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## Rhodes Historical Review

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**“Hail, Hail, Cooperation:” The Providence Cooperative Farm and Economic Democracy in Holmes County, Mississippi**

*Jeffrey K. Walters Jr.*

**Mammy and the Housewife: Feminine Expressions of Racial Superiority in American Film and Advertisement Media During the Great Depression**

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**Nazi Propaganda and German Rearmament: How Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party Presented Re-Militarization to the German Public**

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**The Vietminh’s Rural Revolution: Ho Chi Minh, Vo Ngyuen Giap, and the Fight to Defeat French Colonialism**

*Alex McTaggart*



# The Rhodes Historical Review

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# Hail, Hail, Cooperation: The Providence Cooperative Farm and Economic Democracy in Holmes County, Mississippi

Jeffrey K. Walters, Jr.

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In October of 1937, as the members of the Delta Cooperative Farm near Hillhouse, Mississippi were preparing for the winter offseason, its leaders were preparing for expansion. The Bolivar County cooperative, a Christian realist experiment in interracialism, began with a successful and promising year after its incorporation in 1936. It spent the entirety of its sophomore year, however, recovering from a disastrous flood, dismal financial returns, and widespread social and racial tension that erupted in the form a string of dismissals and departures, in addition to regular strikes and disputes. The cooperators, in an effort to reintroduce the aspirations and enthusiasm for the experimental agrarian society, composed a new song to the tune of the Yale Alma Mater whose refrain highlighted their ambitions:

*“Hail, hail, Cooperation  
On the Delta Farm!  
We are through with the old plantation,*



*We're secure at home.*<sup>1</sup>

The combination of racial cooperation, personal and economic security, and evasion of the influence of the “old plantation,” combined, formed the *ethos* of the Delta Cooperative experiment. Beneath the glossy surface of the song, however, the words rarely rang true. The lofty ideals of the cooperative’s founders, a combination of the early interracial unionism movement and Christian realist thought, translated poorly into the practical realities of operating an interracial farming community in Jim Crow’s Mississippi Delta.

In a search for greener pastures, the cooperative’s trustees approved the purchase of 2,800 acres at Providence in Holmes County in early 1938. Here, the community could diversify its enterprises, start its racial relationships and policies afresh, and rethink its values as a community. Leaving behind the lofty goals of communalism espoused at Hillhouse, the members morphed the direction of the cooperative into a center of black economic and civic empowerment in Holmes County. The transition to Providence ushered in the development of a number of educational initiatives, one of the few credit unions in the Delta, an integrated health clinic, and an accessible community cooperative store that extended the cooperative’s sphere of influence into the broader community. With this reimagined vision of black self-help, the Providence Cooperative Farm was a natural target for white resistance in Holmes County. The passage of *Brown v. Board* in 1954 ushered in a new wave of racial violence

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<sup>1</sup> “Song Composed by the Forum Group: Delta Cooperative Farm,” in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (SHC hereinafter), 10/7/37, Folder 46.

and concerted efforts to strengthen the authoritarian racial hierarchy of the Delta. Massive white resistance brought a formal end to the Providence cooperative project in 1956, but its legacy as an uplifting hub for the immediate black community far outlived its formal existence as the long struggle for black freedom began to take on the structure of a national movement in the 1950s.

This article is an account of the short history of the Providence Cooperative Farm and its influence on black Holmes County residents and the amalgamating movement for civil rights in the post-World War II era. An innovative reaction to decades of the racial and economic subjugation that typified black experience in the Mississippi Delta, the cooperators at Providence constructed a democratic economy that undermined the traditional Jim Crow structures of Holmes County and, more broadly, the American South. Little scholarship exists on the cooperative, the notable exception being Robert Hunt Ferguson's recent book-length study.<sup>2</sup> In *Remaking the Rural South*, Hunt argues that from their inception, the Delta and Providence Cooperatives were "liminal" spaces whose very existence challenged the racial hierarchy of the rural South.<sup>3</sup> I argue, however, that the cooperative experiment at Providence took time to break away from traditional race and class antagonisms and develop into an institution of social change in Holmes County.

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to Robert Hunt Ferguson, *Remaking the Rural South: Interracialism, Christian Socialism, and Cooperative Farming in Jim Crow Mississippi* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2018), smaller studies include Jerry W. Dallas, "The Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms: A Mississippi Experiment in Cooperative Farming and Racial Cooperation, 1936-1956" *Mississippi Quarterly* 4 (1987), and a chapter in Fred C. Smith, *Trouble in Goshen: Plain Folk, Roosevelt, Jesus, and Marx in the Great Depression South* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Ferguson, *Remaking the Rural South*, 174.

