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Vagrants and Beggars in Hitler's Reich

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I

The years of the Depression in Germany brought unemployment and destitution to millions. Unemployment insurance, introduced as late as 1927, only provided regular payments for a fraction of the six million or more unemployed. While just under a million were being supported in this way by January 1933, when Hitler was appointed Chancellor, some 3.9 million unemployed were dependent on the much lower rates paid in 'crisis benefits' or by local authority welfare. The financial burden fell heavily on the virtually bankrupt urban and communal authorities, so that they increasingly tried to exclude as many people as possible from entitlement to claim. By the beginning of 1933, nearly 1,200,000 registered unemployed were receiving no benefits at all.¹ The poverty of these people meant that many of them were unable to afford rent payments, and the numbers of homeless people increased dramatically. They were passed on by the authorities from town to town, as 'vagrants' (*Wanderer*), but the hope of finding work and accommodation became ever more illusory as the Depression deepened. According to officials of the Vagrancy Relief (*Wanderfürsorge*), some 200,000 to half a million people, mostly men, were living on the streets by the beginning of the 1930s. The desperate financial situation of local authorities made it more or less impossible for them to provide these great masses of people with food, clothing and shelter, even had they wished to add the homeless to all the other categories of claimants they were trying to support. The situation of unemployed vagrants thus became steadily worse. They often went barefoot in order to preserve their only pair of shoes from wearing out; many of them starved.

¹ Cf. W. Adamy and J. Steffen, '„Arbeitsmarktpolitik“ in der Depression. Sanierungsstrategien in der Arbeitslosenversicherung, 1927-1933', *Mitteilungen aus der Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung* (1982), pp. 276-91.

[p. 211] Most of these vagrants were under 30 years of age. Young people were completely excluded from state unemployment insurance and 'crisis benefits', and many of them left home because they were unwilling to burden their parents, or because their parents were unwilling to tolerate or support them. However, there was no such thing as a 'typical' homeless person. Those who wandered the streets or gathered in the doss-houses included not only the masses of young unemployed men but also old-established tramps (*Kunden*), recently jobless skilled labourers looking for work, and impoverished intellectuals. As the Depression wore on, however, the distinctions between the classic vagrancy of the tramp, the travelling urge of the young, and the remnants of the wandering tradition became blurred. Never before had there been so many vagrants from so many different backgrounds. This new situation provided the seed-bed for groups such as the 'International Brotherhood of Vagabonds', which was organised enough to bring out no fewer than 21 numbers of its magazine *The Tramp* between 1927 and 1931.² The high point of the Brotherhood's career was the celebrated Vagabonds' Congress held at Stuttgart in 1929. It brought the possibilities of organising and politicising the homeless to the fore, and soon inspired other attempts along these lines.

In July 1932, for example, a meeting of some 300 'tramps' took place in a hall in Hamburg, to complain about abuses in the running of doss-houses, and the excessively high rates charged by some, the inadequate pay offered in some 'itinerant workers' centres' (*Wanderarbeitsstätten*) and 'labour colonies', and the rundown condition of municipal night-shelters. However, the strong presence of the Communist Party at this meeting caused the police to break it up.³ The Nazis were also active in this area, and attempted in their turn to rescue 'fellow-Germans who had got into difficulties through no fault of their own'. A good many of the homeless must have found their way into the arms of the SA, the Brownshirts, attracted by the promise of food, shelter, uniforms and plenty of action. At the beginning of 1933 the Nazis even published a novel, called *The road to Hitler*, complete with foreword by Goebbels, in the attempt to win over the vagrant constituency to the 'movement'.⁴

Once they had gained power, however, the Nazis gradually abandoned their attempt to win the support of the homeless and turned instead to persecuting this sub-proletarian stratum with measures that became ever harsher as time went on. This chapter [p. 212] takes the example of Hamburg, Germany's second largest city after Berlin, to illustrate this process in

² On the 'International Brotherhood of Vagabonds', see Klaus Trappmann (ed.), *Landstrasse, Kunden, Vagabunden. Gregor Gogs Liga der Heimatlosen* (Berlin, 1980), and the catalogue *Wohnsitz: nirgendwo. Vom Leben und Überleben auf der Strasse* (Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 1982).

³ 'Kongress der Ruhelosen', *Hamburger Fremdenblatt*, 163 (13 June 1932).

⁴ Peter Hagen, *Die Strasse zu Hitler* (Berlin, 1933).

detail. Of course, in Hamburg perhaps more than in most places, the need to find temporary accommodation – in this case, for sailors, casual harbour workers and the like – had been at least partially recognised and met well before the Depression. The largest number of beds was provided by the Police Shelter in the Neustädterstrasse, built in 1913 and still in operation today. In 1937 it passed into the hands of the social welfare authorities, but it continues to be known as the 'Police Shelter' even today. With 300 places, it certainly could not stand comparison with the 5,000-bed Berlin Night-shelter, the celebrated *Palme*, in scale; but its notoriety among the vagrant community was just as great. Even today, it still deals with its customers impersonally, from behind a closed-in counter, and it still has mass dormitories.⁵

Besides the Police Shelter there were also, according to an annual official survey, 24 other accommodation centres, including three run by the Salvation Army, one 'refuge' called the *Herberge zur Heimat*, one itinerant workers' centre, and various sailors' homes and private lodging-houses.⁶ Apart from these officially recognised centres, there were also a number of opportunities for cheap accommodation in low pubs and doss-houses not approved by the authorities. In addition, there was also a 'labour colony'⁷ in the Bilhoner Kanalstrasse, founded in 1891. It offered relief and long-term accommodation, and obliged its inmates to work at chopping wood, for which they received no more than a few pfennigs pocket-money every week. It was closed in 1935, however, because its 160 places had long since ceased to be regularly filled. The accommodation and maintenance which it offered were so bad that even the Homelessness and Vagrancy Department of the Hamburg Social Welfare Authority, which was not particularly known for its sensitivity to the interests of those with whom it dealt, had refused to send people there since 1934.⁸

⁵ Hille Jan Breitenreicher, 'Hamburg-Pik As', in *Wohnsitz: nirgendwo*, pp. 447-59. The nickname of the Police Shelter is virtually untranslatable. It took - and takes - its initials *PA* from the official name (*Polizei-Asyl*), and uses them as the basis for *Pik As*, the Ace of Spades, the card of death.

⁶ Staatsarchiv Hamburg (StA Hbg), Sozialbehörde (SB) I, EF 60.11, 29 November 1935.

⁷ On the history and function of the labour colonies, see *Ein Jahrhundert Arbeiterkolonien. 'Arbeit statt Almosen'. Hilfe für obdachlose Wanderarme 1884-1984* (Zentralverband deutscher Arbeiterkolonien, Bielefeld, 1984). On the history of vagrants' welfare in the Third Reich, see Wolfgang Ayass, 'Die Wanderfürsorge im Nationalsozialismus. Quellen und Dokumente zur Geschichte der Wanderfürsorge und der Herbergen zur Heimat zwischen 1933 und 1945' in Jürgen Scheffler (ed.), *Bürger und Bettler. Materialien und Dokumente zur Geschichte der Nichtsesshaftenhilfe in Diakonie, Vol. 1, 1854-1954* (Bielefeld, 1987).

⁸ StA Hbg, SB I, FR 30.29, 10 December 1934; *ibid.*, EF 61.16, 147.

II.

