

Dorothee Hochstetter. *Motorisierung und 'Volksgemeinschaft': Das Nationalsozialistische Kraftfahrkorps (NSKK) 1931-1945.* München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2005. 536 S. EUR 69.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-486-57570-5.



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Driving National Socialism Home

When it became known during the Waldheim affair of 1986 that later Austrian president Kurt Waldheim had lied about his service as an officer in the SA-Reiterkorps (the cavalry corps of the storm troopers) and about his time as an ordinance officer in Greece during World War II, Waldheim's opponent in the presidential race mocked him by stating that not Waldheim himself, but only his horse, had been a member of the SA-Reiterkorps. The joke was on Waldheim, but it raised the issue of the allegedly unimportant sub-organizations of the Nazi party, which attracted hundred of thousands of members interested in equestrian or other supposedly apolitical pursuits. For historians of the Nazi regime, the question is whether these organizations were indeed as politically innocent as many of their members claimed after 1945 and what specific role they filled under the dictatorship.

Dorothee Hochstetter's voluminous study of the National Socialist Motorist Corps (Nationalsozialistisches Kraftfahrkorps, or NSKK), the motorized equivalent of the Reiterkorps, shows that driving a car or learning to drive one under the auspices of the NSKK was far from apolitical. On three major levels, the NSKK worked to-

wards Nazi goals: the training of a hundreds of thousands of capable motorists whose skills were used in World War II, the Nazification of sports racing in Germany and Europe, and the participation of NSKK members in the Holocaust. Most of this will be news to historians of Germany. This study, therefore, deserves wide attention and contributes to our understanding of both the history of Nazi Germany and the contested process of motorization in this country. Hochstetter's book reminds us that the spread of automobiles and trucks in the twentieth century was neither inevitable nor apolitical. While Americans often tend to think of cars and roads as emblems of freedom, the German context and the very American Henry Ford make it clear that automobile possessed quite differing political meanings under different regimes.

Providing his country with cars and roads was one of Hitler's earliest political goals. The dictator was as enamored of Henry Ford's antisemitism as he was of his production of mass-produced vehicles for a broad market. The Volkswagen effort largely failed under the Nazis while the push for roads materialized in the form of the

Autobahnen. The NSKK's role in all of this was to "motorize" the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Founded in 1930 under a slightly different name, the NSKK was a department of the SA until the "Night of the Long Knives" in 1934. After this event, Hitler turned the NSKK into an independent organization under the umbrella of the NSDAP. In true Nazi fashion, the organization was made up of a complex hierarchical bureaucracy, with regional "Motorobergruppen," different ranks, uniforms and a host of publications. Neither ownership of a car nor membership in the Nazi party was a prerequisite for joining the NSKK, whose ranks swelled to 500,000 by 1941. The "Korpsführer," or NSKK leader, was Adolf Hühnlein (1881-1942). Yet, Hühnlein's weak personality seems to have been no match for the main political actors in the forceful, if inconsistent, Nazi push for cars and roads. Fritz Todt, the General Inspector for the German Road System and the Reich's chief engineer, arrogated powers from the erstwhile German states and the Reich department of transportation. Indeed, Hühnlein's and the NSKK's role in high-level decision-making was marginal, as Hochstetter shows. A "scary" public speaker, as Joseph Goebbels confided to his diary, and not as politically savvy as other Nazi leaders, Hühnlein was relegated to representing the NSKK at races and awarding prizes. In public, he always wore spurred boots, earning him the nickname "gespornter Heini" (p. 129).

Still, the periphery of Hühnlein's position does not mean that the organization as a whole was irrelevant. First of all, the NSKK was one of the agents in "Aryanizing" the field of automobiles and motor sports and of motorizing "Aryans." Membership in the NSKK was restricted to applicants classified as "Aryan." Hühnlein urged the automobile industry to fire employees classified as Jewish. The NSKK also pushed for restricting the work of Jewish driving instructors. What is more, it took over some of the work of state-licensed driving instructors, Jewish or not, and was responsible for training the tens of thousands of Germans who were learning to drive. NSKK officials supervised the "Motor-HJ," a branch of the Hitler Youth in which youngsters could learn how to ride and repair motorcycles and cars. All over the Reich, the NSKK set up 26 "Motorsportschulen" that, despite their sportive name, were training sites for future soldiers; 180,000 of their graduates received driving licenses before 1939. In effect, the NSKK became part of the Nazi preparation for the military conquest of Europe. There can be no doubt that learning how a motorcycle or car works and operating one when they were still scarce was an exciting venture, especially for German males,

whose definition of masculinity included love of modern technology. At the same time, it becomes clear from Hochstetter's study that this popular enthusiasm was as closely connected to war as a hubcap is to a wheel.

