable pressure by young guns such as Almenroeder and Erhard Wächtler (1901–63). The latter, an engineer from Dresden who was to become Chairman of the West German naturist federation (DFK) in the 1950s, had a reputation as an apolitical pragmatist, but at the April 1933 meeting he argued that the commissars should be appointed rather than elected, since 'parliamentarism has been now been abolished'.³⁸

An agreed statement was issued after the meeting and sent to all members of the RFK. It made clear:

The national uprising demands in the interest of the people that all organizations pledge their allegiance to the new state. This will require a separation from all those groups and members who cannot fit in to the new order, such as members of other races ... Political neutrality, in the old liberal sense, will not be possible in the new Germany.³⁹

Hauff appears to have had second thoughts, since a circular issued under his name on 26 May 1933 attacked the 'troublemakers' whose 'subversive' tactics had undermined the RFK.⁴⁰ He even began a legal action against the 'unruly commissars', whom he accused of having used violent methods.⁴¹

³⁴ RFK statement of 8 March 1933, quoted by Pforte, 'Zur Freikörperkultur-Bewegung', p. 136.

³⁵ This view was argued strongly by the Berlin naturist Charly Sträßer (1900–89). See letter of 30 September 1987 in Nachlaß Sträßer, IFB L2065/S. Interestingly, Sträßer's short published memoir, *Nacktkultur im alten Berlin. Die Anfänge der FKK-Bewegung* (Kassel, 1981), makes no mention of this episode. Another to have portrayed events in this way was 'Arno Vossen' (actually Hermann Wilke) in *Sonnenmenschen. Sechs Jahrzehnte Freikörperkultur in Deutschland* (Hamburg-Großflottbek, 1956), p. 56.

³⁶ This view is put forward by Pforte, 'Zur Freikörperkultur-Bewegung', p. 137.

³⁷ The minutes are quoted at length by Hermann Wilke in his unpublished manuscript 'Aufstand des Leibes', IFB 1141. See also the minutes of the final Extraordinary General Meeting of the LfL on 14 May 1933 in Nachlaß Sträßer, IFB 2065/S.

³⁸ Wilke, 'Aufstand des Leibes', IFB 1141.

³⁹ Quoted by Pforte, 'Zur Freikörperkultur-Bewegung', p. 136.

⁴⁰ Quoted by Wilke, 'Aufstand des Leibes', IFB 1141.

⁴¹ *Deutsche Freikörperkultur*, 1, 6 (1933), p. 88.

By this time, however, it was all too late. A new umbrella organization, the Militant Circle for Racial Free Physical Culture (Kampfring für völkische Freikörperkultur), had been established by the commissars and each of the RFK's affiliated associations had been invited to join. By the summer of 1933, fifty-nine groups had signed up to the Kampfring, including nearly all of those previously organized within the RFK. Groups identified as socialist or internationalist in orientation were barred, as were individual socialists or Jews, and all member associations were requested to ensure that their leaders were in tune with the new political circumstances.

Official histories of German naturism, such as those by Vossen (1956),⁴² Pfitzner (1964),⁴³ and Dreßen (1995),⁴⁴ emphasize the outside pressures that forced naturists into line in the spring of 1933. Frequent reference is made to the Goering decree, and to the sporadic attacks on naturist colonies by groups of Hitler Youths and SA men. Even the historian Giseller Spitzer talks of naturism's 'persecution'.⁴⁵ It seems clear, however, that no real effort was made by the authorities to close down bourgeois naturist associations, to arrest individual activists, or to impose a new leadership from above. Whether out of fear, apathy, opportunism or conviction, Germany's bourgeois naturists appear to have carried out their own *Gleichschaltung* from within.

It is also interesting to note that the strategy of *Anpassung* was not exclusively limited to bourgeois naturists. Amongst the associations listed as members of the new Kampfring were some previously left-leaning groupings, such as the Free People (Freie Menschen) in the city of Aachen, formerly subtitled a League for Socialist Lifestyle and Free Physical Culture.⁴⁶ Moreover, though the Adolf Koch schools had been banned, an Adolf Koch League for Social Hygiene, Body Culture and Gymnastics continued to operate well into 1934. In a typewritten report, dated October 1945, and designed to counter rumours that he had adopted a pro-Nazi attitude in the Third Reich, Koch laid out the various 'legal and illegal' efforts to continue his work after 1933.⁴⁷

⁴² Vossen, *Sonnenmenschen*.

⁴³ Georg Pfitzner, *Der Naturismus in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz* (Hamburg-Altona, 1964).

⁴⁴ Karl Dreßen, *Geschichte des Naturismus. Von der Nacktheit über die Nacktkultur zum Naturismus* (Berchem, Belgium, 1995).

⁴⁵ Spitzer, *Der Deutsche Naturismus*, p. 115.

⁴⁶ Spitzer suggests, however, that the Aachen group had already distanced itself from socialism by 1932, when it was listed as a member of the bourgeois RFK rather than the socialist *Verband Volksgesundheit*. See Spitzer, 'Die "Adolf-Koch-Bewegung"', p. 97.

⁴⁷ 'Adolf Koch. Im Oktober 1945. Bericht', IFB L175. The six-page report is attached to a two-page document, dated 30 Dec. 1947, entitled *Bericht über die Rehabilitation von Adolf Koch*. Its author is not named, but it is likely that both documents were given by Koch himself to Karlwilli Damm, founder of the IFB, and a supporter of Koch in the post-war DFK. Although he conceded he had paid some eighteen monthly subscriptions as a 'Supportive Member' [*fördendes Mitglied*] of the SS, Koch was cleared by the Denazification Commission Berlin-Kreuzberg in Dec. 1947, which accepted that this had been a cover for his anti-fascist activities.

Unsurprisingly, the six-page report did not reflect the extent to which, for whatever reason, he had attempted to conform to the language of the National Socialist régime. In an essay published early in 1934, for instance, Koch had written: 'The Adolf Koch Movement ... has gone its own way unwaveringly since 1920. Its case, its struggle, has been brilliantly justified by the events of 1933 ... We have pointed out often enough that racial biology and racial hygiene are crucial to this struggle for public health.'⁴⁸ The article even had words of praise for Ernst Röhm, and his circular of 8 September 1933, '*Betreff: Ausbreitung des Muckertums*', in which he had told his men to act as revolutionary fighters, not as 'bearers of repressed complexes'.⁴⁹ 'Happily', Koch wrote,

the head of the SA, Röhm, has made it clear in his well-known decree against petty bourgeois narrow-mindedness, that the new men in the new Reich are not willing to give in to those obdurate elements who only wish to make life more restrictive.⁵⁰

The sincerity of Koch's 1934 article is open to question—Spitzer sees it as an exercise in subversive irony, though Oliver König has labelled this defence 'naïve'⁵¹—but it is clear that until Röhm's demise in the Night of the Long Knives, the homosexual SA chief and Germany's leading proletarian naturist at least shared a common rhetorical target in the priests, prudes and philistines who shaped conventional bourgeois morality.