The Nazis planned their first big round-up of the homeless almost as soon as they came to power. In July 1933 the recently founded Reich Ministry of Propaganda was urging a nationwide swoop on beggars, informing the welfare agencies of its intention in August 1933.⁹ The raid was preceded by a carefully orchestrated [p. 213] propaganda campaign. 'Guidelines' were issued to the press, portraying the forthcoming action quite cynically as a pendant to the recently inaugurated Winter Aid Programme (motto: 'No one will freeze or starve'):

„The psychological importance of a planned campaign against the nuisance of begging should not be underestimated. Beggars often force their poverty upon people in the most repulsive way for their own selfish purposes. If this sight disappears from the view of foreigners as well, the result will be a definite feeling of relief and liberation. People will feel that things are becoming more stable again, and that the economy is improving once more. A successful action against the nuisance of begging can have important propaganda benefits for the 'struggle against cold and hunger'. Once the land has been freed of the nuisance of beggars, we can justifiably appeal to the propertied classes to give all the more generously for the Winter Aid Programme now being set in motion by the State and the party.“¹⁰

Accordingly between 18 and 25 September 1933 the police, supported by the SA and the SS, organised a nationwide so-called 'beggars' week'. Large numbers of vagrants and beggars were taken into 'protective custody' in the course of this action, some of them directly from the doss-houses and night-shelters.¹¹

This first large-scale swoop on the homeless in the Third Reich revealed a mixture of strengths and weaknesses in the Nazis' policy towards beggars at this point in the regime's development. The figures published for Hamburg were characteristic of the situation in the nation as a whole. Within a very short space of time the local police arrested no fewer than 1,400 beggars, but no one really knew what to do with them, so all of them were released after a few days, except for a few, 108 in all, who were interned in a home for the destitute in Farmsen.¹² Judged by its original aim of 'removing the nuisance of beggars' altogether, the round-up of September 1933 had turned out to be a complete flop, a fact that was not

⁹ Archiv des Diakonischen Werkes Berlin, CA 1859, p. 1222 a/b.

¹⁰ Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Munich, MIInn 71575, 15 September 1933.

¹¹ StA Hbg, SB I, EF 6127, 24 October 1933.

¹² Ibid., EF 60.40, 25 October 1933.

altered by the propaganda campaign waged in the Hamburg press in justification of the raid.¹³ The existing prisons were in no way capable of taking the tens of thousand of people condemned across Germany to sentences of up to six weeks for begging either. Recently closed-down penal institutions were [p. 214] reopened for the purpose. In some places, such as Görlitz, Meseritz and Singen-Hohentwiel, press reports revealed that special internment camps for beggars were set up for a few weeks.¹⁴ A local paper published in a municipality near Hamburg, the *Elmshomer Nachrichten*, even published a photograph of the beggars assembled in what the caption described as 'the first concentration camp for beggars', on 7 October 1933. After the dust had settled, of course, the 'tramps' made themselves scarce and went into hiding. The Nazis had their propaganda success, and made much of the corresponding statistical decrease in the numbers of beggars: but this success was superficial and shortlived. The limitations of the round-up soon became apparent: neither in Hamburg nor elsewhere did this police action secure the complete removal of the homeless from the streets.

Nevertheless, the fact that some of them were interned in workhouses for a lengthy period – as in the case of the 108 sent to Farmsen – made the remaining majority of vagrants feel increasingly insecure. Previously, workhouses, so much like prisons in so many respects, had been half empty; after the raids of Autumn 1933, they were crammed full with inmates. The number of workhouse prisoners (*Korrigenden*) in the Reich rose from 1,700 to over 4,000; and from 1934 the provisions of the criminal code dealing with vagrants and beggars were made much tougher. A new measure was added to the code – paragraph 42 d – providing the possibility of indefinite internment, even for life, for those who were sentenced to the workhouse for a second time. This was backed up in 1935 by an injunction from the Reich Ministry of Justice to proceed with all vigour against beggars and to use all the available opportunities for condemning them to the workhouse.

Meanwhile, however, other measures for dealing with the problem were also being found. The homeless in Hamburg, as in many other large cities, were not able to claim their benefits at local welfare offices but had to go to a special, central office instead. This arrangement was justified by the authorities in terms of the particularly difficult clientele and their complicated legal situation, which really was in many cases very tangled,

¹³ Cf. 'Schluss mit dem Bettelunwesen. Unwürdige sollen nicht unterstützt werden', *Hamburger Fremdenblatt*, 15 September 1933; 'Kampf dem Unwesen des Berufsbettelns', *Hamburger Fremdenblatt*, 15 September 1933; 'Auswüchse des Bettelunwesens', *Hamburger Nachrichten*, 22 September 1933, p. 3; 'Razzia', *Hamburger Fremdenblatt*, 21 September 1933.

¹⁴ Thus, for example, 'Die Polizeiaktion gegen das Bettelunwesen. Das Ende des Tippelbruders. Im Gefangenenlager Singen. Wie Bettler das Almosen verprassen', *Badische Presse*, 27 September 1933.

especially where they had claims on other welfare agencies as well. It still exists today. Of course, the effect, and perhaps the intention, was that the benefits accorded the homeless would be still worse than the already miserable support given to claimants with a home to look after. Indeed, the Hamburg Homelessness and Vagrancy Department already had the declared aim under the Weimar [p. 215] Republic of driving claimants out of the city. In September 1931 it claimed proudly that it had succeeded 'by means of the skimpy benefits paid here' in 'causing by far the larger part' of the jobless and penniless wanderers' who had come to the city in the previous few weeks 'to go away again'.¹⁵ Hamburg may have been popularly known as Germany's gateway to the world, but as far as homeless vagrants were concerned, it was to remain firmly shut. To be sure, the fact that thousands of unemployed people were streaming into Hamburg at this time, looking for work in a city where unemployment rates were well above average, suggests that the catastrophic economic situation of the local economy in the autumn of 1931 was not universally recognised.¹⁶ The central welfare agency for the homeless, in the Paulinenstrasse, was dealing with up to 900 claimants a day at this period. Here they received the minimal benefit which was supposed to drive them out of the city as fast as they had come into it: a ticket entitling them to one litre of gruel, for which, if they were still claiming after two or three days, they had to pay with two hours' labour on emergency work schemes.¹⁷

Since 1931, 'aimless immigration' into the city, even if the immigrant's accommodation was guaranteed, was regarded by Hamburg's welfare agencies as 'uneconomic behaviour'. According to paragraph 13 of the Reich regulations on public benefits, this entitled the agencies to restrict benefits to the minimum necessary to keep the claimant alive. Such claimants, in other words, received even less than normal unemployment or crisis benefits or local authority welfare hand-outs. All claimants in need within three months of arriving in Hamburg were referred to the Homelessness and Vagrancy Department even if they had had a fixed address from the start.¹⁸ In 1933 the Department noted with pride that it had succeeded in getting rid of 'unwanted' immigrants and in deterring prospective immigrants from even attempting to get into the city. The Department claimed its share of the credit for a fall of 15,000 in the population of Hamburg since 1932. Making life 'unpleasant' for the 2,000 destitute people who were still arriving every month was a necessary 'defensive measure', added the report. 'Beggars registered as inhabitants of other towns must be ruthlessly removed by the police for a lengthy period into a concentration camp as far away

¹⁵ StA Hbg, SB I, EF 60.49, p. 39.

¹⁶ Ibid., EF 60.11, 9 October 1935.

¹⁷ Ibid., EF 60.49, p. 39.

