



“To show the world that we are not barbarians but Germans”: The Role of the *Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt* in France and annexed Alsace (1940–1944)

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KEYWORDS:

France — Alsace — World War II — Social Policy

When France was defeated in June 1940, a German journalist proclaimed that Germany was not only militarily but also socially superior to its enemies.¹ Thus, “after the end of fighting a large-scale social operation is currently being mounted in the occupied territories, one that evokes admiration and appreciation all over the world, but especially among the French themselves”.² The war correspondent was referring to the activities of the German *Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt* (NSV), which provided food and clothing to refugees in the North-East of France between June and October 1940. Also, the populations of Alsace and Lorraine were assisted by the NSV from the end of June 1940 on, all the more so because the local population was considered as “ethnic compatriots” [Volksgenossen] in a de facto annexed zone.

The activities of the NSV outside of the German Reich during the Second World War have only partially been explored, although the organisation played an important role for the Germanisation policy, particularly in Eastern Europe.³ Julia Torrie analysed for the first time the NSV’s assistance to French refugees, and emphasised the propagandistic aim of using welfare to improve the relationship between Ger-

1 I would like to thank Julia Torrie for her useful comments and also the organisers of the conference on Social Policy held in May 2015 in Prague, whose discussions greatly inspired this article.

2 Bundesarchiv (hereafter BA) Berlin, NS 26/258, Anton Dietz, *Lebendiger Sozialismus*. In: *Artikeldienst II,1d/18407 Hauptamt für Volkswohlfahrt-Hauptstelle Presse*, 15 July 1940, p. 1.

3 Herwart Vorländer, *Die NSV. Darstellung und Dokumentation einer nationalsozialistischen Organisation*, Boppard a. Rh. 1988, pp. 129–130; Georg Lilienthal, *Der “Lebensborn e.V.” Ein Instrument nationalsozialistischer Rassenpolitik*, Frankfurt a. M. 2008, pp. 196–207. For Austria and the Sudetenland see Eckhard Hansen, *Wohlfahrtspolitik im NS-Staat. Motivationen, Konflikte und Machtstrukturen im “Sozialismus der Tat” des Dritten Reiches*, Augsburg 1991, pp. 178–196; for Luxemburg Paul Dostert, *WHW Winterhilfswerk des Deutschen Volkes*, *Ons Stad* 53, 1996, pp. 20–21.



man occupiers and the French civil population.⁴ Studies of Alsace under German annexation indicate the NSV's key role in encouraging the population to feel part of the Reich, stressing its inclusive elements (intensive care for Alsatians deemed "valuable") but always within the context of an exclusive social policy (expropriation, racial exclusion).⁵

Why, then, did the NSV, who assisted only "genetically valuable Germans",⁶ become involved in 1940 with the populations of North-Eastern France and Alsace?

The NSV played different roles in Alsace and in North-Eastern France, but with the same aim: presenting the humane aspects of a superior Germany right from the start, to facilitate future annexation or occupation. Thus, propagandistic aspects briefly trumped political aspects in Germany's occupation policy.

The NSV's assistance in the North-East of France between June and October 1940 should prevent the spreading of diseases, stabilize the security for German forces and facilitate the future German-French relationship. The social engagement in Alsace went far beyond. While the NSV tried so show that Germany was the better caring fatherland as France, Alsace was de facto annexed since June 1940 and should be integrated to Germany. The NSV became an important instrument of integration, as it set up an intense care for "valuable" Alsatians in order to convince them at a long term to be ready to give also sacrifices for the German *Volksgemeinschaft*.

At the same time, analysis of the NSV's activities in occupied France reveals the contradiction in National Socialist social policy. Whereas the NSV was still caring for French refugees in the North-East of France in September 1940, no more "assistance to [...] French citizens living in Germany"⁷ was permitted by its subordinate Winter Relief Organization for the winter season 1940/41, since the French were enemies.

In what follows, the dynamic interaction between pragmatism, propaganda and ideology will be analysed on the example of National-Socialist assistance in France: on the one hand, in favour of French refugees in the North-East; on the other, of future *Volksgenossen* in Alsace.⁸

4 Julia S. Torrie, *The Many Aims of Assistance. The Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt and Aid to French Civilians*, *War & Society* 1, 2007, pp. 27–37; Julia S. Torrie, "For their own good". *Civilian Evacuations in Germany and France, 1939–1945*, New York — Oxford 2010, pp. 40–48.