If Koch and other non-Nazi naturists thought that simply by changing the names and superficial rhetoric of their associations they could continue to operate as before, the Kampfring's Carl Almenroeder was quick to fire a warning shot:

At last, after much hard work, we have put the house of *völkisch* free physical culture in order, and we do not intend to allow aliens and strangers the opportunity to come in through the back door and turn the movement into a gathering place for 'Pan-European Pacifists', Marxists, and others of their ilk.⁵²

The tone of this statement should come as no surprise, since a racist, social Darwinist, strand had been present in German naturism from its very earliest days.⁵³ Its two most important ideologues before World War I, Heinrich Pudor (1865–1943) and Richard Ungewitter (1868–1958), made no secret of their extreme views. An early manifesto of Ungewitter's Loyal League for

⁴⁸ Adolf Koch, 'Krumme Buckel—Runde Rücken—Oder?', *Adolf-Koch-Blätter*, 1 (1934), pp. 2–3. Koch continued his operations for a time under the name Institut für Eubiotik und Lebensregelung, before that too was closed down in 1936.

⁴⁹ See Eleanor Hancock, '"Only the Real, the True, the Masculine Held Its Value": Ernst Röhm, Masculinity, and Male Homosexuality', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 8, 4 (1998), p. 623.

⁵⁰ Adolf Koch, 'Krumme Buckel—Runde Rücken—Oder?', p. 3.

⁵¹ See Spitzer, 'Die "Adolf-Koch-Bewegung"', p. 98; König, *Nacktheit*, p. 191.

⁵² Carl Almenroeder, 'So geht das nicht!', *Deutsche Freikörperkultur*, 1, 6 (1933), p. 88.

⁵³ See Uwe Schneider, 'Nacktkultur im Kaiserreich', in Uwe Puschner (ed.), *Handbuch zur 'Völkischen Bewegung' 1871–1918* (Munich, 1996), pp. 411–35.

Ascendant Life (Treubund für aufsteigendes Leben, 1911), for instance, had stated:

The Loyal League seeks the racial, physical, moral, spiritual and soulful renewal of the German people on a Germanic basis, and to achieve priority treatment over all that is racially alien. We believe that the right way to keep the German people strong, to overcome the fall in the birth rate, and thereby to secure our future, is to raise the strength of the *Volk* ... Only a people certain of its race can rise, whilst miscegenation and cosmopolitanism lead to decline.⁵⁴

As if to emphasize the point, the Loyal League listed those who would not be permitted to join its ranks: 'Baptized and unbaptized Hebrews, Slavs, Britons, members of the Mediterranean races, supporters of social democratic, left liberal and democratic ideas. Playboys, cosmopolitans, hedonists, confirmed bachelors, fashion victims, amazons, campaigners for women's rights and advocates of free love.'⁵⁵ Ungewitter, who had been marginalized during the Weimar years, was celebrated as a pioneering elder statesman of German naturism in the Third Reich, and more alarmingly, in the early Federal Republic as well.

Just one year after its foundation, and with the time for 'struggle' apparently over, the Kampfring changed its name once more. Henceforth Germany's naturist federation was to be known as the League for Body Cultivation (Bund für Leibesucht, BfL), a 'community for a natural and racially focused lifestyle'. After protracted negotiations the BfL was also accepted into the Reich League for Physical Education, the self-proclaimed 'largest sports federation in the world' to which all associations representing German sport, gymnastics and outdoor activities had to belong.⁵⁶ The driving force behind these efforts to co-ordinate naturism within the structures of the Nazi state was Karl Bückmann (1898–1946), a NSDAP Landtag representative from Dessau and himself an active naturist. Bückmann's friendship with the *Reichssportführer* Hans von Tschammer und Osten, who had also been based in Dessau as head of the SA's *Gruppe-Mitte* since 1932, was presumably a decisive factor in the naturist organization's successful application to join the Reich League for Physical Education.

In March 1934 Bückmann was rewarded with the leadership of the BfL, whose headquarters were transferred from Berlin to Dessau. In the League's new constitution the words 'naked' and 'naturist' were deliberately avoided, with the emphasis now placed on fitness and sporting endeavour. All members aged between 20 and 40 were henceforth officially expected to gain a

⁵⁴ Quoted by Arno Klönne, 'Das "Ja zum Leibe"—mehrdeutig. Zur politischen Geschichte der FKK Bewegung', *Vorgänge. Zeitschrift für Bürgerrechte und Gesellschaftspolitik*, 33. 3 (1994), p. 28.

⁵⁵ Quoted by Klönne, 'Das "Ja zum Leibe"—mehrdeutig', pp. 28–29.

⁵⁶ According to Pforte, 'Zur Freikörperkultur-Bewegung', p. 137, the *Reichssportführer* gave permission on 25 October 1933 for the Bund to become part of 'Gruppe III' (Fachamt für Bergsteigen und Wandern), along with the Deutsche Wandervogel and the Deutsche Zeltlagerbewegung.

badge in sport, shooting, or lifesaving, though in practice this was not rigorously enforced.⁵⁷ Even so, the organization's name change was more than merely semantic: by signalling its desire to be considered an aspect of sport, German naturism was also accepting that its character would have to change too.

For some it was a high price to pay, but this strategy did ensure naturism's survival in the Third Reich. It also led, however, to some exaggerated and frankly ridiculous claims after World War II. A 1953 article by Walter O'Kelly, deputy chairman of the West German naturist federation (DFK), was typical in its fulsome praise for Karl Bückmann:

It was a thorny path, but it was thanks to his courage and determination that we did not fall victim to the planned extermination. It is true that all the pictures showing naked people had to disappear from our journals, but Karl Bückmann's first great success was that our organization's journals—which he now edited—were still allowed to appear, month by month.⁵⁸

This blinkered and parochial view was also apparent in an official history of the German naturist movement published in 1956, which claimed: 'The BfL, as standard-bearer for the concept of free physical culture, was actually the only organization in the entire 1933–45 period that succeeded in withstanding a ban from the all-powerful party and its government institutions.'⁵⁹ The author of these lines, Arno Vossen, even described the course chosen by the BfL as one of 'non-violent resistance'.⁶⁰ It should be noted, however, that 'Arno Vossen' was the new identity for a man called Hermann Wilke (1905–70), who had been a leading figure in Third Reich naturism and whose book *Dein "Ja" zum Leibe!* (1939) was a best-seller in wartime Germany.⁶¹ He was one of many naturist leaders from the 1930s who were able to retain prominent positions in post-war naturism, despite their accommodation with Nazism. The case of Erhard Wächtler has already been mentioned; another was Carl Almenroeder, whose post-war change of name was less dramatic—as Karl Almenraeder he was a founder member of the Working Group of Berlin Naturists in the late 1940s.