¹⁸ Ibid., AF 10.22, p. 125.

as possible from Hamburg.' This policy, it considered, would soon become generally known among the well-organised wandering beggars, and deter them from trying their luck there.¹⁹

[p. 216] In April 1934 Hamburg was designated as an emergency area in view of its continuing high unemployment. This provided a means of toughening up measures against immigrants from other parts of Germany still further.²⁰ A sitting of the senior officials of the local State Welfare Authority in August 1934 confirmed that 'the aim of every measure taken must be to prevent those who come here without entitlement, following the designation of Hamburg as an emergency area, from settling in Hamburg'.²¹ This policy inevitably led to complaints from the surrounding district and municipal authorities, which were absolutely flooded with vagrants turned away from Hamburg itself. The mayor of one such commune, Geesthacht, complained that claimants arriving there always said that they had been told 'Hamburg is an emergency area and is therefore unable to accept your claims'. In the winter of 1935-6 the homeless had been driven out of the city half naked and freezing cold:

„People have arrived here wearing shoes that are far too small and completely inadequate; some came here indeed without vest or underpants in this cold weather. From a National Socialist point of view, I must say that it is monstrous to keep on turning these people away.“

These complaints, however, fell on deaf ears as far as the Hamburg authorities were concerned.²²

Those case-workers who did not want to go along with this policy were pressured to do so by their superiors. In January 1938 one case-worker in the Economics Department received a severe reprimand from the head of the Welfare Department simply because she had given meal tokens to a farm labourer who had come to Hamburg.

„Had G. been referred to the Economics Department according to the rules, he would probably have left Hamburg after the application of a small degree of pressure. But giving him a food token card has strengthened his intention of remaining in Hamburg.“²³

The effects of this tough policy were soon evident in a sharp reduction in the number of overnight stays in the Police Shelter, as Table 9.1 indicates. The Homelessness and Vagrancy Department had thus scored a remarkable success in the battle to reduce

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¹⁹ Ibid., AF 10.22, p. 100.

²⁰ Ibid., AF 10.22, 14 July 1934.

²¹ Ibid., AF 10.22, Leitersitzung vom 22 August 1934.

²² Ibid., EF 60.11, 14 January 1936, and EF 60.20, 10 February 1938.

Table 9.1: Overnight stays in the Hamburg Police Shelter, 1928-37²⁴

1928	279,447
1929	306,295
1930	402,660
1931	359,052
1932	367,808
1933	299,142
1934	182,535
1935	149,235
1937	131,041

No figures are available for 1936. For later years only the April figures are available: 1932: 36,035; 1938: 10,246; 1939: 2,378; 1940: 3,126; 1941: 3,722.²⁵ Sources: see footnotes 24 and 25.

welfare costs. In other parts of Germany, too, a combination of repressive measures and the creation of alternative possibilities of accommodation also achieved a gradual fall in the statistics. However, the Hamburg figures already reached their highest point in 1930, while the Reich figures for over 300 *Herbergen zur Heimat* registered their peak only in 1932 and fell thereafter more slowly than those of the Hamburg Police Shelter.²⁶ The earlier start and the greater rapidity of the decline in overnight stays in Hamburg can only be explained by the systematic policy of the local authorities of ridding themselves of vagrants and homeless claimants.

Indeed, the Homelessness and Vagrancy Department in Hamburg was constantly being given fresh tasks by the authorities as it became responsible for more and more groups of unwanted claimants. Thus, in 1935, for instance, settled 'gypsies' were removed from the purview of the district welfare offices and assigned to the Department instead.²⁷ In 1937 it

²³ Ibid., EF 60.20, 10 February 1938.

²⁴ Ibid., EF 60.50.

²⁵ Calculated from *ibid.*, Vb 54.40: Jahresbericht über die Sozialverwaltung 1940-41; *ibid.*, EF 60.50.

²⁶ Georg Steigertahl (ed.), *Die Herberge. Die wechselnden Aufgaben des deutschen Herbergswesens in den Jahren 1854-1954* (Bielefeld, 1954).

²⁷ StA Hbg, SB I, AW 19.15.

received control over 'anti-social' elements, who were now to be separated from other claimants, even to the extent of being paid on a separate day.²⁸ This measure led in 1938 to the Department's reclassification as 'Special Office A', responsible for 'anti-social elements', 'gypsies' and 'vagrants throughout the city'. By 1939 it had a staff of 18. In 1939, too, a 'Special Office B' was set up, to deal with Jews; but it closed down in a few months after Jews had been excluded from welfare altogether. As far as homeless Jews were concerned, the Department had already declared the problem solved by 1938, 'since the people concerned have been told that they are most unwelcome in Hamburg'.²⁹

Meanwhile, encouraged by their success in expelling homeless individuals from the city, the welfare authorities decided in 1934 to allow another, closely related social group to 'disappear' from [p. 218] the statistics. These were unmarried claimants without their own household. Of course, for the young unemployed person in the 1930s, a home of one's own was only a dream. At best they lived in furnished rooms or in digs; the less fortunate could just about manage to find accommodation in one of the numerous cheap lodgings in Hamburg. The Labour Welfare Department of the Hamburg Social Welfare Authority set up a special sub-section in September 1934. The sole purpose of this new sub-section was to reduce the number of single males claiming support by forcing them to work for their benefits – as is still the practice in many parts of West Germany today³⁰ – but outside the city, in the district of Rickling, 50 miles north of Hamburg. Here, there was an old-established centre of the 'Innere Mission' (the welfare organisation of the Protestant Church), consisting of an agricultural training school, a sanatorium and a 'labour colony' for homeless men. The Hamburg welfare authorities proceeded to set up their own labour camp at Rickling. Here, they forced Hamburg claimants to work eight hours a day, mostly on the land, and to sleep in mass dormitories of a very basic kind. Active National Socialist Party members were of course excluded from these stipulations.

By forcing them to work in Rickling, the authorities deprived these claimants of the accommodation which they had often found such difficulty in obtaining in Hamburg, so it is not surprising that these measures caused widespread outrage among those affected by them. Thus, when, in the course of 1936, the welfare authorities issued orders for 1,855 unmarried male claimants to go to the Central Railway Station ready for transporting to the labour camp at Rickling, only just over a third actually appeared. In 1937 only 569 out of 1,991 followed the official instruction and turned up for the six-month stay in the labour camp. The remainder were thereupon classified as 'work-shy' and excluded from benefits of

²⁸ Ibid., VG 23.20, vol. IV, 13 April 1937, p. 4.

²⁹ Ibid., EF 60.10, 1 March 1938.

³⁰ In accordance with the provisions of the Bundessozialhilfegesetz, para. 19-20.

any kind. By these means the number of single male claimants without their own household was manipulated downwards from 5,721 in September 1934 to fewer than 1,500 by 1937.³¹ This in fact was what was intended by the whole operation. The authorities paid the Innere Mission one Mark and ten Pfennigs a day for the maintenance of every inmate of the Rickling camp, which was about the same rate as that of their daily benefit in Hamburg, so that millions were ultimately saved by excluding those who refused to go to Rickling from benefits of any kind.³² By the end of 1939, the number of inmates in the camp had [p. 219] declined so sharply as a result of all these measures that the welfare authorities began to think of other uses for it. In late January 1939, therefore, it was decided forcibly to resettle vagrants there.³³ By April 1939 some 90 tramps had already been removed from the Police Shelter in Hamburg and sent to the labour camp at Rickling.³⁴

III

In the first years of the Third Reich, the authorities still differentiated between different categories of homeless. Rather than arresting them all indiscriminately, they concentrated on registering and controlling them. During this period, 'orderly wanderers' were still tolerated, and the hostile attentions of the police were directed above all towards 'disorderly wanderers' or vagrants, who avoided registered accommodation such as the *Herbergen zur Heimat*, itinerant worker centres, and labour colonies, and preferred to stay unofficially in cheap pubs or private accommodation or live in the open. An 'orderly wanderer' was considered as such because he had a Vagrants' Registration Book (*Wanderbuch*) in which a series of rubber-stamp imprints told the story of his overnight stays in approved shelters. These were issued by the itinerants' welfare agencies or the police and had already been in use for decades. They also recorded the granting of benefits in kind, such as shoes and clothing. Long before all citizens were obliged to carry identity cards, they enabled the police to keep check on the wanderings and overnight stays of the homeless. For the itinerants they offered protection against arrest for vagrancy. Before the Third Reich, however, there was no obligation on itinerants to carry one, despite the pressure exerted in this direction by the welfare agencies, above all since 1929.³⁵

³¹ StA Hbg, SB I, VG 54.36: Jahresbericht der Abteilung VIII für das Jahr 1936, pp. 2-3.