The center for black educational, economic, and civic equality that developed at Providence was a radical space that grew out of an earlier failed experiment in Christian communalism, reshaped by members that refused to follow the visions of paternalistic leaders detached from reality. The members pooled their resources to found a community institution that increased access to education, daily necessities, and health services otherwise inaccessible to black residents in Holmes County. The cooperative served as a model for later initiatives in black equality, a model that is under-recognized for its historical role in transforming daily life in the rural South through cooperative economics.

### **Building a Democratic Economy in the Mississippi Delta**

If ever there was a locale to avoid challenging the *status quo* in the 1930s, it was the Mississippi Delta. Termed “the most Southern place on earth” by James C. Cobb, the seven thousand square miles of rich soil was a microcosm of the American South, a region whose social and economic capital were built on exploitation. From its settlement in 1830, the prevailing notion was that every penny drawn from the “alluvial plain” was reserved for whites only, first through the forced labor of black slaves, then the cheap labor of black sharecroppers and farm tenants.<sup>4</sup> Unhappy farmworkers in the early years of the postbellum Delta would often leave, making labor turnover the thorn in the side of equally unhappy planters. The result was a strict racial hierarchy, with African Americans immovably stuck on the very bottom rung, established through a peonage and

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<sup>4</sup> James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 28.

vagrancy laws that preserved planters' inexpensive and highly exploitable labor source.<sup>5</sup> This hierarchy was reinforced by a notorious reputation for racial violence. Any attempt to resist the world that wealthy white planters had established in the Mississippi Delta was countered by ruthless shows of force, and in the first three decades of the twentieth century, the Delta witnessed a total of sixty-six lynchings.<sup>6</sup>

As such, the Providence Cooperative Farm emerged in one of the most racially tense regions in the United States, but also in the intellectual breathing room of New Deal reform. The Great Depression triggered at once an increased attention towards the South, dubbed by President Roosevelt as the nation's "number one economic problem," and a focus on racial reconciliation as an economic stimulus. The institution of sharecropping had firmly established rural farmworkers as the lowest class in the American hierarchy, through decades of legislation that disfranchised farmworkers and removed their economic independence. The labor market, however, was central to the prosperity of the Southern economic system, as it had been for centuries.<sup>7</sup> As such, when the laborers suffered and left the South, the South suffered with them. The New Deal era, then, opened up breathing room for conversations around the interaction of race and economics. Reforming Jim Crow, whether through legislation or through a fundamental shift in cultural values and norms in the South,

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>7</sup> A number of historians have traced connections between the labor market and sharecropping as historically central components of the Southern economic system, most significantly Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986) and Roger L. Ransom and Richard Sutch, *One Kind of Freedom: The Economic Consequences of Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

became an integral part of the discussion on how to fix the South. Kimberley Johnson argued that solutions to the South's racial-economic quagmire were most often separated into a "stateways" versus "folkways" dichotomy. Federal programs and funding that attempted to lift African Americans out of oppression and into economic opportunity functioned through stateways. Initiatives designed to undermine the cultural root of racial animosity, such as Providence, functioned through "folkways."<sup>8</sup>

The Providence Cooperative Farm, seeking to address the cultural foundation on which white supremacy was built in the South, uniquely blended two lines of activism and intellectual thought that coalesced in the early twentieth century. First, the cooperative was the radical offspring of the interracial unionism movement. Organizations such as the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) in Arkansas were committed to maintaining an organization that served both black and white farmworkers. Their commitment to interracialism was a radical idea to a country firmly committed to segregation and inequality across races.<sup>9</sup> Second was the development of Christian liberalism that emerged from the halls of liberal seminaries. Theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr developed the field of Christian realism, an understanding of Christianity that was deeply concerned with the

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<sup>8</sup> Kimberley S. Johnson, *Reforming Jim Crow: Southern Politics and State in the Age Before Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 23.

<sup>9</sup> The interracial unionism movement of the early twentieth century was a powerful movement that predated the "classical" era of Civil Rights activity and thus reflected the tensions of a segregated society. Interracial unions such as the STFU have been the subject of several critical historical studies, including Donald Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2017) and Daniel Letwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

well-being and survival of the oppressed, and followers of Christian realism were committed to social change and activism.<sup>10</sup> The founders of the cooperative were ardent Christian realists and committed unionists. As such, Providence Cooperative Farm was a manifestation of the unlikely convergence of interracial unionism and Christian realism.