The League for Body Cultivation, with Bückmann at the helm, was to remain the focus of organized naturism in Germany until 1945. Challenges remained, however, for both the BfL and its leader. The incoherent and at times chaotic structure of the Nazi state, with its competing power bases and

⁵⁷ See Wilke, 'Aufstand des Leibes', IFB 1141. Linse, 'Sonnenmenschen unter der Swastika', p. 264, quotes Bückmann in 1935 bemoaning that 'not even 1%' of the membership had gained their sports badge.

⁵⁸ *Freikörperkultur*, 2 (Nov. 1953), pp. 131–32.

⁵⁹ Vossen, *Sonnenmenschen*, p. 30.

⁶⁰ Vossen, *Sonnenmenschen*, p. 30.

⁶¹ *Dein "Ja" zum Leibe! Sinn und Gestaltung deutscher Leibesucht* (Berlin, 1939) sold some 120,000 copies, although its popularity no doubt had more to do with its potential as a source of pin-up pictures, than for its short introductory text.

individual empires, also impacted on naturism, where internal divisions, personality clashes, and regional rivalries were never far from the surface. Bückmann's main rival within German naturism was the former army major and successful author Hans Surén (1885–1972),⁶² whose book *Der Mensch und die Sonne* (1924) sold over 250,000 copies and was translated into many languages. As head of the Army Sports School at Wünsdorf near Berlin in the early 1920s, Surén replaced mindless drills with a physical education programme based on the classical Greek ideal of harmony between mind, body, and soul. It involved abstinence from alcohol and nicotine, breathing exercises, and a vegetarian diet. Above all, however, Surén's 'German Gymnastics' involved nakedness; including naked cross-country runs and mud baths. During the Weimar years Surén had been careful to appear 'above' politics and had refused to become involved in the petty organizational disputes that characterized German naturism. Having met Hitler in March 1932, however, he became an Inspector for Physical Education in the Nazi section of the Republic's Voluntary Labour Service (FAD), based at the party's Hammerstein leadership school, and joined the party on 1 May 1933. Sensing a unique opportunity to put his rather esoteric ideas into practice, Surén became a prolific author of books, articles, memos and letters in the early years of the régime.⁶³ The Labour Service, which after the *Machtergreifung* became the compulsory *Reichsarbeitsdienst* (RAD) under Konstantin Hierl, is best known for the columns of workmen marching with spades through the German countryside or at the Nuremberg party rallies. While these men were fully clothed, Surén ensured that RAD recruits—including all prospective male university students after February 1934—should prepare themselves for hard physical labour with a programme of naked, or near-naked, rhythmic gymnastics. It is not certain, however, to what extent this regulation was followed in practice, even before Surén's departure from the RAD in 1936.⁶⁴

Although there is little evidence of deep personal animosity or ideological differences between Surén and Bückmann, it is clear that German naturists were divided on which of the two men represented the best chance for the movement's survival. Each enjoyed the backing of a middle-ranking institution within the party hierarchy—in Bückmann's case the Reich Sport Office and in Surén's the Reich Labour Service—but neither could be sure of more high-ranking backing. There were rumours that Rudolf Hess was sympathetic

⁶² For Surén see Dietger Pforte, 'Hans Surén—eine deutsche FKK-Karriere', in M. Andritzky and T. Rautenberg (eds), *Wir sind nackt und nennen uns Du*, pp. 130–35.

⁶³ See Giselher Spitzer, 'Gymnastik und Parademarsch?'

⁶⁴ Spitzer states that Surén succeeded in his demand that gymnastic exercises in the RAD should be carried out 'as far as possible in an undressed state' ('möglichst unbekleidetem Körper'). See Spitzer, 'Gymnastik und Parademarsch?', p. 202. For a first-hand account see Charly Sträßer's unpublished manuscript 'Mit Hans Surén im RAD. Höhenflug und Absturz', Nachlaß Sträßer, IFB L2065/X.

to naturism,⁶⁵ but in the early days of the régime the only leading Nazi to express support in writing was Dr. Walter Gross, head of the Party's Office of Racial Policy. On 7 June 1934 Gross wrote to the Ministry of the Interior:

A general ban on free physical culture would represent a major state intervention into the private lifestyles of the members of this movement ... I cannot implement racial and population policies on the one hand, while defaming the human body as something to be kept covered up on the other.⁶⁶

The response came from Dr. Gerhard Wagner, the Reich Doctors' Leader and Hitler's spokesman on public health issues. Whilst acknowledging the potential benefits for health and morality, Wagner concluded that the German people were not yet ready for naturism.⁶⁷

This was as close as Germany's naturists ever came to hearing the Führer's views on their cause. In *Mein Kampf* Hitler had attacked the 'saint's cloak of prudishness' worn by the bourgeoisie,⁶⁸ and his sympathy for other aspects of lifestyle reform such as vegetarianism and abstinence was well-known,⁶⁹ yet he had also attacked the Weimar Republic as a 'hothouse of sexual ideas and stimuli'.⁷⁰ The conflicts and uncertainty within the Nazi régime over the issue of naturism were therefore typical of the many areas of policy where the Führer was unwilling or unable to commit himself to a public position. In the absence of a definitive order from above, lower-ranking figures in the National Socialist hierarchy were able to play out their own tastes and prejudices, and these varied widely: 'some did indeed want a return to more conservative values and behaviors, but many others worked to detach emancipatory impulses from their association with "Marxism" and "Jewishness" and to redefine sexual liberation as a "Germanic", "Aryan" prerogative.'⁷¹ Thus, while Heinrich Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich would later express support for Bückmann and the BfL, Hermann Goering and the Reich Minister of the Interior Wilhelm Frick remained implacably opposed. Indeed, Frick explicitly stated in a circular to police chiefs dated 8 July 1935 that the ban on mixed nudity would remain in force, with single-sex naturist activities closely monitored for evidence of homosexual activity.⁷² Opponents of Bückmann sought to

⁶⁵ Letter of 30 Sept. 1937 in Nachlaß Sträßer, IFB L2065/S.