³² Ibid., EF 61.16, 17 September 1934.

³³ Ibid., VG 23.01, Niederschrift über die 39. Amtsleitersitzung am 26. Januar 1939, p. 509.

³⁴ Ibid., AW 60.33, 18 April 1939, 2 February 1939.

³⁵ Cf. 'Tagung der drei Wanderfürsorgeverbände am 28. und 29. Mai 1929 in Bonn', *Der Wanderer*, vol. 46, no.8 (1929).

With the advent of the Nazi regime, this voluntary arrangement began to be transformed into a means of sifting out and examining those vagrants whom the state found disagreeable. In November 1933, the welfare agencies, at the prompting of the Hamburg Social Welfare Authority, adopted the Vagrants' Registration Book as a compulsory identity card for the homeless. The aim, as an official circular to the agencies concerned noted, was 'to remove the work-shy, the chronically ill and the infirm etc. from the stream of wanderers'. From 1 January 1934, vagrants not in possession of a Vagrants' Registration Book were to be [p. 220] assigned to compulsory labour schemes or incarcerated in state institutions and reported to the police.³⁶ Once again, it was the Homelessness and Vagrancy Department that was charged with the responsibility of issuing these documents and keeping a register of those who applied for them. Nationwide, one of the three major vagrancy welfare agencies, the *Deutscher Herbergsverband*, issued no fewer than 40,000 application forms in 1934 alone.³⁷ Up to 1 May 1934, the Hamburg Homelessness and Vagrancy Department issued 1,505 Vagrants' Registration Books. Over half the applicants were homeless men under the age of 30. This revealed a considerable pool of under-utilised labour among these men. Altogether, 220 of them were aged 18-21, 584 aged 22-30, 300 aged 31-40, 162 aged 41-50, 165 aged 51-60, and 74 aged 61 and over. A total of 3,791 of these documents were issued in Hamburg up to September 1935.³⁸

Two years after their first issue, the Hamburg Social Welfare Authority drew up a provisional balance sheet of the scheme's effects. Reports from social workers on the ground led them to take a less than sanguine view of its achievements:

„Most of those with no fixed address who come to Hamburg do so with the intention of staying here and settling down, since it is still widely believed that there is work available in Hamburg. This stream of vagrants flows into Hamburg above all from the West. Fewer come from the rural provinces of Pomerania, Mecklenburg or Brandenburg. Most of them are local vagrants who confine their wanderings to an area of 50-60 km in the vicinity of Hamburg so that they can keep on coming back into the city. The Vagrants' Registration Book will remain without any real significance in our experience as long as it is not introduced on a nationwide basis.“

The problem, complained the Authority, was that no proper check could be kept on the issue of the Vagrants' Registration Books. It was impossible to know whether an incoming vagrant had been issued with one except by asking him, and of course, the authority added, 'the vagrants have an interest in concealing the fact that they have been issued with a

³⁶ StA Hbg SB I, EF 60.11, 24 October 1933.

³⁷ Ibid., 7 November 1935.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 656.

Vagrants' Registration Book, so that the new welfare agency does not get to know of the benefits they received' in the previous places they had visited. In any case, the report went on, many of the Books did not carry a photograph of [p. 221] the bearer, so that it was impossible to check whether they were genuine or not.³⁹

What the Authority really wanted above all else was what the Vagrants' Welfare Association and the German Association for Public and Private Welfare had already been demanding for years: a Reich Law on Vagrancy Welfare which would make mandatory the introduction of a Vagrants' Registration Book in every part of the Reich, and make its use compulsory wherever the vagrant went.⁴⁰ This never happened, however. There never was a central register of vagrants covering the whole Reich, so the Registration Book remained a less than total means of controlling the vagrant population. Nevertheless, a system of checking and surveillance was at least partially achieved by the issue of regional Registration Books. A central register was eventually set up only after the war, by the Federal Agency for the Homeless (*Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Nichtsesshaftenhilfe*) in Bethel (Bielefeld). In the Third Reich, homeless people without a Registration Book were treated as tramps and were liable to arrest, so most of them obtained one in the end. As time went on, however, the conditions of issue were made steadily more severe. In 1937 the North German welfare agencies decided to confiscate the Registration Books of those who were deemed unfit for the nomadic life (*wanderunfähig*) and 'ruthlessly' to end their career of vagrancy by confining them to an institution.⁴¹ In February 1938, Otto Beckendorf, head of the Homelessness and Vagrancy Department of the Social Welfare Authority in Hamburg, proposed that extensive enquiries should be undertaken before issuing a vagrant with a Registration Book. These should include systematic checking for records of previous convictions.⁴² From the outbreak of war in September 1939, the issue of Vagrants' Registration Books, which had already become very restricted in any case, was terminated altogether,⁴³ and vagrancy became wholly illegal.

Already by this time, in fact, there were relatively few people left who were in a position to embark on a life on the road with official approval. It had generally been agreed by all the welfare agencies from the beginning, for instance, that this life was one for men only, and women were barred from itinerant workers' centres and the *Herbergen zur Heimat*. Vagrants' Registration Books were not issued to women. Reversing cause and effect in a way quite characteristic of the welfare agencies, the Homelessness and Vagrancy

³⁹ Ibid., 4 October 1935.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 9 October 1935.

⁴¹ Ibid., VT 23.16, p. 41.

⁴² Ibid., EF 60.48, 18 February 1938.

Department reported in 1934 that 'Females do not apply for any Vagrants' Registration Books'.⁴⁴ The proportion of [p. 222] women among homeless single people was very low. Hamburg did, to be sure, possess a special shelter for women and children, at Bundesstrasse 23,⁴⁵ but it only lasted until 1938 and it was tiny in comparison with the Police Shelter, counting fewer than 10,000 overnight stays in 1933, whereas the latter counted almost 300,000.⁴⁶ No one has so far looked systematically at the reasons for the consistently low proportion of women among the homeless: a number of them probably found board and lodging by working as prostitutes. While the vagrancy welfare agencies still concentrated on organising male itinerants well into the 1930s, they sought to exclude women from vagrancy from the very beginning, and made increasing use of institutionalisation and psychiatric criteria to do so.

The application of custodial orders to 'anti-social' people, and their incarceration in state institutions, even if they had not been convicted of a crime or legally incapacitated by care and committal orders, had already been the most frequently discussed of all topics in this area among welfare organisations under the Weimar Republic. As early as 1921, Agnes Neuhaus, a Reichstag deputy for the Catholic Centre Party, had brought a Custodial Orders Bill (*Bewahrungsgesetz*) before the national legislature, and Hilde Eiserhardt of the German Association for Public and Private Welfare counted a total of ten such proposals by the time she came to publish her book on the 'Purpose of the Custodial Orders Bill' in 1929. The book devoted much space to comparing these various drafts, and it was clear that widely differing conceptions of the categories of people who were to come under the legislation's purview and the allocation of the financial responsibility for the law's operation were the main reasons for the failure of any of these proposals to reach the statute book.⁴⁷ Whatever the differences of opinion, however, it was noticeable that tramps and beggars were listed among those to be encompassed by the law in every single draft.