For the cooperative's founders, the best way to illustrate the blending of interracial unionism and Christian realism as a mechanism of broad social and cultural change was through a cooperative. A cooperative is an organization that promotes economic democracy, where resources are pooled to promote equality and decisions over how equality is pursued is done democratically by those involved. In this way, cooperative economics and democratic economics are inherently radical ideas that go against the grain of American capitalist and meritocratic tradition. Cooperatives have a long historic role in the history of African American economic activity, but their role is largely absent from narratives of the modern black freedom struggle.<sup>11</sup> Nembhard, however, illustrates that cooperatives have served as a mechanism for black economic autonomy since the antebellum

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<sup>10</sup> Garry J. Dorrien traces the development of Christian liberalism in his three-volume *The Making of American Liberal Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001-2006) and Reinhold Niebuhr outlines the tenets of Christian realism in *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932).

<sup>11</sup> The relationship between cooperatives and the modern Movement in Mississippi is either tenuous or ignored in significant works such as John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), and Françoise Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta after World War II* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

era. "In every period of American history," she argues, "African Americans pooled resources to solve personal, family, social, political, and economic challenges."<sup>12</sup> As a cooperative that pooled resources to address the social, economic, and political ills of marginalized black folk in Holmes County, the Providence Cooperative Farm inherited this long but nearly forgotten tradition of black economic organizing.

### **The Delta Cooperative Farm, 1936-1943**

The Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms were largely the brainchild of Reverend Sam H. Franklin, Jr. After a short career as a missionary in Japan, Franklin studied under the famed liberal theologian Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Through Niebuhr, Franklin met Sherwood Eddy, a wealthy New York philanthropist, evangelist, and committed socialist who would journey with him into the Mississippi Delta.<sup>13</sup> Long a fierce advocate for social and economic reform, Franklin's attention turned, with increasing distress, towards his native South. Beginning in January 1936, Eddy and Franklin began making visits to a group of concerned citizens in Memphis, Tennessee, a group that had developed a close relationship with H.L. Mitchell's Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU). They described conditions near Parkin, Arkansas, where sharecroppers were regularly evicted from plantations and at times violently driven out of town for their membership in the STFU. Eddy accompanied Franklin on a number of trips to the

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<sup>12</sup> Jessica Gordon-Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2014), 28.

<sup>13</sup> Sam H. Franklin Jr., *Early Years of the Delta Cooperative Farm and the Providence Cooperative Farm* (unpublished, 1980), 8-11.

Arkansas Delta, where the duo witnessed dozens of former sharecroppers taking refuge in small tents with few resources, punishment for unionization. Recounting his visits to the Arkansas camps, Eddy recalled the injustice of “human beings living in tumbledown shanties, rewarded for their toil by poverty, pellagra, hookworm, and malaria.”<sup>14</sup> The repeated visits through the Arkansas Delta led Eddy and Franklin to take it upon themselves to devise and organize a haven for the evicted sharecroppers from the violent world of the plantation economy.

They designed a cooperative farm that implemented their shared passion for socialism, racial reform, and Christianity. Their vision was bolstered by the personal support of Niebuhr, who would go on to serve as the Board of Directors’ first president. In March 1936, Eddy purchased 2,158 acres of “the richest black cotton soil in the Mississippi Delta” near Hillhouse in Bolivar County at five dollars an acre, sold as “the best buy in the South.”<sup>15</sup> Eddy assembled a Board of Trustees that would plan and govern the community, tentatively organized as the “Sherwood Cooperative Farm.”<sup>16</sup> Franklin was appointed the farm’s manager and he promptly went about recruiting sharecropper families in Arkansas to join them at Delta. At Hillhouse, they were promised an opportunity to participate in a democratic economy, where each member sat on a cooperative council that made decisions regarding the direction of the cooperative and more importantly, make profits off of their own

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<sup>14</sup> Sherwood Eddy, *A Door of Opportunity* (New York: Eddy and Page, 1937), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Sherwood Eddy to unaddressed, 4/2/36, in the Delta and Providence Farm Cooperatives Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 3.

<sup>16</sup> “A Tentative Plan of Organization for the Sherwood Cooperative Farm No One,” undated, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 166.



labor. The farm was to have a producers' cooperative, where profits gained from selling cotton, eggs, and poultry would be divided equally, and a consumers' cooperative, where profits from cooperators' everyday needs such as groceries would also be shared. The cooperative would also operate on a four-headed set of socialist and Christian principles: the establishment of a new social order, interracial cooperation, unionization, and "the teachings of Jesus and the prophets."<sup>17</sup> In the spring of 1936, Franklin traveled to Hillhouse with an integrated group of over twenty former sharecroppers to begin building houses, the community store, and planting cotton.