5 Sophie Friederich, *La Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt à Strasbourg de 1940 à 1944*, Strasbourg 1999; Lothar Kettenacker, *Nationalsozialistische Volkstumspolitik im Elsaß*, Stuttgart 1973, pp. 136–139. Johnpeter Horst Grill, *The Nazi Movement in Baden, 1920–1945*, Chapel Hill 1983, pp. 400–409.

6 *Tatgewordener deutscher Sozialismus*. In: Herwart Vorländer, *Die NSV. Darstellung und Dokumentation einer nationalsozialistischen Organisation*, Boppard a. R. 1988, p. 373.

7 Archives Nationales (hereafter AN) Paris, AJ 40/1489, Letter from the Winterhilfswerk delegate of the Gau Baden to all NSDAP district leaders in Alsace, confidential, 14 September 1940.

8 The NSV's role in the annexed department of Moselle in Lorraine was comparable to Alsace, but will not be analyzed here owing to a paucity of sources. See Dieter Wolfanger, *Die nationalsozialistische Politik in Lothringen (1940–1945)*, Saarbrücken, Univ. Diss., 1977, pp. 69–70.



THE INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT OF A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION

Founded in September 1931 as a local self-help association for National-Socialists in Berlin, the “Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt” (NSV) became with its recognition by Adolf Hitler on 3rd May 1933 officially responsible for all questions of welfare and social care in the German Reich. An affiliated association of the NSDAP, its main office in Berlin was from March 1933 headed by Erich Hilgenfeldt, a former employee of the German Office for Statistics.⁹

The NSV, some 17 million members strong (by 1943) described itself as the “world’s biggest welfare organization”¹⁰ but was chiefly known for its relief subsidiaries “Mother and Child” [Mutter und Kind] and the “Winter Relief Organisation” [Winterhilfswerk]. The NSV’s main task was to organise supplementary welfare and health services for persons deemed “valuable” for the *Volkgemeinschaft*.¹¹ The criterion for neediness was now defined racially, centred on the genetically healthy and productive German family.¹²

The NSV organised recreational stays for mothers and children, ran kindergartens and distributed food, clothing or heating material to Germans in need.¹³ The scope of its tasks changed, however, with the outbreak of the Second World War. In contrast to the pre-war years, where it was guided by the imperative of individual and racial “people’s welfare” [Volkspflege], the NSV had now to deliver rapid humanitarian aid to the many victims of aerial warfare, as well as refugees and evacuees.¹⁴

In the occupied countries, the NSV became one of the instruments of National Socialist population management in deciding who beyond Germany’s borders was worthy of assistance. However, the NSV didn’t act within national, but within the vague ethnic (völkisch) categorie. In collaboration with the “Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle” or the “Lebensborn e.V.,” the NSV became one of the instruments of Germanisation policy in occupied Europe and would concentrated on its efforts only on those seen as “genetically healthy, socially useful ethnic compatriots”¹⁵. One of the first steps to-

9 H. Vorländer, *Die NSV*, pp. 9–14.

10 Cornelia Schmitz-Berning, *Vokabular des Nationalsozialismus*, Berlin 2007, p. 443.

11 Christoph Sachße — Florian Tennstedt, *Der Wohlfahrtsstaat im Nationalsozialismus. Geschichte der Armenfürsorge in Deutschland*, Vol. 3, Stuttgart — Berlin — Cologne 1992, pp. 119–120.

12 Marie-Luise Recker, “Stark machen zum Einsatz von Gut und Blut für Volk und Vaterland” — die Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt (NSV). In: Stephanie Becker (ed.), “Und sie werden nicht mehr frei ihr ganzes Leben”. Funktion und Stellenwert der NSDAP, ihrer Gliederungen und angeschlossenen Verbänden im “Dritten Reich”, Berlin — Münster 2012, pp. 269–279.

13 Herwart Vorländer, NS-Volkswohlfahrt und Winterhilfswerk des Deutschen Volkes, *Vierteljahresshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 34, 1986, pp. 341–380, here pp. 342–345.

14 Armin Nolzen, “Sozialismus der Tat”? Die Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt (NSV) und der alliierte Luftkrieg gegen das Deutsche Reich. In: Dietmar Süß (ed.), *Deutschland im Luftkrieg. Geschichte und Erinnerung*, Munich 2007, pp. 57–69, here p. 67.