The most energetic proponent of this policy in the Weimar Republic was Georg Steigertahl, who became the head of the Hamburg Office for Welfare Institutions in 1925.⁴⁸ A former army officer who had served in the First World War, Steigertahl was obviously strongly influenced by his negative impressions of the revolution that overthrew Wilhelm II in 1918. He began his long struggle against 'anti-social behaviour' as early as 1920, when he became head of the Gross-Salze Workhouse. Here he was able to gain his first experiences

⁴³ Ibid., VG 54.40: Jahresbericht über die Sozialverwaltung 1940-1, p. 41.

⁴⁴ Ibid., EF 60.1, 6 December 1934.

⁴⁵ Ibid., EF 61.55, 19 May 1938.

⁴⁶ Ibid., EF 60.50.

⁴⁷ Hildegard Eiserhardt, *Ziele eines Bewahrungsgesetzes* (Frankfurt, 1929).

⁴⁸ See especially Georg Steigertahl, *Grundriss der Anstaltsfürsorge* (Berlin, 1933).

of 'the use of post-prison custody [p. 223] in the fight against anti-social elements'.⁴⁹ He believed that the traditional use of paragraph 361 of the German Criminal Code to impose short prison sentences on beggars and follow these up with longer 'post-prison correctional custody' in a workhouse, usually lasting several months, was completely out of date. Nothing much could be achieved with 'anti-social elements' by means of the 'short prison sentences which washed over them like a rainstorm without touching their inside in any way'.⁵⁰ In his dissertation, published in 1925 under the title 'The Application of Compulsory Care Measures to Adults', Steigertahl argued that 'correctional custody' in workhouses had little effect and needed replacing with other measures. Tramps and beggars, he thought, were not dangerous, but neither were they capable of mending their ways: subjecting them to penal measures in workhouses was pointless on both counts.

Instead, he advocated a range of measures varying according to the three categories of offender into which he divided these people: 'idiots, explosive people and passive psychopaths'. Securing them behind bars in penitentiaries or gaols was unnecessary. Twenty-foot walls and armed guards were hardly necessary for people who were basically passive by nature. However, notions of 'improving' them were the result of social romanticism, he believed, or confined to those just starting in the custodial or welfare services. Such notions were as pointless as the construction of expensive purpose-built modern institutions. Steigertahl's ideal was a large, inexpensive institution which would gather within its walls all kinds of offenders, rather than smaller, specialised centres with their own institutional egotisms and mutual rivalries. The workhouses where tramps and beggars were detained should also, he believed, be merged into these larger custodial institutions. Here the inmates were to be assigned at the sole discretion of the head of the institution into various departments, irrespective of the reasons for their committal. Discipline was to be enforced by a hierarchy of departments, so that well-behaved inmates could advance to a progressively more lenient regime, while the refractory could be consigned to 'fixed stations', where they would be kept firmly behind bars.⁵¹

By the time Steigertahl took over as head of the state welfare institutions in Hamburg in 1925, these ideas had already been put into practice in the city. In national conferences he

⁴⁹ Georg Steigertahl, 'Die Bekämpfung asozialer Elemente durch die Nachhaftstrafe', *Jahrbuch der Gefängnisgesellschaft für die Provinz Sachsen und Anhalt*, vol. 41 (Halle, 1925), p. 98.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁵¹ Georg Steigertahl, *Zwangsfürsorgereische Massnahmen gegenüber erwachsenen Personen* (Berlin, 1926), p. 45; StA Hbg, SB I, StW 31.6: Erfahrungsbericht des Herrn Direktor Steigertahl über die Asozialen 1936; Georg Steigertahl, *Zwischen Epochen der Weltgeschichte. Dienstliche Erlebnisse von 1926-1950 des Direktors der Hamburgischen Wohlfahrtsanstalten* (Hamburg, 1974).

was able to report proudly that the long-drawn-out committal procedures common elsewhere in Germany did not deter Hamburg from [p. 224] simply imposing care and custody orders by 'normal administrative procedures'. Thus, while the bureaucrats of the Reich Ministry of the Interior were still wrestling with the problem of drafting satisfactory legislation in this area, officials in Hamburg were behaving as if a law on the subject existed already, and were legally incapacitating hundreds of awkward fellow citizens by placing them in the Home for the Destitute in Farmsen under the collective guardianship of the Social Welfare Authority. The Authority itself admitted that the legal basis for this procedure was extremely questionable. Nevertheless, long before the Nazi seizure of power, the Social Welfare Authority in Hamburg had created a whole range of possibilities for the forcible committal of these people to institutions, which could be smoothly integrated into the persecution of 'anti-social elements' undertaken by the Nazis and then extended to cover ever greater numbers of people.

By the autumn of 1936 there were some 922 people incarcerated in Hamburg welfare institutions on this basis, mostly in Farmsen. The number had more than tripled since 1927.⁵² Some 215 of them had been committed under paragraph 22 of the Hamburg Police Law, and 21 under paragraph 20 of the Reich Decree on Welfare Obligations. A further 201 had been deprived of their legal majority as alcoholics under paragraph 6 of the German Civil Code, and 338 as mentally retarded under the same paragraph. Some 69 had been committed as alcoholics under paragraph 1906 of the same code, which also provided the basis for the committal of a further 56 people as mentally retarded. Finally, 22 girls had been committed by the Youth Office. At least 800 other people had been consigned to these institutions under paragraph 13 of the 'Reich Code of Practice for the Reich Decree on Welfare Obligations' after a certain degree of pressure from local welfare centres. This was twice as many as in 1927.⁵³ Paragraph 13 merely said that 'the work-shy and those who behave in a non-economic way could be denied all forms of benefit except indoor relief.'⁵⁴ Those committed under this paragraph were officially described as 'volunteers', since they were theoretically at liberty to leave the institution any time they wished. However, in reality little about their presence was voluntary: even Steigertahl put the word 'voluntary' in quotation marks. As he reported in 1936, „a recipient of welfare benefits comes into an institution as a [p. 225] vagrant or a homeless person or whatever, and attracts attention

⁵² Cf. StA Hbg, SB I, StW 31.6: Erfahrungsbericht (note 51, above).

⁵³ Ibid., p. 10.

⁵⁴ Karl Rutz, *Die Reichsfürsorgepflicht-Verordnung und die dazu geltenden Ausführungsbestimmungen mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der süd- und mitteldeutschen Länder* (Munich, 1930), p. 19, ('Reichsgrundsätze über Voraussetzung, Art und Mass der öffentlichen Fürsorge. Vom 4. Dez. 1924').

here because of his anti-social disposition; so before he is due to leave, the institution can apply for a care and custody order and use the appropriate way leading quickly and securely to its desired objective.⁵⁵

Once within the institution, the 'voluntary' inmates were thus threatened with compulsory institutionalisation.

Conditions in the Farmsen institution under the Third Reich have only recently begun to be studied.⁵⁶ Steigertahl's cynical references to 'welfare parasites and recalcitrant old men',⁵⁷ his perpetual references to the 'ageing of the German people', and the high death-rate in the state welfare institutions which he ran, throw a harsh light on to this dark chapter in the history of Hamburg's social administration. Table 9.2 provides some revealing statistics:

Table 9.2: Number of beds and deaths in state welfare institutions, Hamburg, 1931-7

Year	Number of Beds	Deaths ⁵⁸	Deaths per 100 beds
1931	3,356	502	14.9
1932	3,470	652	18.8
1933	3,603	701	19.4
1934	3,807	744	19.5
1935	4,260	972	22.8
1936	4,413	1,003	22.7
1937	4,568	978	21.4

Source: StA Hbg, Sozialbehörde I, VG 54, 56.