The first season at the cooperative brought a surprisingly good return. With cotton as the farm's only cash crop, the producers' cooperative alone earned over \$8,000 to be distributed among its members.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the farm gained national notoriety as an innovative project in economic and racial idealism in the South. Elmer A. Carter, the editor of the National Urban League's *Opportunity*, identified the endeavor at Delta "one of the most important in the history of agriculture in the South."<sup>19</sup> Beneath the glossy surface presented by the farm's proponents, however, the cooperative's structure led to tension and issues among its members as the farm moved into its second year of operation. The first issue in the cooperative's sophomore season

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<sup>17</sup> Franklin, *Early Years*, 13-14; "Some Basic Principles of the Delta Cooperative Farm," c. 11/1936, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 166

<sup>18</sup> "Statement of Operations, Producers' Cooperative, Delta Cooperative Farms, Hillhouse, Miss., Year Ending December 15, 1936," in Allen Eugene Cox papers (hereinafter AEC), Special Collections Department, Mississippi State University Libraries, Box 8, Folder 18.

<sup>19</sup> Elmer A. Carter to Sam Franklin, 7/3/1936, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 9.

was environmental. The Flood of January 1937 crippled operations at Delta, causing farm leadership and the cooperative's women and children to evacuate to Memphis until the waters receded. By the time the cooperators returned to Hillhouse in February, the community's operations were behind by a month.<sup>20</sup>

The cooperative's structure rendered social tensions among a membership rooted in the racial traditions of the Jim Crow South. The interracialist nucleus of the Delta Cooperative project was a compromise, intended to navigate the complicated space of racial politics and relationships of the 1930s, to "have regard as far as possible for the customs and sentiments of the region."<sup>21</sup> The farm's racial policies were designed by the trustees, five Southern white men, a process in which black perspective was notably absent. The simple idea was to illustrate that whites could work amicably with their black cooperators, but not live, eat, or worship together. Black members lived on opposite sides of the cooperative from white members, held separate social events, and participated in separate worship services. Leadership roles on the farm were also reserved for whites, so as to avoid any conflict between a white member resenting the authority of a black member.<sup>22</sup> This system of "voluntary separation" at Delta was meant to avoid any racial confrontation on the farm or with the surrounding community. With a racially separated community, the trustees could advertise the farm as respectful of the South's racial customs and steer clear of the dangers of being labelled integrationists.

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<sup>20</sup> Sam Franklin to Barbara Parker, 2/5/1937, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 34.

<sup>21</sup> Eddy, *A Door of Opportunity*, 43-44.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

The frailty of the interracialist “compromise” at Delta was not lost on its members, nor was its thin-veiled resemblance to the plantation system they were hoping to escape. One black member wrote to the STFU, expressing grievances related to life on the farm, and according to Franklin, “accusing it of attempting to reestablish Negro slavery.”<sup>23</sup> Despite the high-minded ideals of Delta’s founding principles, there was little protection against class-based and racial paternalism. This dynamic especially surfaced in the cooperators’ relationship with the all-white leadership, where Sam Franklin was often the root of dissatisfaction. Bradner J. Moore was originally appointed the superintendent of the farm in its early stages, but resigned before the first families arrived at Hillhouse. Shortly after his resignation, he wrote to one of the trustees, decrying Franklin’s “scheme of paternalistic dictatorship.”<sup>24</sup> Devoutly committed to the communal principles of the cooperative, Franklin regularly dismissed members with a “bad attitude” or unworthy of the farm’s lofty ambitions. The racial and organizational tension ultimately led to an official investigation at Hillhouse by the STFU. Though Franklin disputed the claim, thirty-nine members of the cooperative signed a petition complaining that their votes in the cooperative council were rendered useless by Franklin’s overbearing leadership.<sup>25</sup> Though the STFU found nothing to lead them away from their association with the cooperative, the

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<sup>23</sup> Sam Franklin to Trustees, 7/1/1937, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms #3474, SHC, Folder 37.

<sup>24</sup> Bradner J. Moore to Dr. William Amberson, 5/1/36, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 4

<sup>25</sup> William B. Amberson, “A Statement to The Board of Trustees,” 2/22/39, AEC, Box 8, Folder 19.

repercussions of the investigation rattled the farm from the bottom up.

After the tensions and frustrations of 1937, it was clear the cooperative project needed a restart. The board began seriously looking at properties for expansion at a frantic pace in October.<sup>26</sup> Financed once again out of Sherwood Eddy's pocket, they purchased 2,800 acres in Holmes County, some eighty miles from Hillhouse, a former plantation named Providence.<sup>27</sup> At Providence, the members could start their cooperative vision anew. While initially, the trustees intended to maintain both cooperatives, the purchase of the new farm sent Delta into rapid decline. In early 1938, the cooperative's members and operations began moving to Providence, and the Hillhouse cooperative was sold after several years of diminishing activity and enthusiasm in January of 1943.<sup>28</sup>

### **Providence and Black Self-Help in Holmes County**

For the first few years at Providence, the leadership attempted to manage both cooperatives at the same time, in the same fashion. The move to Holmes County, however, came at a time of transition across the country and, more broadly, the world. The entry of the United States into World War II in 1942 permanently altered the demographic and economic landscape of the South as many Southerners, black and white, began migrating north to find employment in the war industry. As a result, the white population at the Delta and Providence Farms dwindled

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<sup>26</sup> Sam Franklin to H.H. Marks, 10/1/37, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 46.

