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‘Like 100 years ago…’: Local Festivities in Weimar and Nazi Germany

While previous chapters have concentrated on mass staged events, illustrating the development of festive aesthetics, this chapter shifts the focus to an overview of the staging of local festivities. Discussions on reforming the style and visual impact of festive ceremonies often centred on large-scale events, but we want to examine whether similar debates influenced local celebrations. After all, Rhine spectacles, Thingspiele or the Olympic Games were only tangible for a majority of the population through coverage in the newspapers or on the radio. How much of the proclaimed new festive culture—being visual, inclusive and spectacular—actually reached local celebrations?

Research on local festivities is less numerous than one might expect. Frequently, it concentrates on celebrations in a particular town during a specific period or on festive activities of one societal group. Extending time frames beyond political turning points with a focus on festive continuities is rarely attempted. In other cases, the period under consideration covers several centuries which makes it too broad to trace continuities and discontinuities in the development of festivities. For a long time, scholarly research has concentrated on festivities in Imperial Germany with a particular focus on celebrations of the working class and its affiliated organisations. Less attention has been given to local festivities in the Third Reich while local celebrations in the Weimar years are often completely neglected.

Rather than concentrating on one specific region, this chapter analyses whether ideas regarding aesthetic themes were suggested for local communities and, if so, whether they actually influenced festivities staged there. It will become clear that festivities at local level were difficult to alter. The Weimar Republic and the Nazi state alike attempted...
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to influence the way their citizens celebrated. While the republic limited its efforts to the suggestion of topics and themes, as the first part will show, the Nazi dictatorship tried to reform the actual festive style. The National Socialists were not the only ones trying to influence celebrations. An examination of the demands and ideas of the Reichsbanner attempting to shape the local festivities will make this clear in the second part. The Reichsbanner repeatedly reminded its members of the importance of clearly structured celebrations and the visual impact these festivities should make. The efforts of the Nazis to reform local celebrations were far greater but also their suggestions were nothing new as the third part of this chapter will demonstrate. Their demands on clearly structured celebrations, a careful eye to the decoration of the venue and the avoidance of Kitsch and clutter echoed modernist ideas and concepts which the Social Democratic Party and the Reichsbanner had formulated earlier. This is remarkable because the Nazis promoted their reforms of festive styles as being directed against the alleged ‘bourgeois way of celebrating’ in Imperial and Weimar Germany.

Perhaps surprisingly, National Socialists, Social Democrats and Reichsbanner members seemed to have been equally unsuccessful in their efforts to reform popular style and taste. Furthermore, local festivities remained immune to many of the suggested changes. It has to be kept in mind that local festivities were often constrained by financial and spatial limitations. These problems were generally left to local organisers to resolve, and were not usually addressed by recommendations on festive staging. Although interpretations of the Nazi state frequently presume that the political regime possessed a very good sense for popular wishes and demands, Nazi propagandists failed remarkably in their efforts to influence popular taste. This is not to suggest that celebrations in the Third Reich which followed a rather traditional style and set-up were not successful in mobilising the population or creating enthusiasm for the Nazi cause. On the contrary, many of these festivities might have affected local citizens precisely because they kept a traditional and familiar style.2

Constitution Day celebrations at local level

Constitution Day celebrations occupied the thoughts and minds of republican civil servants and officials as previous chapters have shown. Indeed, the republic managed to stage most impressive spectacles in 1929 and 1930. However, Constitution Day festivities were also celebrated in towns and villages, and these festivities differed from