Unfortunately there are no figures for the following years, although it is known that in 1939 some 1,075 inmates died in Farmsen alone. In 1940 the figure rose to 1,122; on the outbreak of war, Steigertahl ordered rations to be cut 'particularly in the case of anti-social

⁵⁵ Erfahrungsbericht, p. 19.

⁵⁶ First attempts in Angelika Ebbinghaus *et al.*, (eds), *Heilen und Vernichten im Mustergau Hamburg. Bevölkerungs- und Gesundheitspolitik im Dritten Reich* (Hamburg, 1984), and above all in Friedemann Pfäfflin, 'Hamburger Wohlfahrt. Die würdigen und die unwürdigen Insassen der Fürsorgeheime' in *Beiträge zur nationalsozialistischen Gesundheits- und Sozialpolitik, vol. I: Aussonderung und Tod. Die klinische Hinrichtung der Unbrauchbaren* (Berlin, 1985), pp. 108-99.

⁵⁷ Erfahrungsbericht, p. 7.

⁵⁸ Calculated from StA Hbg, SB I, VG 57.56: Todesfälle in den Jahren 1931-7.

elements'.⁵⁹ Thus, those inmates with only a limited capacity for work now received only 80 per cent 'and less' of the normal food ration. Bedding was changed only once every six weeks.⁶⁰

In 1941-2 the Hamburg authorities became involved in the Nazis' 'euthanasia action', in which large numbers of inmates of mental hospitals and similar institutions were put to death: others have already described this involvement in some detail.⁶¹ The [p. 226] institutional murders of early 1941, disguised as 'transfers', invariably included inmates of Farmsen. Thirty men were taken from Farmsen in the first 'transfer' of inmates from Hamburg institutions to the extermination centre of Meseritz-Obrawalde in March 1941.⁶² A further 'transfer' on 26 March 1941 included another 25 men from Farmsen.⁶³ Moreover, the drastic increase in the death rate of inmates revealed by Table 9.2 prompts the suspicion that a large number of unwanted people were already effectively being exterminated by overcrowding, malnutrition and inadequate care long before the 'transfers' to 'euthanasia' centres began.

Steigertahl was naturally a well-known figure among specialists in vagrancy welfare: in 1936, for example, in the keynote speech at a joint meeting of the three vagrancy welfare societies, he was able to tell them of his experiences in 'cutting off' vagrants from society through the Hamburg model of custodial care.⁶⁴ Thus, when Gottlieb von Meyeren, for decades chairman of the Central Committee of German Labour Colonies, died in 1939, Steigertahl was nominated as his successor. By this time the labour colonies were half empty because of the drastic fall in the number of vagrants brought about by the decline in unemployment and the campaign of arrests. Most of the resources were provided by the churches, and in order to keep and maintain their property, they offered to allow the buildings of the labour colonies to be used for the planned system of compulsory custodial care. Nothing could express the intention of changing the colonies' function in this way better than the choice of Steigertahl as their new chief executive.⁶⁵ The executive secretary,

⁵⁹ Ibid., VG 54.56.

⁶⁰ Ibid., VG 23.08, 30 September 1939.

⁶¹ See especially Dietrich Kuhlbrodt, '„Verlegt ...und getötet“, Die Anstaltstötungen in Hamburg' in Ebbinghaus *et al.* (eds) *Heilen*, pp. 156-61; Pfäfflin, 'Hamburger Wohlfahrt'; Stefan Romey, 'Asylierung – Sterilisierung - Abtransport. Die Behandlung geistig behinderter Menschen im Nationalsozialismus am Beispiel der Alsterdorfer Anstalten' in Michael Wunder (ed), *Sie nennen es Fürsorge. Behinderte zwischen Vernichtung und Widerstand* (Berlin, 1982).

⁶² StA Hbg, SV I, StW 30.11, 17 March 1941.

⁶³ Ibid., 20 March 1941.

⁶⁴ Georg Steigertahl, 'Arbeiterkolonie und Bewahrungsfürsorge', *Der Wanderer*, vol. 53 (1936), pp. 182-90.

⁶⁵ Cf. Wolfgang Ayass, 'Der Zentralvorstand deutscher Arbeiterkolonien im Dritten Reich 1933-1945' in *Ein Jahrhundert Arbeiterkolonien* (note 7, above), pp. 87-101.

Pastor Paul Gerhard Braune, spoke in justification of the choice of Steigertahl at a conference of heads of the labour colonies in the following terms: 'His appointment has been made above all in view of the fact that the provision of welfare measures for vagrants is gradually being replaced in our labour colonies by custodial care.' 'This', he concluded, 'makes it necessary to develop stronger connections with the agencies of the authorities and the police.'⁶⁶

IV

The beginning of 1934 saw the coming into effect of a 'Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring' (*Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses*), promulgated by the Nazis the [p. 227] previous summer. It introduced a policy of compulsory sterilisation for people suffering, or allegedly suffering, from 'inborn mental deficiency, schizophrenia, manic-depressive syndrome, inherited epilepsy, inherited St Vitus's Dance (Huntington's Chorea), hereditary blindness, hereditary deafness, severe inherited physical deformity' and 'hereditary alcoholism'. By September 1934, some 2,860 such people had been compulsorily sterilised in the Reich as a whole, a quarter of them (706) in Hamburg. This was a striking indication of the efficiency with which the Hamburg Social Welfare and Health Authorities pursued the cause of eugenic health care.⁶⁷ As the two Authorities (which were joined together from 1933 to 1936) met in this month to consider progress in this area and draw up plans for the future, Dr Meinhof, the President of the Eugenic Court (*Erbgesundheitsgericht*) estimated the number of people in Hamburg who should be compulsorily sterilised at 33,000.⁶⁸ Medical Officer Dr Holm from the Health Authority emphasised at this meeting that 'the sterilisation in particular of prostitutes and vagrants is a priority'.⁶⁹

The number of homeless people and vagrants among the total of 24,260 individuals subjected to compulsory sterilisation in Hamburg up to 1945 is unlikely to have been small. On the orders of the Home for the Destitute in Farmsen, where, among others, beggars and tramps were interned, a total of 1,143 inmates (800 men and 343 women) were sterilised

⁶⁶ 'Die Hausväterkonferenz des Zentralvorstandes Deutscher Arbeitskolonien in Mariaveen am 27. Juni 1939', *Der Wanderer*, vol. 56 (1939), p. 150.

⁶⁷ On this point cf. the contributions of F. Pfäfflin, A. Brücks, C. Rothmaler and M. Garn in Ebbinghaus *et al.* (eds), *Heilen*; and 'Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses. Die Durchführung des Gesetzes in Hamburg', in *Hamburg im Dritten Reich. Arbeiten der Hamburgischen Verwaltung in Einzeldarstellungen* (Hamburgisches Staatsamt, Hamburg, 1936).