In the field of motor sports, the NSKK tried to exploit the growing popularity of races, which had already attracted large crowds during the 1920s. It attempted to control drivers, car manufacturers and audiences as well as events themselves. In her nuanced analysis, Hochstetter admits that the NSKK was especially unsuccessful when it came to controlling drivers, with their risk-taking, hypertrophically male individualism, which also fed on notions of heroism. The race car driver Hans Stuck, for instance, continued his career despite being married to a Jewish tennis player and journalist, Paula von Reznicek; Stuck happened to enjoy Hitler's personal protection. Still, the NSKK succeeded in broadening the popular base for motor races and freeing them from their former elitist status, according to Hochstetter.

Lastly, the NSKK played an important role in the logistics of the National Socialist Party and the Wehrmacht before and during World War II. Nazi party speakers and foreign guests were transported by NSKK officers; the organization was responsible for parts of the logistics of the party's public celebrations. In some cities, local NSKK men participated in the November 1938 pogroms. In January 1939, Hitler charged the NSKK with motorized preparation for war. Besides having trained young Germans on their wheels, the organization integrated its services into the Wehrmacht. Starting in the fall of 1939, the NSKK became responsible for the entire logistics of the "Westwall," a fortification on the Reich's western border. Throughout the war, the organization trained thousands of future car and truck drivers for the Wehrmacht, procured supplies for the front and chauffeured military personnel. Some ten NSKK "transport regiments" assisted mostly the Luftwaffe. In occupied Poland, NSKK units harassed the local population under the guise of enforcing German traffic laws. By 1941, SS chief Heinrich Himmler employed nine NSKK companies with some 600 men in Ukraine and Russia, whose members killed thousands of Jews. None of these NSKK killers appear to have been charged for their crimes after 1945.

Hochstetter's study is thus a valuable addition to the literature on cars, roads, and motor sports in the Third Reich and on the relationships between technology and Nazism. She successfully debunks the myth that the NSKK was an "apolitical" organization. Yet, it was precisely this stance that allowed former members to portray

their membership after 1945 as trivial. When the author interviewed some former members in 1999, they claimed that their “technical” jobs were not related to the repressive side of the regime. If one needed further evidence that technology is as political as the societies which create it, this study provides it.

The book’s focus is, however, not always clear. In the introduction, the author sets out to write an organizational history of the NSKK and its functioning in the National Socialist system of governance. Her analysis shows that this goal is elusive, given the inferior role of the organization in making top-level decisions. Instead, Hochstetter reviews many aspects of transportation in the Third Reich, even if they are only tangential to the NSKK itself. These somewhat lengthy sections are well-researched, but readers knowledgeable about Nazi transportation will find them less original than the chapters on the NSKK itself; they could easily have been trimmed in the interest of stringency. In the end, Hochstetter’s main contribution is to show how the NSKK, by spreading knowledge and skills regarding cars and trucks, both exploited and expanded the popularity of these new technologies. Simultaneously, this orchestrated process was wound up in the Nazi regime’s preparation for and execution of war.

As any useful study does, this one opens up new questions. One wonders, for example, about National Socialist ideas of masculinity and femininity and how they related to training behind the wheel. Hochstetter states that “active service” in the NSKK was prohibited for women after October 1934. Women could only become supporting members and were excluded from driv-

ing lessons. While Nazi propaganda celebrated female “flying aces” such as Elly Beinhorn, its prominent race car drivers were almost exclusively male. Beinhorn’s husband Bernd Rosemeyer, who died in 1938 while setting a speed record, is a case in point. What exactly was “manly” about driving a car and why were female pilots acceptable? What were the legacies of this gender-based exclusion from driving in the two successor states of Nazi Germany?[1] Secondly, Hochstetter’s study, as the pioneering one on the organization, rightly stresses the top-down, heavy-handed efforts of Nazi instruction on how to handle cars and trucks. Could one conceive of other, counterintuitive effects of spreading motoring skills by using the consumer angle rather than the regulatory one? For instance, how did fitful motorization change social relationships in the countryside? In the American hinterlands, where driving distances are admittedly longer, early motorists remember access to automobiles as contributing to the break-up of spatially constricted sets of relationships.[2] Did the German *Provinz* see similar developments? What agency, if any, did consumers have in the process under such dictatorial conditions? If future research engages these kinds of questions, it will find Hochstetter’s study indispensable.

Notes

[1]. See the classical account for the United States: Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

[2]. See Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

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