

READING

Speaking in Whispers

Victor Klemperer was a German professor who kept a diary for much of his life. He was born the son of a rabbi but later converted to Protestant Christianity and married a non-Jewish woman. In August 1933, he wrote: “Everyone cringes with fear. No letter, no telephone conversation, no word on the street is safe any more. Everyone fears the next person may be an informer.”¹ After a visit to Germany three years later, W. E. B. Du Bois, an African American sociologist, reached a similar conclusion. He portrayed Germany as “silent, nervous, suppressed; it speaks in whispers; there is no public opinion, no opposition, no discussion of anything; there are waves of enthusiasm, but never any protest of the slightest degree.”²

Was there really an informer on every street corner and a tap on every phone? The Gestapo, Germany’s secret police, certainly gave that impression with its talk of destroying Social Democrats, Communists, Jews, and other “undesirables.” And yet, the Gestapo was a relatively small organization. For example, in Berlin, then a city of 4.5 million people, the Gestapo never had more than 800 officers—one for approximately every 5,600 people. How, then, was the Gestapo able to keep a close watch on everyone?

Part of the answer lies in the fact that the Gestapo encouraged members of the Nazi Party to “turn in” anyone who spoke against the state. As a result, they received more tips and denunciations than they could respond to. The Gestapo particularly relied on a group of Nazi officials known as cell and block wardens. Every cell warden supervised four to eight block wardens. Each block warden, in turn, was responsible for keeping a close watch on approximately 40 to 60 households. An article published in 1935 in a Nazi journal for cell and block wardens explained how they gathered information about those households:

Occasionally one hears a block warden or a cell warden complain: “Our duties are too menial—selling tickets and badges and running errands, that’s all!” That’s all? No, those who say that have no proper understanding of their duties. Rightly understood, the duties of a cell or block warden are far more important and far broader. Their primary task is to

¹ Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933–1941* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), 30–31.

² W. E. B. Du Bois, “What of the Color-Line?” in *Travels in the Reich, 1933–1945: Foreign Authors Report from Germany*, ed. Oliver Lubrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 146.

anchor the party members of their cell or block ever more firmly to the party, and to win those who live in their cell or block more and more to National Socialist thinking.

After the last referendum, in which 38 million voted “yes” and only about 4 million voted “no,” the Führer himself said in his fiery speech that the task was now to win over that last 4 million to National Socialism. It would be wrong to sit around and wait to see what the government would do to achieve that goal. No, each individual National Socialist has the duty to use all his strength to help. The cell and block wardens are called to the task, and are in an excellent position to do it.

Can there be better or more varied tasks? They offer opportunity for independent and extraordinarily varied activities that are gratifying and satisfying.

This requires that the cell warden, and even more so the block warden, knows very well all the party members and non-party members in his district. He must know about their families and jobs, as well as all other personal relationships. He must know their concerns, whether large or small. He must know their political and social opinions. This all requires a good measure of tact and sensitivity, and cannot of course be learned overnight. The often underestimated activities of selling tickets and badges, as well as errand running, offer good opportunities for this. Showing friendliness and concern to both party members and non-party members, sharing and understanding their joys and sorrows, must and will help to win the confidence of our people’s comrades such that in time they come to see the cell or block leader as a kind of political pastor.³

³ Oscar Schweichler, “Duties of the Cell and Block Warden” (1935), trans. Randall Bytwerk, German Propaganda Archive, 2004.

Connection Questions

1. How do Victor Klemperer and W. E. B. Du Bois describe the mood in Germany in the mid-1930s? How do their descriptions compare to the impression of Germany offered in the pamphlet for cell and block wardens? How might Klemperer and Du Bois's identities as outsiders have influenced their perspectives?
2. What were cell and block wardens encouraged to do to "win over" Germans to National Socialism? What is stated directly in the pamphlet? What can you infer about the impact the cell and block wardens might have had?
3. What does the term "political pastor" imply about the relationship between the block warden and the people who live in that block?