⁶⁸ StA Hbg, SB I, GF 00.23, 18 September 1934, p. 1.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

between 1934 and 1939.⁷⁰ Just a few weeks after the law had come into force, Martini approved a request from Steigertahl which, referring explicitly to vagrants and persons of no fixed abode, demanded that 'all inmates whom the doctors deem ready for sterilisation and want to leave the institution must be forcibly detained in state welfare institutions until the Eugenics Court has reached a decision on them'.⁷¹ Apart from Steigertahl and his state institutions, the Homelessness and Vagrancy Department also played a decisive role in the registration of vagrants to be subjected to compulsory sterilisation. In March 1938 the Department's head reported under the heading 'Sterilisation Law' to his superiors: 'There are in the nature of things a number of people with hereditary mental deficiency among those in our charge. The Department is trying to register these cases and report them.'⁷²

This registration would have been made easier by the passage of a Reich Vagrancy Law such as had long been demanded by the vagrants' welfare agencies and the German Association for Public [p. 228] and Private Welfare. By 1938 it seemed that the time for such a law had at last come. A draft had been prepared in the Reich Interior Ministry and was to come into effect on 1 July 1938. A major conference was held in the ministry on 10 January 1938, with a representative from Hamburg present, to prepare the promulgation of the law. However – to the surprise of many of the participants in the drafting process – the law was never passed. Hermann Goering, in his capacity as overlord of the 'Four-year Plan', was persuaded by the President of the Reich Work Placement and Unemployment Insurance Authority, Syrup, to intervene and prevent the legislation from getting on to the statute book. Behind this move lay the machinations of the SS. In 1936 the police, Gestapo and other enforcement agencies had been unified under the leadership of Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS. Their power had become decisive by 1938, and they had their own plans for removing beggars and tramps from the scene. They did not want to be hampered by legal requirements laid down by bureaucrats in the ministries of the civil state. By 1938, rearmament and war preparations had long since turned the mass unemployment of the early 1930s into a general shortage of labour. In March 1938 the number of people in work exceeded 20 million for the first time in the history of the German Reich. The labour shortage caused dramatic problems for the implementation of the Four-year Plan. To cover the demand for agricultural labour, for instance, 120,000 foreign workers had to be requisitioned in early 1938. A whole range of further labour procurement measures was taken in the course of the year, including general obligatory labour service, a year's compulsory labour service for girls, mandatory registration for school-leavers, and welfare

⁷⁰ Ibid., VG 54.56, Sterilisation im Versorgungsheim Farmsen.

⁷¹ Ibid., StW 32.16, 19 April 1934.

⁷² Ibid., AW 50.72, 29 March 1938, p. 3.

labour schemes for recipients of unemployment benefits. Up to this point it had still been possible for vagrants to move about with relative freedom, provided they had a Vagrants' Registration Book, so that temporary and localised labour shortages could be covered by mobile casual labour; but now the Nazis clamped down even on this 'orderly vagrancy'. From this point onwards, everyone who lived without a fixed abode was persecuted as an 'anti-social parasite on the people'.

A general labour shortage had now set in, and the authorities were no longer interested in preserving the mobility of casual labour. The reserve army of labour which, it was suspected, lay unmobilised among the vagrant population, was now to be thrown [p. 229] entirely into the battle for production. In a decree of March 1938, Himmler declared that „The President of the Reich Work Placement and Unemployment Insurance Authority has instructed the labour exchanges to register the inmates of doss-houses, itinerant workers' centres and other vagrants' welfare institutions for labour mobilisation and if necessary to apply police compulsion to vagrants unwilling to work.“⁷³

Such orders received a warm welcome from Hamburg' s Social Welfare Authority. In the same month, the head of the Homelessness and Vagrancy Department ordered tougher measures to be taken against 'disorderly elements': „The roughly constant statistics of overnight stays in the Police Shelter has demonstrated that there is still a whole number of disorderly elements loitering in Hamburg. I consider it time to bring about a change in this situation, in co-operation with police agencies and the labour exchanges. Police regulations applying to this category of persons must be tightened up. An attempt must be made to draft this category of persons into work, insofar as these people are capable of it. If this attempt fails in individual cases, or if individuals are incapable of working, they must be committed to labour institutions or to the Home for the Destitute. Would it not be possible for those who repeatedly stay in the Police Shelter to have further overnight stays made dependent on daily registration at the labour exchange?“⁷⁴

The Hamburg Social Welfare Authority thus put forward proposals for improved co-operation with the police in the fight against 'disorderly elements'. Meanwhile, however, a major blow against 'labour saboteurs' was being prepared by the top police agencies in Berlin.

Already, indeed, the application of 'preventive custody' (*Vorbeugungshaft*) to 'anti-social elements' by the police had been facilitated by a 'Fundamental Decree on Crime Prevention

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'Der Reichsführer-SS und Chef der Deutschen Polizei im Reichsministerium des Innern, O-VUR 3955 II/38, und Erlass 28.3.1938, Arbeitseinsatz der Insassen von Herbergen, Wanderarbeitsstätten und ähnliche Einrichtungen der Wandererfürsorge', *Reichsministerialblatt der Inneren Verwaltung*, p. 578.

by the Police', issued on 14 December 1937.⁷⁵ Early in 1938 the Gestapo moved into action on Himmler's orders, and shortly afterwards, Heydrich issued instructions to every criminal police division under his command that: [p. 230] „irrespective of the special action carried out against anti-social elements by the Gestapo in March of this year, at least 200 male persons (anti-social elements) capable of work are to be placed under preventive police custody in your police division in the week from 13 to 18 June 1938 by applying the decree of 14 December 1937 in the harshest possible way.“⁷⁶

According to Heydrich's instruction, the brunt of this wave of arrests was to fall on 'tramps, beggars, pimps and gypsies': 'In the first place preventive police custody should be applied to anti-social elements with no fixed address', as the 'Guidelines' of the Reich Criminal Police Headquarters put it on 4 April 1938.⁷⁷ Two major waves of arrests were ordered by Himmler and Heydrich in 1938. Known as the 'Reich Campaign Against the Work-shy' (*Aktion Arbeitsscheu Reich*), they netted a total of about 11,000 'work-shy' elements across the country as a whole. This was a relatively small catch compared with that of the first great trawl of beggars carried out in September 1933. However, whereas most of those arrested in 1933 got away with a few days in a police cell, all those caught in 1938 immediately disappeared into concentration camps.

Since Heydrich had ordered at least 200 arrests in each criminal police division, one would expect the 15 divisions in the 'old Reich' (i.e. not including Austria) to have yielded a total of only 3,000, so that the regional police divisions fulfilled Heydrich's quota many times over. In the Hamburg division alone there were 700 arrests, 300 of them carried out within the city boundaries, instead of the 200 which were all that Heydrich had asked for.⁷⁸ Mass arrests were carried out on several nights at the Police Shelter in the Neustädterstrasse. Indeed, on one night all the inmates were taken away in one go.⁷⁹ Of the 300 people arrested within the city limits, between 60 and 80 were taken from the Police Shelter. Another six were removed on the night of 12 June 1938 from the *Herberge zur Heimat* in

⁷⁴ StA Hbg, SB I, AW 50.72, 29 March 1938.

⁷⁵ 'Der Reichs- und Preussische Minister des Inneren, Pol. S-Kr. 3 Nr. 1682/37-2098 - 14 December 1937, grundlegender Erlass über die vorbeugende Verbrechensbekämpfung durch die Polizei. Reichskriminalpolizeiamt, Tgb. Nr. RKPA 6001-295.38, 1. Juni 1938, Schnellbrief, betr. Vorbeugende Verbrechensbekämpfung durch die Polizei', ZStLJV, Dok. Kartei, Ord. Nr. 1-2, Bild Nr. 337-9.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Ulrich Bauche (ed.), *Arbeit und Vernichtung. Das Konzentrationslager Neuengamme 1938-1945* (Hamburg, 1986), p. 35.

⁷⁷ Reichskriminalpolizeiamt, Tgb. Nr. RKPA 6001 250/38, 4. April 1938, Richtlinien zum Erlass des RuPrMdl v.14. Dez. 1937 'Vorbeugende Verbrechensbekämpfung durch die Polizei' - Pol. S-Kr. 3 Nr. 1682/37-22098.

⁷⁸ StA Hbg, SB I, VG 23.20, Niederschrift über die Referentenbesprechung am 13. September 1938, p. 13.

⁷⁹ Ibid., AW 50.72, 22 June 1938.