15 Ernst Korten, Heini Steubing, *Rassisch ausgerichtete Bevölkerungspolitik. Die Grundlagen der Betreuungsarbeit der NSV*, Frankfurt a. M. 1937, p. 79.

wards involvement beyond Germany's borders took place in Austria and the Sudetenland in 1938. By 1940 it had become "self-evident that the NSV moved in with the German army when it came to reclaiming ancestral German soil"¹⁶. During the Second World War, these pre-war experiences were applied to the occupied territories. But how would the NSV react when it accompanied the German army into territory that could hardly be defined as "ancestral German soil"?¹⁷



EMERGENCY RELIEF IN OCCUPIED NORTH-EASTERN FRANCE

When the Blitzkrieg against France began on the 10th of May 1940, about seven million French and two million Belgians fled before the advancing German army.¹⁸ German reports painted a picture of French mayors abandoning their municipalities, of overloaded busses overturning on crowded roads and ending up in ditches, of babies starving to death — while at home "the cows burst their udders and perished from not being milked"¹⁹. German sense of duty and modern order is then compared to this French chaos. Since neither the French Red Cross nor any other French welfare organisations would sufficiently supply the French and Belgian refugees, the director of the NSV, Erich Hilgenfeldt, received on 3 June 1940 the order to organize the NSV's activities in the western occupied territories. The NSV should care for refugees returning home to Belgium, Holland and Northern France as also for the local population.

Shortly after the armistice on 22 June 1940, the "North-East axis" from the mouth of the Somme to the Suisse frontier was established which should control and prohibit the return of civilians to Northern France. Numerous camps for refugees waiting to return home were erected along this axis.²⁰ The NSV, for its part, set up soup kitchens for the refugees detained there. By mid-July they were servicing the area around Paris, but also Normandy, Picardy, Champagne-Ardennes and Burgundy.²¹ In all of France, there were about 100 soup kitchens being operated by 283 members of the NSV.²² Between June and September 1940, the NSV is said to have distributed 15

¹⁶ Erich Hilgenfeldt, Vorwort. In: Walter Hebenbrock, *Mit der NSV. nach Polen*, Berlin 1940.

¹⁷ For the NSV's care for the Polish population as in Belgium, France and Holland see Hans Bernsee, *Aufgaben der NS.-Volkswohlfahrt im Kriege*, Berlin 1941; W. Hebenbrock, *Mit der NSV. nach Polen*.

¹⁸ J. S. Torrie, "For their own good", pp. 38–40; Nicole Dombrowski-Risser, *France under Fire. German invasion, civilian flight, and family survival during World War II*, Cambridge 2012, p. 2.

¹⁹ H. Bernsee, *Aufgaben der der NS.-Volkswohlfahrt im Kriege*, p. 24.

²⁰ For the alternatively called "Führerlinie" and for German plans to annex Northern France, see Peter Schöttler, *Eine Art "Generalplan West". Die Stuckart-Denkschrift vom 14. Juni 1940 und die Planungen für eine deutsch-französische Grenze im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, *Sozial. Geschichte* 3, 2003, pp. 83–131, here p. 85 and 124–125.

²¹ Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg, RW/35/197, *Camps of the NSV in France*, July 1940.

²² J. S. Torrie, *The many aims of assistance*, pp. 29–30.



million hot meals. Especially children and mothers were prioritised, with the NSV assisting at 700 childbirths and distributing 8.5 million bottles of milk.

It is interesting to note that the food, clothing and other materials given to French refugees during the summer of 1940 all came from captured French or British stocks. While praising the humanity of its social actions, the NSV at the same time underlined that “no food from the Reich was being used to assist (the French), only the spoils of war”.²³ It is quite characteristic of National Socialist social policy that the NSV designated the distribution of British and French food to French refugees as German assistance. But what was the rationale behind the German authorities calling upon the NSV in the first months of occupation between June and October 1940?