⁶⁶ Quoted by Pforte, 'Zur Freikörperkultur-Bewegung', p. 138.

⁶⁷ Quoted by Linse, 'Sonnenmenschen unter der Swastika', pp. 281–82, fn 13.

⁶⁸ Quoted by Hans Peter Bleuel, *Strength Through Joy. Sex and Society in Nazi Germany* (London, 1972), pp. 32–33.

⁶⁹ See Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889–1936: Hubris* (London, 1998), pp. 261–62, 343–45; also Ernst G. Schenk, *Patient Hitler. Eine medizinische Biographie* (Düsseldorf, 1989). For a 1930s viewpoint see E. Kaiser, 'Hitler als Lebensreformer', in *Freikörperkultur und Lebensreform*, 4/5 (April 1933), p. 65 and p. 84.

⁷⁰ Quoted by Hans Peter Bleuel, *Strength Through Joy*, pp. 32–33.

⁷¹ Herzog, 'Hubris and Hypocrisy', p. 6.

⁷² Frick's circular of 8 July 1935, 'Betrifft: Bekämpfung der Nacktkulturbewegung', is printed in Krüger, 'Die Lebensreform-Bewegung und Naturismus in Göttingen', Appendix VI.

turn this setback to their advantage. A small group of Berlin naturists hatched a plot to replace Bückmann with Surén, and simultaneously to take the movement out of the Reich League for Physical Education. The plot failed—not least because of Surén's reluctance to move without the specific approval of the Ministry of the Interior—and only a small group of Berlin naturists seceded in the late spring of 1935.⁷³

The Berlin Olympics of 1936 produced a wave of enthusiasm for all kinds of athletic activity in Germany, including bodybuilding and gymnastics. Leni Riefenstahl's two-part film *Olympia* (1938) with its images of classical athleticism, did much to promote the body cult. The influence of the 1924 naturist film *Wege zur Kraft und Schönheit*, in which Riefenstahl had performed as a dancer, was readily apparent in the largely naked opening sequence of *Olympia*, filmed at one of the most popular nudist sites on the Baltic coast, the white sand-dunes of the Kurischer Nehrung, east of Danzig.⁷⁴ To coincide with the Games, a revised edition of Surén's book *Man and the Sun* was published, with a new subtitle *The Aryan-Olympian Spirit*, and a pronounced racial dimension largely absent from the 1924 version. Although the book received positive reviews in the *Völkischer Beobachter* and the SS journal *Das Schwarze Korps*,⁷⁵ Surén's star was by this time already on the wane. In July 1934 the RAD had become the responsibility of the Interior Minister, and as we have seen, Frick made no secret of his distaste for naturist activities. More importantly, Surén's 1934 book on physical education in the Labour Service (*Völkserziehung im Dritten Reich. Manneszucht und Charakterbildung*) had contained numerous quotes by the subsequently 'disgraced' Ernst Röhm, whose vision of a new and radicalized masculinity based on the discipline and comradeship of a community of men had been similar to his own.⁷⁶ Given Surén's fondness for displaying his oiled and shaven body in publicity photographs, his reputation was always likely to suffer in an increasingly homophobic environment,⁷⁷ especially after a dangerous liaison with a transvestite. This, together with his longstanding hostility to war games, led to his departure from the Labour

⁷³ See Linse, 'Sonnenmenschen unter der Swastika', pp. 243–44.

⁷⁴ Cooper C. Graham, *Leni Riefenstahl and Olympia* (Metuchen, NJ and London, 1986), p. 139.

⁷⁵ *Völkischer Beobachter*, 17 Dec. 1936, and *Das Schwarze Korps*, 17 Dec. 1936. Both quoted on dust jacket of Surén, *Mensch und Sonne* (Berlin, 1937, 3rd edn).

⁷⁶ See Hancock, 'Only the Real, the True, the Masculine Held Its Value'.

⁷⁷ Hitler had tolerated homosexuality in the SA and the Hitler Youth before his rise to power, but this changed after the Röhm purge. The law against homosexuality was toughened in 1935 and the following year saw the establishment of the Reich Office for the War on Homosexuality and Abortion. Some have argued this radicalization was largely for pragmatic political reasons; others believe that 'toleration of male homosexuality would have threatened the strong emphasis on male bonding in Nazism, or that toleration of homosexuality was incompatible with National Socialist emphasis on the importance of reproduction for the racial state'. See Hancock, 'Only the Real, the True, the Masculine Held Its Value', p. 637; also Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*; and Harry Oosterhuis, 'Medicine, Male Bonding, and Homosexuality in Nazi Germany', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 32, 2 (1997), pp. 187–205.

Service in March 1936.⁷⁸ Although he was given a new position as a 'special authorized representative for physical education amongst the rural population' by the Reich Farmers' Leader R. Walther Darré, Surén's influence faded in the late 1930s and his regular articles for journals such as the *Nationalsozialistische Landpost* rarely contained references to nudity.⁷⁹ In 1942, a neighbour's maid reported him to the police for masturbating on the balcony of his Berlin villa; he was charged with creating a public nuisance, fined, and expelled from the Party. In 1953 he was made an honorary member of the DFK and, having undergone a none-too-onerous denazification process, was able to draw on a substantial pension from the Federal Government for the next twenty-seven years.

Darré's admiration for Surén was apparent in a letter he had written to him in 1935, which concluded: 'One cannot on the one hand sing a song of praise to the race, intellectually and theoretically, and then on the other hand cultivate self-righteous complexes of moral indignation about the body.'⁸⁰ As the reiteration of the Goering decree made clear, however, this is precisely what many in the National Socialist state were wont to do. For the first five years of Hitler's régime, Germany's naturists therefore existed in a strange semi-legal limbo. Provided they were not Jewish or active socialists, most were able to continue using their clubhouses and grounds, but police visits were not uncommon, and if naked bathing on a mixed basis was discovered then prosecutions could follow.⁸¹ One young naturist from Wuppertal, Gertrud Riphahn, described the situation at her local colony after 1933: 'Only a few members continued to meet at the colony, sometimes only eight to ten of us. Someone always kept a lookout at the entrance to the colony, and when a police patrol was passing they would shout 'Völkerball'! Quickly we would put our bathing costumes or sports clothes on.'⁸²

In autumn 1933 the Kampfring had claimed a membership of 'around 10,000'.⁸³ At the end of 1934, however, the BfL's adult membership stood at 4112.⁸⁴ This fell further to just 3700 in 1937, before rising modestly to 4305 in 1939.⁸⁵ In view of the pre-1933 membership totals, it is clear that only a

⁷⁸ Sträßer, 'Mit Hans Surén im RAD. Höhenflug und Absturz', Nachlaß Sträßer, IFB L2065/X.