Wandsbek.⁸⁰ All those arrested were taken into 'protective police custody' at the Fuhlsbüttel Police Prison (known up to 1936 as the Fuhlsbüttel Concentration Camp). From the end of May to the end of June 1938 the number of people held there in preventive custody rose from 72 to 1,006. A month later the number had fallen to less than 100 once more. The remaining 'work-shy' prisoners had already been deported to the concentration camp in Sachsenhausen. The only time when a similar increase in numbers [p. 231] occurred in Fuhlsbüttel before the war was in the course of the 'Night of Broken Glass' in November 1938, when thousands of Jews were arrested all over the Reich. In Sachsenhausen, the arrival of 6,000 'anti-social elements' arrested in Hamburg and elsewhere increased the number of inmates, which was a mere 2,500 at the beginning of the year, several times over during the summer of 1938. In this and other concentration camps the 'anti-social elements' were forced to wear a black triangle, to distinguish them from other categories of prisoners, who were also assigned their own particular colours according to category. Their death rate was well above the camp average.⁸¹

The removal of hundreds of 'work-shy elements' from Hamburg to Sachsenhausen concentration camp aroused mixed feelings in the officials of the Social Welfare Authority.⁸² In a meeting of the responsible personnel held in September 1938, Steigertahl warned „that the whole matter urgently needs to be settled by discussions with the police. It is not acceptable for the police to grab these anti-social elements for themselves, in order to get them to carry out useful work of some kind or other. These persons are urgently required as workers in local community institutions. They do not belong in concentration camps at all. Only insofar as they are refractory should we be pleased that they are being taken there. But a great many of these people can still be influenced by the effects of care.“⁸³

Both Steigertahl and his colleague Dr Reinstorf went on to suggest at this meeting that the police should be persuaded to bring the less 'hopeless' cases to Farmsen and that only the serious 'degenerates' should be placed in preventive custody.⁸⁴

The Hamburg Social Welfare Authority feared the loss of slave labour from its own institutions through centrally co-ordinated waves of arrests. As it saw hundreds of 'urgently needed workers' taken off into concentration camps far away from the city, it found itself

⁸⁰ Ibid., EF 61.22, 31 July 1938.

⁸¹ Cf. Henning Timpke, 'Das KZ Fuhlsbüttel', in *Studien zur Geschichte der KZ* (Schriftenreihe der Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte 21, Stuttgart, 1970), p. 25; and Falk Pingel, *Häftlinge unter SS-Herrschaft* (Hamburg, 1978).

⁸² There are indications that arrests were actually made in the Farmsen Home. See StA Hbg, Amt für Wohlfahrtsanstalten I 27, 21 June 1938.

⁸³ StA Hbg, SB I, VG 23.20, 13 September 1938, p. 14.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

forced to fight for its own place in the Nazi system of oppression. It was quite 'pleased' to consign the 'refractory' and the 'degenerate' to the SS, but it preferred to force those who could 'still be influenced' to work in Hamburg. In this situation, the Authority seized the initiative itself. In January 1939 it ordered a comprehensive registration of the 'ling vagrants, vagabonds [p. 232] and anti-social elements' for the purposes of forced labour. A joint raid on the Police Shelter carried out by the police, the welfare authorities and the Employment Office in December 1938 had revealed 'that the principal customers of the doss-house are not, as was expected, old tramps and human wrecks, but mostly, indeed over 75%, middle-aged people'.⁸⁵ The division of vagrants into 'orderly' and 'disorderly' had long since been abandoned. As the guidelines published in the *NS-Volksdienst*, the organ of the Nazis' welfare services, in October 1938, declared, 'There must be no more tramps in Germany!'.⁸⁶ Those who could prove they had work were left alone, even by the frequent round-ups in the Police Shelter. However, 'labour saboteurs' faced the threat of the Home for the Destitute at Farmsen, the labour welfare camp at Rickling, or preventive police custody in a concentration camp.

The initiative for such round-ups came not only from the police but also from the Hamburg Employment Office. In March 1939, for instance, the Office noted that there were still some vagrants who had managed to evade compulsory labour. The Office suggested that the round-ups should be extended to private lodging-houses as well. It went on:

„The Employment Office will take up the necessary contacts with the police to this end, and ensure that the police are represented in this action. The Employment Office has agreed with the owners of various brickworks and gravel-pits that their representatives should also be present at the raids so that they can take on the labour that is present on the spot, and pay the costs of transport to the workplace, perhaps also the procurement of equipment and working clothes. Those who are useful would be taken away by the representatives of these firms immediately they had been registered.“⁸⁷

The necessary approval was obtained from higher authority to force 'shirkers' to work, and a doctor was also present, to certify whether those arrested were capable of working.

Such 'slave markets' were extended in summer 1939 to pubs, places of entertainment and parks in St Pauli, once more at the prompting of the Hamburg Employment Office:

„The aim of this measure was the registration of the relevant men for assignment to the labour force. The rendezvous was [p. 233] the Davidstrasse police station. Criminal Police

⁸⁵ Ibid., EF 60.49, p.74.

⁸⁶ Karl Mailänder, 'Schluss mit dem Bettel und allem unnützen Wandern', *NS-Volksdienst*, no.10 (1938).

⁸⁷ StA Hbg, SB I, EF 60.45, Vermerk. Betr.: Arbeitseinsatz der Asylisten.

Commissioner Prefer gave a detailed account of the peculiarities of the entertainment centres, pot-houses and parks in question, the latter mainly used as sleeping-quarters. From 1 a.m. to 7.30 in the morning 15 patrols were mounted. A total of 48 men were registered. Fourteen of them were arrested for criminal offences. The other 34 were taken the same morning for individual interrogation after the confiscation of their papers.⁸⁸

Quite apart from such raids, the police had already gone over to a policy of arresting all vagrants who fell into their hands if they had been unemployed for any length of time and sending them off to concentration camps.⁸⁹

Round-ups of vagrants continued in wartime, and raids on the Police Shelter were still being recorded in the files of the Social Welfare Authority as late as 1942.⁹⁰ All in all, the Authority's files reveal a depressing picture of smoothly co-ordinated measures of persecution undertaken by welfare bodies, labour offices and police, in which it was often the police who were prompted to take action by the social welfare and labour authorities and not the other way round, as the sources clearly demonstrate. The suppression of the homeless and vagrant population was carried out with great thoroughness. It formed part of the Hamburg city authorities' determination, by means of registration of 'anti-social elements' and their mass exclusion from the stream of heredity, to achieve a 'final solution' of the poverty problem by the simple destruction of all sub-proletarian groups.⁹¹

Instead of destroying poverty, it was considered cheaper and more efficient to destroy the poor.

Note:

This chapter was originally published as 'Von „Pik As“ ins „Kola-Fu“'. Die Verfolgung der Bettler und Obdachlosen durch die Hamburger Sozialverwaltung' in Klaus Frahm *et al.* (eds), *Verachtet – verfolgt – vernichtet. Zu den 'vergessenen' Opfern des NS-Regimes* (Projektgruppe für die vergessenen Opfer des NS-Regimes in Hamburg e.V., VSA-Verlag, Hamburg, 1986), pp. 153-71. It is printed here in a slightly abridged form. Translation and abridgement are by Richard J. Evans. Thanks are due to the author, the Projektgruppe and to the VSA-Verlag for permission to translate and reprint.

⁸⁸ Ibid., AW 50.72, 26 March 1939.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 24 March 1939.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 4 March 1932.

⁹¹ Cf. Karl Heinz Roth, 'Ein Mustergau gegen die Armen, Leistungsschwachen und „Gemeinschaftsunfähigen“', in Ebbinghaus *et al.*, (eds) *Heilen*, pp. 7-17.