The primary aim behind German willingness to assist French refugees should be sought on the plane of propaganda, showing to a sceptical world that the German occupiers were both responsible and humane. A second aim was to prevent the spreading of diseases, while a third was to improve security for the German forces.²⁴ In this way, Germany tried to present its occupation in a positive light, but especially so towards a France which had still the destructions of the First World War in bitter memory. The NSV’s ministrations were part of a “charm offensive” in the first months of occupation, demonstrating that from now on Germany would care for a French population deserted by its leaders. Therefore, it is no surprise that one of the first propaganda posters from June 1940 showed a smiling German soldier looking after abandoned French children like a father.²⁵

Especially in the North and the East of France, where the population had already suffered much during the First World War, a humane image of the occupation was necessary. The German occupation was represented here as chivalrous, in positive light compared to the French occupation of the Rhineland after World War I. The NSV felt that by caring for the French refugees it was discharging a modern, a superior social policy: “thus it becomes clear that Germany is not only militarily but socially superior to its enemies”.²⁶

This modern social policy towards the French refugees was, however, underpinned by racial and political categories. Assistance to France and even Belgium was one thing, as both were “civilised nations whose inhabitants had been remained thrifty, hard-working and generally rooted in their native soil”.²⁷ The NSV was even ready to help Northern Normandy, as in the case of Evreux near Paris, where the population was “racially less perfect than further north along the Channel coast”.²⁸ While

23 H. Bernsee, *Die Aufgaben der NS.-Volkswohlfahrt im Kriege*, p. 27.

24 J. S. Torrie, *The many aims of assistance*, pp. 27–28.

25 Alexandre Sumpf, *Populations abandonnées, faites confiance au soldat allemand!*, *L’Histoire par l’image*, ed. by Henri Bovet, 2010, < <http://www.histoire-image.org/site/oeuvre/analyse.php?i=1236> > (9 January 2017).

26 A. Dietz, *Lebendiger Sozialismus*, p. 1.

27 BA, NS 26/258. Mit der NSV. in Belgien und Frankreich, Artikeldienst II/1d/15407, 10 July 1940.

28 BA, NS/37/2065. Report of the NSV district leader Folkers, *Sondereinsatz der NSV. in Belgien und Nordfrankreich*, 27 November 1940.

in Rouen the NSV was willing to let a Flemish mother return to her home in Gent, Jews who passed themselves off as ethnic Germans [Volksdeutsche] were rejected. The NSV's supply point doubled as a control point, where German opponents living in French exile could be identified and handed over to the German *Sicherheitsdienst*.²⁹

Now, it is instructive to compare German assistance to North-Eastern France with parallel assistance to Alsace, i.e. from early June to October 1940. A large part of the food and clothing distributed to the Alsatian population came from the neighbouring region of Baden. Although this was probably done for mainly pragmatic reasons, the NSV didn't hesitate to portray this as an instance of interregional and National-Socialist solidarity. Significantly, this alerts us to the different aims pursued by German occupation policy in Alsace and France.

RECONSTRUCTION AND EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE TO ALSACE (JUNE – OCTOBER 1940)

In 1938 and 1939, the NSV had allotted 76.5 million Reichsmark for special operations to integrate Austria and even more — 79 million Reichsmark — for the Sudetenland. Investing only 3.6 Million Reichsmark in similar activities after June 1940, the NSV tried to win over the “shackled German soul”³⁰ in Alsace.³¹

“Operation Alsace” lasted from 1 July to 31 October 1940, in which time the NSV estimated that about 500,000 persons in Alsace would need help; these persons were mainly Alsatians who had been evacuated in September 1939 and were now returning home as also demobilized Alsatian soldiers. The NSV's role in Alsace was to present Germany, right from the start of the occupation, as the more social and caring fatherland — always in comparison to France. Whereas French soldiers were said to have plundered the last remaining food stocks in the evacuated regions, the German NSV was now coming to the rescue of its “Alsatian compatriots”.³² From the perspective of the ensuing annexation of a region deemed “Germanic”, it is not surprising that assistance for Alsace went far beyond of that made available to French refugees near Paris.

Thus, in June 1940, the NSV had to care for two population segments in Alsace. First, those already in Alsace at the time; and second, Alsatian evacuees about to return home.

For those who were already in Alsace and needed “total supply” in the evacuated areas, the NSV had to step into the breach as long as there wasn't a regular supply of electricity, heating material and food. According to NSV reports, during “Opera-

29 BA, NS 26/258. Wilhelm Reher, Der Parteieinsatz im besetzten Gebiet (1), Artikeldienst II/1d/15407, 6 July 1940.

30 E. Hilgenfeldt, Aufgaben der nationalsozialistischen Wohlfahrtspflege, p. 3.

31 BA, NS 18/963. Main Office for Statistics, Sondereinsätze der NSV, 10 April 1942.

32 Generallandesarchiv, Karlsruhe (hereafter GLA, Karlsruhe), 465d/820, Direction of the NSDAP Gau Baden, “Aktion Elsaß”. Statistischer Bericht über die Betreuungs- und Aufbauarbeit der NS.-Volkswohlfahrt im Elsass, Vorgeschichte, undated.