<sup>27</sup> Franklin, *Early Years*, 59-61.

<sup>28</sup> Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, 1/3/43, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 153

significantly, white members who stayed in the South were easily able to find better jobs in the American industrial war machine.<sup>29</sup> With significantly more black members than white, the farm's interracialist creed lost its founding purpose. Holmes County was also remarkably different than Bolivar County. Cooperators were greeted with grim stories of racial violence, including two black residents who were lynched shortly before their arrival for allegedly burning down a white man's barn, and all around them, evidence of extreme poverty and medical need abounded.<sup>30</sup> Responding to the specific needs of the community around them, the Providence Cooperative Farm soon began moving away from the lofty idealism of Eddy, Franklin, and Niebuhr, and towards a center of education, health, and economic self-sufficiency for the broader black community in Holmes County.

Changes in leadership accelerated Providence's progress towards a community-focused institution. Franklin's missionary ties to Japan pulled his attention increasingly away from Providence as violence in the Pacific escalated. In one of the more significant moments in the transition to Providence, in late 1942, Franklin decided to leave his utopian dreams of cooperative farming behind and join the war effort. He applied for a position as a U.S. Navy chaplain and left Providence for Guam in May 1943.<sup>31</sup> Sherwood Eddy enthusiastically moved care for the farm into the capable hands of Allen Eugene Cox, an accountant and graduate of Texas Christian University, who had joined the

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<sup>29</sup> Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), 241-257.

<sup>30</sup> Franklin, *Early Years*, 62.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-79.

cooperators at Hillhouse in June 1936.<sup>32</sup> Cox had practically devoted his life to the cooperative since his arrival in its early days, and his leadership of the farm, remarkably more diplomatic and less domineering than Franklin's, gave breathing room for the development of the initiatives that made the new farm's connection to the old practically unrecognizable. Through Cox's leadership, the Providence Cooperative Farm diversified its crop production and expanded many of its services. Responding to desires expressed by cooperators, Cox set up a canning plant, and by 1945, the Providence consumers' cooperative was canning goods in addition selling cotton, soy, and cultivating personal plots for community usage.<sup>33</sup> Cox also expanded the farm's credit union, an operation that had begun under his guidance at Hillhouse. Chartered in 1946, by the farm's end in 1955, the credit union had given over three hundred loans to local residents.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to Cox, few understood the radical nature of the project at Providence and its potential to reshape the daily lives of Holmes County's black residents than Fannye Booker. Born in nearby Tchula, Booker was brought on in 1944 to run the women's and children's educational projects at the Cooperative Association's summer schools. Shortly after joining, she was fired from her position for attending a local union meeting and began devoting her full time and passion to Providence.<sup>35</sup> Booker did many things on the farm, including working at the health clinic

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<sup>32</sup> Sherwood Eddy to A.E. Cox, 5/19/43, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 157

<sup>33</sup> Sherwood Eddy to My dear Fellow Director of the Cooperative Farms, Inc., 4/27/45, in in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 159

<sup>34</sup> "Credit Union Examinations Reports," multiple from 10/47 to 2/55, AEC, Box 5, Folder 17.

<sup>35</sup> Ferguson, *Remaking the Rural South*, 130.

and managing the cooperative store. Her primary mission at Providence, however, was as a teacher. In Holmes County, schools for black children customarily opened six weeks after and closed six weeks before white schools. As a supplement for black students whose semesters were cut short, Booker initially opened a summer school in 1945 that remained open until white schools closed, and again opened in the fall when the white schools opened.<sup>36</sup> In this way, and in continuing her summer school, Booker effectively ensured that black children had access to education that the local school district was unwilling to provide. By 1946, more than fifty local children were enrolled in Booker's school and the next year, Booker began instruction at the high school level.<sup>37</sup> Her work at the cooperative symbolized the nature of the Providence Cooperative Farm as a whole, rooted in a drive to change the surrounding community, forged by the determination of its black members to bring economic democracy and self-sufficiency to Holmes County.

The Providence Cooperative Association was the primary vehicle for many of the community engagement initiatives that began at Providence. Though designed by Franklin, the Association flourished under Cox's leadership of the farm. The only component of the cooperative not expected to turn a profit for its members, it was led by a black farmer named Robert Granderson.<sup>38</sup> The Association operated on a four-pronged approach to improving their community: religious, educational, economic, and medical. They charged no fees or dues, and anyone

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<sup>36</sup> Sherwood Eddy to My dear Fellow Director of the Cooperative Farms, Inc., 4/27/45, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 159.