⁷⁹ Surén's file in the press archive of the Reichslandbund contains more than forty of his articles (in the form of press cuttings and typewritten manuscripts, dated between April 1937 and Sept. 1938) on physical education, the body and exercise, but there are few specific references to nudity. Bundesarchiv Lichterfelde, Reichslandbund Pressearchiv, BAarch R8034III/462.

⁸⁰ Letter of 17 Aug. 1935, quoted by Pforte, 'Hans Surén—eine deutsche FKK-Karriere', p. 139.

⁸¹ Much depended on the attitude of the local police chief or Party official. The strictest controls were apparently in Saxony. See Vossen, *Sonnenmenschen*, p. 28.

⁸² Gertrud Riphahn, 'Bilder aus meiner Kinder- und Jugendzeit im Lichtbund Wuppertal', unpublished manuscript dated 29 June 1974, IFB Wüendr. IV. Völkerball was a much-played game in nudist colonies, involving two teams seeking to remove the other side's players by hitting them with a ball.

⁸³ *Deutsche Freikörperkultur*, 1, 3 (1933), p. 35.

⁸⁴ Linse, 'Sonnenmenschen unter der Swastika', p. 255.

⁸⁵ Wilke, 'Aufstand des Leibes', IFB 1141.

small minority of German naturists took part in associational life during the Third Reich. Unfortunately complete membership statistics for the BfL are not available, but a card index of members of the Lower Saxony branch has been examined by the historian Ulrich Linse.⁸⁶ The index, which covers the period June 1933 to April 1940, does not provide a complete record—it appears that the cards of members who left the Bund were simply removed—but it does offer some interesting information on the age, marital status, occupation and religion of a small group of BfL members. The average age of the 91 members who joined the Lower Saxony branch between 1933 and 1940 was about 36 years old; 51 were male and 40 female; there were 28 married couples, 8 individual members who were married or divorced; and 28 singles, of whom 19 were male and 8 were female.⁸⁷ This gender imbalance was less marked than in the male-dominated naturist associations of the Wilhelmine era, and suggests that the implication of Frick's circular to police chiefs of 8 July 1935—that the BfL be regarded as some kind of *Männerbund*, attracting 'persons of a sick disposition', who were likely to commit a crime against Paragraph 175 of the Criminal Code (the law against homosexuality)—was made on the basis of prejudice rather than fact. While it is possible that the clampdown on nightclubs and bars favoured by homosexuals led to the dispersal of Germany's gay subculture into other locations such as swimming pools and nudist colonies, there is little hard evidence to support this. Fabian Krüger's unpublished study of the Göttingen's Freisonnland colony in the 1930s also suggests that the membership consisted mostly of middle-aged married couples.⁸⁸ On the other hand, the fact that single men over the age of 35 were barred from joining the BfL from 1938 onwards would seem to suggest that for some naturists at least, the local colony was still a place in which romantic liaisons—whether heterosexual or homosexual—could blossom.⁸⁹

In Hamburg, where the local branch of the BfL produced its own newsletter, marriages between members were announced in almost every issue, and the May 1934 edition reported no fewer than three weddings.⁹⁰ In this regard it no doubt helped that Hamburg naturists were allowed to bring 'guests' to their four colonies.⁹¹ While outdoor activities remained popular, lectures and

⁸⁶ Linse, 'Sonnenmenschen unter der Swastika', pp. 253–77. The card index of members had formerly belonged to the BfL *Gauwart* for Lower Saxony, Friedrich Möller.

⁸⁷ Of the 91 members, 53 were protestant, 11 Catholic, 7 were of other faiths, and 20 declined to answer. At the point of joining, 17 were members of the NSDAP, with 16 belonging to party organizations such as the SA, SS, DAF etc.

⁸⁸ Krüger, 'Die Lebensreform-Bewegung und Naturismus in Göttingen', pp. 79–113. In April 1933 the colony was used by 'some 25 people, including some 10 families'; the membership then fell to 15 in 1935 and 11 in 1939. In that year the local police noted that the members were 'older people' of 'mature morality' (p. 113).

⁸⁹ Linse, 'Sonnenmenschen unter der Swastika', p. 261.

⁹⁰ BfL, Ortsgruppe Gross-Hamburg, newsletter of 16 May 1934, IFB 106a.

⁹¹ BfL, Ortsgruppe Gross-Hamburg, newsletter of 19 July 1934, IFB 106a.

seminars staged by the Hamburg BfL were often poorly attended. A lecture by Dr Röhrs of the Party's Office of Racial Affairs, on the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Progeny, attracted only forty-five people ('a disgrace without compare!'),⁹² while a notice announcing a working group on Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the 20th Century* stated: 'We have repeatedly pointed out that participation is weak ... It cannot go on like this.'⁹³ At the branch AGM in April 1938, an angry Hamburg BfL leader, Herbert Seitz, felt compelled to remind members that they had joined 'neither a leisure club nor a co-operative to deliver cheap suntans and diets', but were rather part of 'the spiritual struggle against alien influences'.⁹⁴

A nationwide naturist journal was published throughout the Third Reich, albeit under changing titles. The first was *Deutsche Freikörperkultur. Zeitschrift für Rassenpflege, naturgemäße Lebensweise und Leibesübungen*, which was the successor to the RFK's *Freikörperkultur und Lebensreform* and lasted for a total of fourteen issues between June 1933 and July 1934. It was succeeded by *Gesetz und Freiheit. Monatsschrift der Bünde für Fahrt und Lager im Deutschen Reichsbund für Leibesübungen*, which appeared for twenty-nine issues between August 1934 and December 1936, with a circulation of around 6000. Karl Bückmann took over the editorship from Hans Gellenthin in November 1935, and remained in charge when the title changed again in January 1937. The next seventy-four issues appeared under the masthead *Deutsche Leibesucht. Blätter für naturnahe und arteigene Lebensgestaltung*, before wartime paper shortages finally brought the journal to a halt in the winter of 1943–44. All these titles were freely available at newsstands, as well as on subscription. Circulation figures for the late 1930s are not available, but a report in a 1939 edition of *Deutsche Leibesucht* claimed that a doubling of the circulation had failed to satisfy the great demand.