tion Alsace” it distributed hot and cold meals on a daily basis to 96,252 Alsatians.³³ The second, and more important, population segment for the NSV were evacuees from the French interior returning to Alsace. In September 1939, some 370,000 Alsatians from the Franco-German frontier region had been evacuated to South-West France.³⁴ After the armistice of 22nd June 1940, the NSV probably assisted two-thirds of these so-called “Rückwanderer” (a total of 202,997 persons).³⁵ The NSV set up special camps in St. Dizier and Savigny between June and November 1940 for the returnees of Alsace and Lorraine.³⁶ Persons who were judged unsuitable for a National Socialist regime, whether for political or racial reasons, were prevented from returning, with the NSV ramming through its social policy in the returning camps by selecting only “healthy” and “valuable” German persons. About 18,000 persons are said to have thus been prevented from returning to Alsace.³⁷ However, those who were judged to be “valuable” received special care upon their return. When the first trainload of evacuees reached Strasbourg on the 6th of August 1940, they were welcomed with the song “O Straßburg, du wunderschöne Stadt”; not only that but the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* helped transport the luggage, while the NSV, for its part, distributed hot and cold meals.³⁸ “Rückwanderer” were supplied by the NSV for three days following their arrival or until such time as the public services could take over assistance on a regular basis — which could be as many as six days. In this way, 119 special food stations were set up during Operation Alsace, as well as 13 points of supply within train stations. Household goods and clothes and footwear — for example, 81 pairs of shoes in Mulhouse — were distributed during the same time. For those who couldn’t return immediately to their damaged houses, the NSV set up 12 hostels for homeless people, mainly in Strasbourg and Colmar. Contrary to operations in Poland or the North-East of France, the clothes and food came from Germany, with apparently three-quarters of “Operation Alsace” being sourced from neighbouring Baden.³⁹ While the “self-sacrificing engagement”⁴⁰ of 4,000 voluntary assistants in Alsace was praised during “Operation Alsace”, it is instructive to compare this with their counterparts in North-

33 GLA, Karlsruhe, 465d/820, Aktion Elsaß, p. 2.

34 Kurt Hochstuhl, *Zwischen Frieden und Krieg. Das Elsaß in den Jahren 1938–1940. Ein Beitrag zu den Problemen einer Grenzregion in Krisenzeiten*, Frankfurt a. M. — Bern — New York 1984, p. 193.

35 S. Friederich, *La Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt à Strasbourg*, p. 31.

36 Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg, RW/35/197, Letter from the military administration’s main office, 16 October 1940.

37 About 105,000 persons had been deported from Alsace or prevented from returning there by the end of 1940. Alexa Stiller, *Grenzen des “Deutschen”. Nationalsozialistische Volkstumspolitik in Polen, Frankreich und Slowenien während des Zweiten Weltkriegs*. In: Mathias Beer — Dietrich Beyrau — Cornelia Rauh (ed.), *Deutschsein als Grenzerfahrung. Minderheitenpolitik in Europa zwischen 1914 und 1950*, Essen 2009, pp. 61–84, here p. 66; L. Kettenacker, *Nationalsozialistische Volkstumspolitik im Elsaß*, pp. 250–254.

38 Eugène Riedweg, *Strasbourg, ville occupée 1939–1945. La vie quotidienne dans la capitale de l’Alsace durant la Seconde guerre mondiale*, Steinbrunn-le-Haut 1982, p. 67.

39 GLA, Karlsruhe, 465d/820, “Aktion Elsaß”, pp. 8–12.

40 GLA Karlsruhe, 465d/820, “Aktion Elsaß”, p. 30.

Eastern France, who were described as lethargic and slow to act. The French social and health staff there had to be urged again and again by the NSV to assure a constant food supply for the French refugees.⁴¹



THE “MENTAL OCCUPATION” OF ALSACE AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ALSATIAN NSV (1940–1945)

The emergency assistance provided to Alsace between June 1940 and April 1941 was only a first step towards integration into the German Reich. The NSV combined the role of a mother “caring” for her “valuable” children with simultaneously performing a controlling function.⁴² The NSV was therefore ideally suited for winning over and “educating” the new *Volksgenossen* in Alsace. Apparently, its efforts were partially successful as the NSV was more appreciated and respected in 1940 than the NSDAP in Alsace.⁴³