<sup>37</sup> Franklin, *Early Years*, 79.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

within an eight-mile radius of the cooperative could register as members.<sup>39</sup> In 1941, the Association began hosting annual one-week educational institutes held on the farm that focused on self-help. The educational institutes drew in local black residents for training in “crafts and cooking,” with a daily attendance between forty-five and fifty. Through the Cooperative Association, residents hosted Bible studies, established a community library, outlined cooperative economics, and organized physical examinations and health education seminars.<sup>40</sup>

The Providence Cooperative also operated an integrated, full-time clinic, run by Dr. David Minter. Described by Franklin as someone who “walked about with a twinkle in his eyes,” Minter accepted a position at the cooperative in December of 1937 after completing his residency at the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>41</sup> The Mississippi Delta was notorious in the 1930s for its inattention to the health of black residents. With very few hospital beds for African Americans, individuals struggling with a serious illness had to travel anywhere from fifty to a hundred fifty miles to be treated at a charity hospital with limited facilities.<sup>42</sup> To operate a desegregated clinic in Holmes County, then, radically undermined the strict segregationist *status quo* of Mississippi’s health care system. While the Hillhouse cooperative had a medical clinic that served its members and occasionally a local family in need, it was never staffed by a full-time physician or fully opened

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<sup>39</sup> “The Providence Cooperative Association,” undated, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 166.

<sup>40</sup> “A Brief Report on an Educational Institute for Negroes,” 11/16/1941, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 137.

<sup>41</sup> Franklin, *Early Years*, 52; David Minter to Sam Franklin, 12/10/37, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 54.

<sup>42</sup> Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, 162.



its doors to the community. For nearby black residents and even some whites from local plantations, Dr. Minter ran a general medical practice. Through Minter, Providence grew into a center of medical relief, offering malaria examinations, pre-natal care, and even instruction in contraception at little to no cost to patients.<sup>43</sup>

The Providence cooperative store was also a radical alternative to traditional, exploitative economic structures of the Mississippi Delta. Plantation commissaries ensured that sharecroppers rarely turned a profit on their labor. Families lived off of the commissary, where landowners charged the cost of the tools, food, fertilizer, and clothing sharecroppers needed to live and work on the plantation to accounts that not only kept the sharecroppers from profit, but often drove them deeper into debt to the landlord.<sup>44</sup> At the Providence cooperative store, however, profits from each purchase were returned to members in proportion to their purchases. To run the store, the trustees recruited Sam Checkver, a Harvard Law graduate whom Franklin later described as a “retail sales genius.” A sharp contrast to the traditional role played by plantation commissaries, the community store at Providence was a natural connection to the surrounding community. The store was integrated, and locals came to shop, linger, and enjoy the warmth of a stove in winter. With the addition of a small library and reading room in the store, they also came to read. By 1946, the store had a membership of 270, and dividends reasonably outpaced every other component of the cooperative.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Franklin, *Early Years*, 68.

<sup>44</sup> Woodruff, *American Congo*, 25.

<sup>45</sup> Franklin, *Early Years*, 70-71.

### **Massive Resistance Comes to Providence**

As the Providence Cooperative Farm waded into the 1950s, operations largely continued unchanged. The members continued to focus more on community change than agricultural production, instead focusing almost entirely on the community store, education, and the medical clinic. A 1947 pamphlet detailed the cooperative's ambition to build dormitories to shelter guests of the Association's educational initiatives and promised "all existing activities will be strengthened and special stress will be laid upon practical education."<sup>46</sup> By 1950, the Producers' Cooperative was no longer even producing cotton, and most of the farm's cultivatable acreage that was not used for pastureland was rented to local farmers. Instead, most of the cooperative's income was coming from selling timber and beef.<sup>47</sup> By 1954, the credit union had 190 members, Fannye Booker was still directing summer camps, sales at the cooperative store were steady, and the medical clinic had been expanded to twelve air-conditioned rooms. A.E. Cox also regularly traveled to local schools to screen films on health, soil conservation, and forest fire prevention.<sup>48</sup>

While the cooperators at Providence were intent on expanding their self-help initiatives, many whites in the Delta and across the South were growing increasingly resentful of black advancement. The 1950s brought the rise of what scholars have referred to as "massive resistance" to increasing pressure for black

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<sup>46</sup> Sam Franklin and Arthur Raper, "The Cooperative Farm Carries On: An Account of the Providence Cooperative Farm," 1947, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SCH, Folder 191.