One presumes that this demand was fuelled primarily by pictures rather than editorial content. At first, the only depictions of nudity had come in the form of prints of classical statues, paintings, and some photographs of children, but from August 1934 occasional photographs of naked adults, usually side-on or rear views, began to appear. By the later 1930s these had become a regular feature of every issue. The pictures were invariably outdoor shots, with the body 'framed' by nature.⁹⁵ Nudes in interior settings were conspicuous by their absence, since these were considered to possess unwanted erotic connotations. It should be stressed, however, that this did not

⁹² BfL, Ortsgruppe Gross-Hamburg, newsletter of Feb. 1935, IFB 106a.

⁹³ BfL, Ortsgruppe Gross-Hamburg, newsletter of March 1935, IFB 106a.

⁹⁴ BfL, Ortsgruppe Gross-Hamburg, newsletter of April 1938, IFB 106a.

⁹⁵ It is worth remembering that the 'natural' look celebrated in these photographs was itself contrived: all naturist groups staged regular tanning sessions with sun-lamps, while women's magazines continued to advertise moisturizers and depilatory creams. See Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic. Fashioning Women in the Third Reich* (Oxford, 2004), p. 99.

mark a fundamental break with pre-1933 practices: naturist journals had always attempted to de-fuse their erotic charge, not only in their selection of photography, but also by issuing regular warnings against the dangers of masturbation. In fact, the same settings and motifs recur in both Weimar and Nazi naturist publications, bearing out Terri Gordon's recent assertion that 'sexual iconography persisted in Nazi Germany in ways highly reminiscent of the Weimar period'.⁹⁶

As for the articles, most were written by men (even in the Weimar period, very few features in naturist journals were by women) who had been considered political moderates in the 1920s, and who would continue to write for naturist publications well into the 1950s and 1960s.⁹⁷ Indeed, despite the proliferation of Nazi terminology and frequent references to racial issues, the rhetoric of these journals was generally less radical than in the *völkisch* naturist publications that had appeared in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany. Oliver König suggests an explanation: 'The *völkisch* wing of the naturist movement became ... less and less important, because the sect-like radicalism of these lifestyle reformers was, for all the racist overtones, much too individualistic and unpredictable'.⁹⁸

It was not until 1938 that signs of a fundamental change in the régime's attitude to naturism became apparent. In that year Bückmann succeeded in staging an officially approved naturist summer camp for 120 men and 85 women at the privately owned Jungmöhl colony on the Plauer Lake in Mecklenburg.⁹⁹ The BfL was also allowed to have a stand at a major exhibition in Berlin, held under the motto 'Healthy Life—Happy Work'. More significantly, two anonymous articles in the official organ of SS High Command, *Das Schwarze Korps*, took a strongly pro-naturist stance. The first, entitled 'For a genuine and noble nakedness', and credited to 'a well known North German writer',¹⁰⁰ was accompanied by two pages of photographs. The article claimed:

[O]ur healthy and self-confident world view is a deadly enemy of any kind of prudery. We have succeeded in making a sporting nation out of a population of bespectacled stay-at-homes.

⁹⁶ Terri J. Gordon, 'Fascism and the Female Form: Performance Art in the Third Reich', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 11, 1/2 (2002), p. 165.

⁹⁷ Men such as Wilke, Magnus Weidemann (1880–1967), Walter Fränzel (1889–1968) etc. See König, *Nacktheit*, p. 192.

⁹⁸ König, *Nacktheit*, p. 197.

⁹⁹ Jungmöhl, a *Lebensreform* colony, was open to naturist guests throughout the 1930s, except for a short period between summer and winter 1935. See *Jungmöhl. Ein Bündel Berichte und Bekenntnisse* (Lauf, 1937), p. 6. Previous summer camps had been less successful: in 1935 a Bückmann-led camp on the Baltic coast was broken up by the police (see 'Ein Ostseelager mit Hindernissen', in *Gesetz und Freiheit*, 2, 9 (1935), pp. 226–30. Winter camps were also held throughout the 1930s, with a focus on naked skiing.

¹⁰⁰ Hermann Wilke suggests this is likely to have been the Pomeranian author and World War I veteran Ulrich Sander (born 1892), whose novels such as *Sturm in der Düne* and *Ola—die Schwedin*, had the search for a natural lifestyle as their theme. Sander wrote volume 5, *Sinn der Nacktheit*, in Wilm Burghardt's 'Geist und Schönheit' series of 1939–40 and was a close friend of Wilke, who penned his biography (*Ulrich Sander. Mensch und Werk*) in 1942. See Wilke, 'Aufstand des Leibes', IFB 1141, pp. 168–69.

We have replaced pasty-faced 'gushing' girls with bronzed and sport-steeled maidens. In just a few years we have improved the moral concepts of the people to such an extent that there is now hardly anyone left who longs for the days of single-sex swimming pools or Bracht's infamous gusset.¹⁰¹

The second article left its readers in no doubt as to the context in which nudity should be viewed:

As in all areas of life, it is not much use just to take negative measures, such as the removal of the physically inferior from the reproductive chain. In the long term it is not only important to create conditions so that more healthy people are born than today, but also that these healthily born people should choose, of their own volition, to live and look after their bodies in such a way that they become the healthy progenitors of later generations.¹⁰²

These two articles have been discussed at some length in recent years. Irene Guenther, in her study of *Nazi Chic*, sees them as 'evidence that nudity, eroticism and sex were not suppressed', but rather 'redirected towards fascist aims and encouraged',¹⁰³ and Dagmar Herzog agrees: 'the ugly aspects of Nazi sexual politics ... were not embedded in a broader antisexual attitude, as so many scholars have surmised, but rather, coexisted with ... injunctions and encouragements to the majority of Germans to seek and experience sexual pleasure.'¹⁰⁴ This is an important point, but the particular significance of the articles for the naturist movement should not be overlooked either, for there can be little doubt that they made a crucial contribution to the changed climate for naturist activities in the later years of the Third Reich. The *Schwarze Korps* was after all one of Nazi Germany's most widely read weeklies, with a six-figure circulation and close links to the very top of the SS.¹⁰⁵ When its editor, SS-Obersturmbannführer Gunter D'Alquen (1910–98), married Erica Schrader in November 1937 the guests included Heinrich Himmler himself.¹⁰⁶ D'Alquen was acknowledged by leading German naturists as a supporter of their cause.¹⁰⁷ His hostility to prudery and support for 'natural' nudity had in fact been apparent from the very first issues of the magazine. In only its second month of publication, April 1935, the *Schwarze Korps* had defended the use of naked and near-naked illustrations in that year's official *Farming Calendar*. The *völkisch* ideologue Wilhelm Stapel, who had condemned the illustrations, was accused of false puritanism and the 'systematic destruction of all that is beautiful and noble'.¹⁰⁸ Then, in September 1936, the magazine published an

¹⁰¹ *Das Schwarze Korps*, 20 Oct. 1938, p. 11.