While Germany hadn’t officially claimed Alsace-Lorraine during the armistice agreement, the former departments of Bas-Rhin, Haut-Rhin and Moselle were de facto annexed by Germany.⁴⁴ Based on the “Elsässischer Hilfsdienst”, a political organization supporting German annexation between June 1940 and April 1941, a branch of the NSDAP was officially opened in Alsace on 22nd March 1941.⁴⁵ The NSV was thus represented on every local level (*Gau, Kreis, Ortsgruppe, Zelle, Block*) in Alsace, combining the dual functions of care and control of virtually every household. Success in Alsace, however, proved elusive. Three years later, in July 1944, only 5 % of the Alsatian population were members of the NSV, while the figure of 20 % for Baden was slightly higher than the average for Germany.⁴⁶

From October 1940 on, the NSV sought to replace in Alsatian minds the defects of a “French or international”⁴⁷ social policies with National-Socialists ideas. In its own self-conception, Germany was the messenger of a socialist Europe, its chosen role

41 BA, NS/37/2065. Report of the NSV district leader Folkers, Sondereinsatz der NSV. in Belgien und Nordfrankreich, 27 November 1940, p. 3.

42 Marie-Luise Recker, Die Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt (NSV) im Bombenkrieg. In: Michael Fleiter (ed.), Heimat/Front. Frankfurt am Main im Luftkrieg, Frankfurt a. M. 2013, pp. 131–146.

43 Marie-Joseph Bopp, L’Alsace sous l’occupation allemande 1940–1945, Le Puy 1945, p. 103; H. Grill, The Nazi Movement in Baden, p. 496.

44 L. Kettenacker, Nationalsozialistische Volkstumspolitik im Elsaß, pp. 51–58; Eberhard Jäckel, Frankreich in Hitlers Europa. Die deutsche Frankreichpolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg, Stuttgart 1966, pp. 79–84.

45 Markus Enzenauer, “Deutsches Elsaß kehre heim!” Nazifizierung, Germanisierung und Organisationsgrad der elsässischen Bevölkerung während der “verschleierte Annexion” 1940–1944/45. In: Konrad Krimm (ed.), NS-Kulturpolitik und Gesellschaft am Oberrhein 1940–1945, Ostfildern 2013, p. 44.

46 M. Enzenauer, “Deutsches Elsaß kehre heim!”, pp. 71–72.

47 Dr. Götz, Sozialpolitische Probleme im Elsaß, Monatshefte für NS-Sozialpolitik, 1940, 11/12, pp. 244–248, here p. 245.



being to unfurl over “Europe the banner of socialism”⁴⁸ The NSV should therefore be exported to the newly annexed territories as an instrument of modern social policy.

One of the NSV’s first successes was an authorisation of Liquidation Commissar [Stillhaltekommissar] Franz Schmidt on 8th May 1941 to dissolve all welfare organizations in Alsace. The confiscated property was given over to the NSV.⁴⁹ Thus, the NSV could announce in 1942 that it had taken over “the entire Alsatian child-care system”.⁵⁰ As had been the fate of all other societies, including sport clubs or music groups, the charitable organisations were forced to toe the line or else dissolved in Alsace. A similar dissolution of concurrent charity organisations within the Reich was impossible for the NSV. Such was the extraordinary situation which made the newly occupied territories into a sort of German laboratory for modern social policy.⁵¹

The Nazification of welfare in Alsace soon ran out of steam when it came to finding enough personnel, especially for the growing number of kindergartens. The NSV responded pragmatically by appointing confessional nurses, for example from the Catholic “Society of Saint Vincent de Paul”, and formed its properly staffed personal in a nursery school in Strasbourg, probably from March 1941 on.⁵² In the following years an intense exchange between Baden and Alsace was encouraged. Similarly to other occupational groups as for example civil servants, NSV-kindergarten teachers from Baden were sent to Alsace to internalize the new governmental unit of the “Upper Rhine”. In November of the same year, 1941, some 270 Alsatian girls were trained in Baden as NSV-kindergarten teachers. The aim was to assess their competence and improve their German language skills.⁵³ Officially, political attitude counted more for recruitment than professional skills.⁵⁴

After establishment of the NSV in Alsace, it tried to achieve its goal — the Germanisation of the Alsatian population — in two different ways: first, by measures integrating but always controlling the population on a basis of “worthiness and neediness”.⁵⁵ Second, by measures excluding and devaluating Francophiles and Jews, but also those deemed “asocial” or critical the regime.