<sup>47</sup> AE Cox to Leonard G. Pardue, 7/17/63, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 164.

<sup>48</sup> AE Cox (presumably) to Sherwood and Louise Eddy, 8/8/154, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 164.

equality.<sup>49</sup> The U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* in May of 1954 asserted that the segregation of public schools was unconstitutional, and civil rights activists welcomed the decision as a watershed moment in the battle against Jim Crow. Staunch segregationists in the South memorialized May 17, 1954 as "Black Monday," initiating a new era of Southern mass resistance to black equality. Resistance took its most virulent form in the White Citizens' Councils, formed in Indianola, Mississippi just a month after *Brown*. The Citizens' Councils, comprised mostly of middle class Deep Southern men, functioned as a white-collar vehicle for white supremacy that feigned respectability by shunning violence and advocating for the doctrine of "states' rights." Instead, Council members in power exploited the economic vulnerability of African Americans by firing black employees, removing them from welfare rolls, or refusing credit to those who attempted to register to vote or to enroll their children in white schools. Though racial violence was certainly not a phenomenon that emerged in the 1950s, Webb argues massive resistance "represented a potent challenge to the advancement of racial equality" that "pervaded the social, intellectual, and political discourse of the southern states."<sup>50</sup>

Racial violence had never seemed a distant notion to the cooperators at Providence. From its beginnings in Holmes County, the leadership was particularly aware of its precarious position in the farm's social and political environment. When Sam Checkver began hosting clandestine union meetings just off the farm's property, Sam Franklin noted that should it leak, it would

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<sup>49</sup> See Clive Webb, ed., *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-8.

cause trouble for the farm of a “very serious sort.”<sup>51</sup> White members of the cooperative also regularly complained of local whites’ antagonisms for their association with outreach programs that benefitted the black community.<sup>52</sup> After *Brown*, however, resistance to Providence’s provocative initiatives quickly elevated beyond antagonism. “Since the Supreme Court ruling was handed down on segregation in public schools,” A.E. Cox reported to Sherwood Eddy in October 1954, “tensions, suspicions and rumors have been growing in our area.” He further reported that a private detective in Jackson was keeping track of him, and that rumors were circulating about Dr. Minter being a Communist. “It is very difficult to prove,” Cox wrote, “you are not a Communist when people are not aware of just what constitutes communism.”<sup>53</sup>

As the Citizens’ Council gained power in Holmes County, the Providence Cooperative Farm became a natural target of their ire. By September of 1955, Mississippi was awash in racial tension and violence after the acquittal of the two men accused of murdering Emmett Till in nearby Money, Mississippi.<sup>54</sup> Three days after the acquittal, a similar situation occurred in Providence and the mechanisms of massive resistance began to turn against the cooperative. A nineteen-year-old African American named Curtis Freeman was accused of flirting with a ten-year-old white girl named Mary Ellen Henderson, a resident of the Providence

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<sup>51</sup> Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy, 3/30/40, AEC, Box 20, Folder 10.

<sup>52</sup> Sam Franklin to Sherwood Eddy and Arthur Raper, 8/1/41, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 132.

<sup>53</sup> A.E. Cox to Sherwood Eddy, 10/6/54, in the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms Papers #3474, SHC, Folder 164.

<sup>54</sup> See Timothy B. Tyson, *The Blood of Emmett Till* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017).

Cooperative Farm. After Freeman's arrest, the local Sheriff questioned him about Providence. All it took to link Freeman to the cooperative was that his parents patronized the cooperative store and attended the educational institutes offered by the Association.<sup>55</sup> The Sheriff determined that Providence Cooperative Farm was promoting integration and equality, and summoned an emergency community meeting organized by the White Citizens' Council. The meeting, held on September 27, 1955 in the auditorium of nearby Tchula High School, quickly turned into a kangaroo court where A.E. Cox and David Minter were put on trial. The trial was presided over by state representative J.T. Love, and was attended by over five hundred locals. Cox and Minter were accused of leading integrated social spaces and even allowing black and white residents to swim together. At the conclusion of the meeting, the two were ordered to leave Holmes County as a punishment for their "strange racial opinions."<sup>56</sup> Though initially, Cox and Minter were determined to stay in Providence, on their way out of the auditorium, they overheard a white Tchula tell a small group, "What we need for these S.O.Bs. is a couple of grass ropes."<sup>57</sup> Aware of the connotations of such a threat, Cox and Minter fled Providence within a year.

The departure of A.E. Cox and Dr. David Minter marked the formal end of the Providence Cooperative Farm. Dr. Minter and his wife moved to Tucson, Arizona, and the Cox family settled in Whitehaven, just outside of Memphis, where Cox would continue to monitor Holmes County as its black residents continued to push for full equality through the remainder of the twentieth century. A holding body, the Delta Foundation, was

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<sup>55</sup> Ferguson, *Remaking the Rural South*, 144, 152.