¹⁰² *Das Schwarze Korps*, 17 Dec. 1938, p. 6.

¹⁰³ Guenther, *Nazi Chic*, p. 103.

¹⁰⁴ Herzog, 'Hubris and Hypocrisy', p. 13.

¹⁰⁵ See Mario Zeck, *Das schwarze Korps. Geschichte und Gestalt des Organs der Reichsführung SS* (Tübingen, 2002); and William Combs, *The Voice of the SS: A History of the SS Journal 'Das Schwarze Korps'* (New York, 1986).

¹⁰⁶ Bundesarchiv Lichterfelde, Reichslandbund Pressearchiv, BAArch R8034III/5.

¹⁰⁷ See letters from Bernhard Schulze(-Holthus) to Charly Sträßer, dated 11 Sept. 1985 and 3 March 1986, in IFB 1389/C.

¹⁰⁸ *Das Schwarze Korps*, 24 April 1935, quoted by Hans Peter Bleuel, *Strength Through Joy*, p. 58.

article which stated that nudity 'in itself' is not 'shameless', but 'chaste and pure', and argued that 'even those for whom the sight of a naked, beautiful body is still something new and unusual, must be made accustomed to this sight.'¹⁰⁹

It was only due to the support of key figures in the SS that a racist form of naturism was allowed to flourish in the last years of the Reich.¹¹⁰ As early as 1936 Bückmann was informed in a letter that: 'Reichsführer SS Himmler has asked me ... to inform you that he has instructed the Gestapo not to hinder in any way the efforts of the League for German Body Cultivation which stands under your leadership.'¹¹¹ Meanwhile, Heydrich assured Darré in a letter of May 1939: 'I will endeavour to deal with this question by adopting a natural and popular touch to free physical culture.'¹¹² The advances made by naturism between 1938 and 1942 would clearly not have been possible without the support of such powerful figures in the Nazi state. Even the SA, which since Röhm's demise had been implacably opposed to naturism, was forced to adapt its stance: in 1938 its journal *SA-Mann* had described naturists as 'sun junkies and herb hunting runts',¹¹³ but in August 1939 the *SA-Führer* conceded: 'The beneficial effect of fresh air on the naked body is well known to anyone who has ever experienced it for themselves ... Knowledge of the life-giving divine power of the sun is part of the basic existential knowledge of all the Aryan peoples'.¹¹⁴

New publications displaying full nudity now began to appear too. These included an upmarket magazine edited by Wilm Burghardt, a former teacher in one of Adolf Koch's schools, under the title *Geist und Schönheit. Schriftenreihe für deutschbewußte Lebensführung*, and Hermann Wilke's aforementioned book *Dein "Ja" zum Leibe!* which had a foreword by the head of the NSDAP's Office of Racial Policy, Walter Gross. Spring 1939 even saw the release of a full-length feature film, Kurt Reichert's *Natürliche Leibeserziehung*, which had been shot the previous year. The film, which received its première in Dortmund on 19 February 1939, was shown throughout Germany to members of the BfL and their guests. In Berlin, some 850 people turned up to watch, including many representatives of state and party institutions. Admirers of the film, which was certified 'educational', included Darré, who observed in a letter to Heydrich 'how clean and respectable it all seems'.¹¹⁵ Reichert

¹⁰⁹ *Das Schwarze Korps*, 17 Sept. 1936. Quoted by Wilke, *Dein "Ja" zum Leibe!*, p. 118.

¹¹⁰ From Dec. 1938 BfL members had to document their 'Aryan' credentials back to their grandparents. Full membership conditions for the BfL are listed in an appendix of Wilke's *Dein "Ja" zum Leibe!*, pp. 188–89.

¹¹¹ Letter from Himmler's office to Bückmann, 28 April 1936, published in Spitzer, 'Gymnastik und Parademarsch?', p. 208. See also the July 1942 correspondence between Himmler and Bückmann in Nachlaß Sträßer IFB 2065/S.

¹¹² Letter of 6 May 1939, quoted by Pforte, 'Zur Freikörperkultur-Bewegung', p. 141.

¹¹³ The original phrase was 'sonnensüchtiger, kräutersuchender Chandis'. It is quoted in the article 'SA und Deutsche Leibesucht', *Deutsche Leibesucht*, 7 (1939), p. 355.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Wilke, *Dein "Ja" zum Leibe!*, pp. 190–91.

¹¹⁵ Quoted by Pforte, 'Zur Freikörperkultur-Bewegung', p. 141.

was able to follow up his film with an illustrated volume *Von Leibesucht und Leibesschönheit* (1940), which was the very first book on German naturism with photographs in full colour.¹¹⁶

Although it made no reference to the fact, the second pro-naturist article in *Das Schwarze Korps* had appeared just two days after a significant ruling from the Prussian Higher Administrative Court in Berlin. On 15 December 1938 the BfL, represented by Bernhard Schulze(-Holthus), who had been defending German naturists in the courts since 1923, succeeded in overturning a number of lower court rulings from Breslau, Wiesbaden and Schleswig. Nude bathing was officially allowed to recommence at three long-established sites, including Klappholtal on the island of Sylt, and the judgement was celebrated within the naturist movement as a sign that the Goering decree was, to all intents and purposes, lifted.¹¹⁷ This was formally confirmed by the passing of a new Bathing Law on 10 July 1942, which was signed by Himmler himself. Paragraph 3 of the law stated that naked bathing was now permitted for individuals or groups, including mixed groups, in any place where they could assume that they would not be seen by an unconnected third party, such as in specially designated colonies. This law, or a version of it, remained in place in most German *Länder* until the 1960s or later.¹¹⁸

The belated union of naturism and Nazism in the second half of the Third Reich was a marriage of convenience rather than a passionate affair; a liaison which only ever won the approval of a section within each movement. It was based ostensibly on a mutual desire to de-eroticize nudity: naturists had always played down the sexual connotations of a clothes-free lifestyle, while leading National Socialists frequently condemned unbridled sexuality as a threat to the health of the race. If nudity was harnessed to racial principles, however, then there were elements within the régime, and particularly the SS, which could see significant benefits from celebrating 'the instinct for bodily nobility and its beauty in our *Volk*', as the *Schwarze Korps* put it.¹¹⁹ Even so, Himmler and Heydrich's apparent sympathy for naturism was always tinged with ambivalence. On the one hand, it is easy to see how the concept of 'body cultivation' might fit in with Nazi rhetoric: fascists of all kinds were wont to compare their ideal state to a human body, in which each part of the organism had to function healthily; where 'diseased' organs had to be removed; and where individual interests had to be sublimated to the will of the whole. As van der Will and others have pointed out, the metaphor of the 'body politic',

¹¹⁶ Kurt Reichert, with a foreword by Karl Bückmann, *Von Leibesucht und Leibesschönheit. Bilder aus dem Leben des Bundes für Leibesucht* (Berlin, 1940).