48 Sozialismus als europäische Aufgabe, Monatshefte für NS-Sozialpolitik, 1940, 9/10, pp. 97–99, here p. 97.

49 L. Kettenacker, Nationalsozialistische Volkstumspolitik im Elsaß, pp. 144–145.

50 Aus der NSV. 2 Jahre NS.-Volkswohlfahrt im Elsaß, Deutsche Zeitschrift für Wohlfahrtspflege, August/September 1942, 5/6, pp. 129–130.

51 See similar phenomena cited for Austria in Verena Pawlowsky — Edith Leisch-Prost — Christian Klösch, Vereine im Nationalsozialismus. Vermögensentzug durch den Stillhaltekommissar für Vereine, Organisationen und Verbände und Aspekte der Restitution in Österreich nach 1945, Vienna — Munich 2004, pp. 292–301.

52 GLA, Karlsruhe, 465d/863. Letter from the NSV’s treasurer Schmitz of Schlettstadt [Sélestat] to the Gau direction Baden, 25 April 1942; S. Friederich, La Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt à Strasbourg, p. 53.

53 GLA, Karlsruhe, 465d/816, Short report about day-care-centers in Alsace, undated.

54 GLA, Karlsruhe, 465d/817, Report about the NSV’s activities from 1 April 1941 to 31 March 1942, p.1.

55 Ibid.



By September 1940 the first evacuation of Alsatian children [Kinderlandverschickung] had been organised, with 782 children from Alsace being sent to the Lake Constance during the months of September and October 1940. Families in Baden were encouraged to receive Alsatian children and given information about the situation in Alsace.⁵⁶

Furthermore, in October 1940, the NSV set up 415 medical centres for mothers in Alsace to encourage and assist with childbirths from the longer perspective of promoting strong German population growth; to this end, in November 1940 it sent 30 Alsatian mothers to a recreation home in the northern reaches of the Black Forest.⁵⁷

Thus, the NSV employed all available instruments to turn the population in Alsace into *Volksgenossen* and so germanise the region — while also, and at the same time, practising a policy of exclusion and radical redistribution.

As in the German Reich, so too in Alsace the property of Jews and political opponents could be, and was, expropriated for the benefit of the NSV. In the districts of Haguenau, Guebwiller and Altkirch alone, the NSV took over 29 estates that had been labelled as “reichsfeindlich”.⁵⁸ And in a former Jewish property in Wasselonne, the NSV created a medical information centre for mothers.⁵⁹ National-Socialist social policy in Alsace was also realized at the expense of the French. After February 1943 the NSV could officially acquire former French property in Alsace. Thus, the NSV built a recreation home for young children in the former house of the family Durand-Casselin in Mulhouse.⁶⁰

But it was only with the establishment of the “Winter Relief Organisation” [Winterhilfswerk] and its collection campaigns during the winter season that Alsace could be totally integrated and “educated”. In the NSV’s eyes, successful collection of donations was tantamount to unanimous approval of the regime and, according to this logic, should constantly increase each year. During the first fundraising in the winter of 1940/1941, about 3.5 million Reichsmark were collected in Alsace and doubled the following year to 6.7 million Reichsmark. In comparison to the parallel campaign in Baden, the collections in Alsace were deceptive, however. Each household in Alsace gave on average only 20.63 Reichsmark between 1941 and 1942, while in Baden each household gave all of 36.68 Reichsmark. From 1944 on, the donations in Alsace decreased constantly.⁶¹

⁵⁶ GLA, Karlsruhe, 465d/820, NSDAP Gauleitung Baden: “Aktion Elsaß”, p. 24.

⁵⁷ GLA, Karlsruhe, 465d/820, NSDAP Gauleitung Baden: “Aktion Elsaß”, 20; GLA, Karlsruhe, 465d/816. Report about the activities of the organization “Mutter und Kind” in Alsace, undated, p. 1.

⁵⁸ GLA, Karlsruhe, 465d/856, Property in Alsace labelled as reichsfeindlich and volksfeindlich, undated.

⁵⁹ GLA, Karlsruhe, 465d/854, Transfer and utilisation of property labelled as reichsfeindlich 1941–1943, undated.

⁶⁰ GLA, Karlsruhe, 465d/854. Letter from the Central Office for Welfare to the NSV district director Merdes in Strasbourg, 25 February 1943.

⁶¹ S. Friederich, La Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt à Strasbourg, pp. 43–44; M. Enzenauer, “Deutsches Elsaß kehre heim”, p. 72.



While the *Winterhilfswerk* was, on the one hand, a symbol of care and solidarity between *Volksgenossen*, it was, on the other hand, an educational instrument especially devised for the newly annexed territories. So-called “bad donors” [Schlechte Spender] were accused of not having given enough and were reminded of their duties towards the *Volksgemeinschaft* in letters or else invited to state their reasons at the local NSDAP’s office. Thus, a baker in Strasbourg was accused in 1942 of always only donating 0.5 Reichsmark, while the NSV’s district officer’s assessment of the situation was that he could easily give 5 Reichsmark. Strasbourg’s NSV suspected the baker of “still having a Francophile attitude”,⁶² which led him to ignore its warning letters. The district craft master should now exert pressure on the baker. Also, even if the donations to the German *Winterhilfswerk* weren’t always as voluntary as they seemed, the results of the collection campaigns served as ideal propaganda for its Gauleiter Robert Wagner in demonstrating Alsatian solidarity with Germany.

CONCLUSION

Both operations — in North-East France and in Alsace — reveal the nature of National Socialist social policies. The NSV was pivotal in both regions and was one of the first civilian organisations to arrive on the scene; in the first weeks of occupation, it played an important role in representing a social and humane Germany.

The National Socialist idea of “socialism” was not, however, to provide a better life for all, but to effect a racial redistribution of existing resources. As earlier in Germany, so too in North-East France the NSV took food and clothes from foreigners and gave them to French refugees as a German gift. Also in Alsace, Jews and French opponents were expropriated to benefit the more “valuable” Alsatians. Overall, Germany wanted to appear as a modern and superior but generous power.

While on the one hand the war radicalized social policy, propaganda on the other hand was accorded greater priority, at least in the short term than were the political criteria of social care.

The priority of propaganda during the NSV’s assistance in North-Eastern France was still evident in summer 1940, when a good relationship with the occupied French was deemed necessary. Right from the start of the Second World War, the NSV’s activities sought to disseminate a humane image of Germany abroad. However, when two years later the NSV published a book reviewing its ten years of existence, the assistance given to French refugees in summer 1940 should no longer be mentioned there. By then the German-French relationship had changed, and the German authorities feared that the NSV’s assistance to the French population could be interpreted as a wasted and useless activity, given that food had already been rationed in Germany itself since 1939.⁶³ In contrast, NSV assistance in Alsace was less unambiguous, as this region was always intended for integration

62 GLA, Karlsruhe, 465d/808. Letter from the propaganda officer of the Gau, Mr. Wickertshaimer, to the district craft master, 8 June 1942.

63 J. S. Torrie, *The Many Aims of Assistance*, pp. 36–37.

into the Reich, whose frontiers were imagined not as fixed but as moving spaces drawing in all “Germanic” territories.

Finally, the emergency relief in Alsace and in North-East France seems to have been more important for the NSV itself than for the assisted population. While emergency relief ceased after a few months, the NSV could distinguish itself abroad (and vis-à-vis other NSDAP organisations and the state) as an efficient organisation through the entire war. The NSV’s assistance to French refugees in North-East France was an exceptional gesture, albeit justified in propagandistic terms — all the more so because, at the time, French citizens living in Germany were deemed enemies and so excluded from the NSV’s *Winterhilfswerk*.⁶⁴ This example illustrates, however, that National Socialist social policy wasn’t homogenous, but could be transformed for propagandistic reasons — just so long as the broader goal of domination was achieved.

The idea of winning people’s hearts by feeding them failed in the long term. Nevertheless, the NSV’s work in the first weeks seems to have been more respected, and so better employed, in Alsace than in North-East France, where German aid was received as a humiliating gesture.⁶⁵ After all, whereas Germany deemed the Alsatians as possible future *Volksgenossen* in the long term, assistance in North-East France seems to have been an act of mercy by the German occupier serving for excellent propaganda.



64 AN, Paris, AJ 40/1489, Letter from the Winterhilfswerk delegate of the Gau Baden, 14 September 1940.

65 Yves Le Maner, *Histoire du Pas-de-Calais 1815–1945*, Arras 1993, p. 234.