¹¹⁷ See Schulze's unpublished Curriculum Vitae in Nachlaß Sträßer, IFB L2065/Y and the documentation 'Nacktbadeprozessen in der Weimarer- und Hitlerzeit', IFB 1389.

¹¹⁸ In Bavaria a more restrictive law, insisting on bathing costumes at all times, was passed in 1957.

¹¹⁹ The phrase is taken from *Das Schwarze Korps*, 24 April 1935, quoted by Herzog, 'Hubris and Hypocrisy', pp. 11–12.

the *Volkskörper*, recurs frequently in Nazi discourse.¹²⁰ Similarly, it was not particularly difficult for a régime with an aesthetic predilection for the monumental neo-classical statuary of Georg Kolbe and Josef Thorak, or the paintings of Adolf Ziegler (nicknamed the ‘Master of the Pubic Hair’), to accept carefully composed illustrations of Aryan beauties—sometimes resembling ‘living marble’—at work and play in the German landscape. In a wartime situation, moreover, any measures that might improve levels of physical fitness and homefront morale would clearly be very welcome.

On the other hand, it is clear that this was a régime which intervened in the private space of the body in hitherto unprecedented ways, and which regarded the individual body, in Terri Gordon’s words, as ‘a public site whose purpose was to further the larger social organism.’¹²¹ In this light, the naturist conviction that fresh air, sunshine, and physical training could make an individual healthy sat awkwardly with the racial certainties of National Socialism, which believed that ‘health’ was something essentially genetic and inherited: ‘Inheritance is in the long run always victorious over environmental influences’, as the *Official Handbook for Schooling the Hitler Youth* put it.¹²² The official response to one of Surén’s books highlighted the problem: ‘How can racial properties, i.e. characteristics anchored in one’s genetic make up, be cultivated by external influences, such as sport and the like?’¹²³ Naturists had long argued that nudity would contribute to racial hygiene, since physical imperfections and deformities could not be hidden from a prospective partner, but as the journalist Ulf Erdmann Ziegler notes in a darkly humorous essay: ‘To select their Aryan partners, the nudists would have had to bring along their grand mothers to the nudist beach, complete with their papers.’¹²⁴

Although *Deutsche Leibesucht* celebrated the 1942 Bathing Law as a great triumph, announced under the simple headline ‘Victory’,¹²⁵ there was no surge in BfL membership. Of course, in 1942 people had other things on their minds, but even so, it was ‘wild’ or spontaneous nudity that grew in popularity as a result of the law, rather than organized naturism. The wartime experience of German soldiers in Finland and Russia had fuelled a boom in saunas and skinny-dipping, whilst regular sunbathing, in shorts or swimming trunks, remained hugely popular. The latter was boosted by Erich Merkel and Christian Wiegand’s invention of Delial: the world’s first effective suntan

¹²⁰ See van der Will, ‘The Body and the Body Politic as Symptom and Metaphor’, p. 22.

¹²¹ Gordon, ‘Fascism and the Female Form’, p. 164.

¹²² Fritz Brennecke, *The Nazi Primer: Official Handbook for Schooling the Hitler Youth* (New York, 1972), p. 59.

¹²³ Response to Surén’s *Rassebewußte Leibeserziehung im Willen des Führers* quoted by Pforte, ‘Zur Freikörperkultur-Bewegung’, p. 139.

¹²⁴ Ulf Erdmann Ziegler, *Nackt unter Nackten. Utopien der Nacktkultur 1906–42. Fotografien aus der Sammlung Scheidt* (Berlin, 1992), p. 15.

¹²⁵ *Deutsche Leibesucht*, 10 (1942), p. 114.

lotion, which was manufactured by the Bayer arm of I.G. Farben and went on sale in 1934, supported by loudspeaker vans, a promotional film and Delia-Girls in bathing costumes.¹²⁶ Those who propagated naturism for ethical or ideological reasons would increasingly find themselves outnumbered and outmanœuvred by people who considered naked sunbathing as nothing more than a leisure activity. In the aftermath of World War II, there were plenty of naturist leaders who were only too eager to agree, burying their own ideological baggage in the rubble of Germany's devastated cities, as they headed once more for the coast.

Abstract

This essay, based on primary sources from the privately-run Internationale FKK-Bibliothek and a growing body of secondary literature, examines some of the myths and misconceptions regarding the fate of naturism in the Third Reich. It shows that despite Goering's decree of 3 March 1933, which described the 'naked culture movement' as 'one of the greatest dangers for German culture and morality', naturism did not come to an abrupt halt after the *Machtergreifung*. While official histories of German naturism talk proudly of the movement's 'persecution' and 'non-violent resistance', there was little concerted effort to close down naturist associations or to arrest individual activists. In fact, without a definitive order from the Führer, Germany's naturists existed in a semi-legal limbo for much of the 1930s. Many National Socialists regarded the clothes-free lifestyle with contempt, but there were elements within the Nazi state—and particularly the SS—which could see significant benefits from celebrating 'the instinct for bodily nobility and its beauty in our *Volk*'. A mutual desire to de-eroticize nudity helped cement the bond between Heydrich, Himmler and naturist leaders. As a result, German *Freikörperkultur* passed some of its most important landmarks in the years of Nazi rule, including its very first book with photographs in full colour, a full-length feature film, and a new, more permissive Bathing Law. Thus while George Mosse's *Nationalism and Sexuality* claims the Nazis 'forbade nudism after their accession to power', a closer examination of the fate of naturism after 1933 reveals a more complex picture, which serves to highlight not only the limits of the régime's totalitarian aspirations, but also the naturist movement's own disparate and problematic heritage.

¹²⁶ See Dieter Wildt, *Sonnenkult. Von der vornehmen Blässe zum nahtlosen Braun* (Düsseldorf, 1987), pp. 138–40.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.