<sup>56</sup> H.L. Mitchell, "Report from Mississippi," 10/4/55, AEC, Box 17, Folder 8.

<sup>57</sup> A.E. Cox to Mitch (surname unknown), 9/30/55, AEC, Box 17, Folder 8.

established to own and dispose of the cooperative's property, and most of the property was sold to private farm operators.<sup>58</sup> Author Will D. Campbell was invited to oversee the liquidation of the cooperative's property and the relocation of its remaining residents. Campbell ensured that some of the black families could remain on the farm's property, sympathetic to those "who had known no other life for many years and who had no other place to go."<sup>59</sup> With the Coxes and the Minters gone, the farm's assets liquidated, and the land divided among former residents and local farmers, the Providence Cooperative Farm seemed to have met a grim end at the hands of massive white resistance the White Citizens' Council.

### **Conclusion**

Organized white supremacy brought an end to the Providence Cooperative Farm, but its short existence provided avenues to resisting white supremacy that continued beyond its formal organization. First, the death of the cooperative experiment resulted in the expansion of black land ownership as the property was divided among its residents, a promise of autonomy and economic viability that long proved evasive to the Delta's sharecropping class. Second, individuals such as Fannye Booker continued the work they began at Providence, ever committed to equal education and civic equality for African Americans in Holmes County. Even after the expulsion of Cox and Minter, Booker continued offering her classes at the community building at Providence and running the cooperative store as best as she

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<sup>58</sup> Franklin, *Early Years*, 91.

<sup>59</sup> Will D. Campbell to Reverend Warren H. McKenna, 2/12/65, AEC, Box 20, Folder 6.

could.<sup>60</sup> She spent the remainder of her life investing in the welfare and equality of Holmes County's black residents. In 1969, she was appointed the director of the Holmes County Community Center (HCCC) in Mileston. At the HCCC, Booker hosted community meetings for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), organized health research projects, and led the center's Head Start program, which had an enrollment of 123 children.<sup>61</sup> Through her activism in the Civil Rights Movement, which took shape in the 1960s, Booker continued the work she began at Providence to educate and serve the black community in Holmes County.

Charles Payne argued that the modern Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi was especially built on established community networks and grassroots activism.<sup>62</sup> Through its black self-help initiatives, the Providence Cooperative Farm established a grassroots network rooted in black self-sufficiency. By its end in 1955, Providence had successfully educated and supported the hundreds of local black families that patronized its services and attended its educational programs for over a decade. From its establishment in 1942, the cooperators used their resources to operate a democratic economy that impacted local lives held under the subjugation of the Jim Crow South. As the cooperative moved away from the lofty principles of its founders, they turned their enterprise into a force for social change that undermined the social, political, and economic norms of the Mississippi Delta. In its radical mission, the Providence Cooperative Farm was one of

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<sup>60</sup> Franklin, *Early Years*, 91.

<sup>61</sup> "Holmes County Community Center: Annual News Letter," Dec. 1969, AEC, Box 14, Folder 2.

<sup>62</sup> Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

the early efforts to bring justice and equality to African Americans in Holmes County. Chana Kai Lee, in her biography of MFDP's champion activist Fannie Lou Hamer, argues that the Freedom Farm Cooperative of the 1960s, one of Hamer's many initiatives aimed at addressing rural poverty, was modeled after established cooperative networks in Mississippi, of which Providence was one of the foremost examples.<sup>63</sup> For activists such as Hamer, then, Providence was an example of what happened when African Americans radically reshaped their own communities in search of economic equality. The enduring legacy of Providence, then, is not defeat, but rather, radicalism.

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<sup>63</sup> Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 162.



# Mammy and the Housewife: Feminine Expressions of Racial Superiority in American Film and Advertisement Media During the Great Depression

## Chandler Hall

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In the late nineteenth century, the “mammy” character emerged as an embodiment of the white ideal for the behavior of African-American women. Usually depicted as a large, matronly black woman wearing an apron and bandana, the mammy performed domestic work for her white employers with a smile. Although used to symbolize a supposedly historical role for black women, she was projected into the past: the mammy is absent from the antebellum historical record, even as she was found in countless early twentieth-century depictions of that era.

Many scholars have examined the mammy’s role in the white mind, including the circumstances surrounding her invention and the purpose of her existence. For instance, M. M. Manring argues that Aunt Jemima “soothed white guilt over slavery and uplifted white womanhood through sheer

contrast.”<sup>1</sup> Although Manring acknowledges the mammy’s white roots in blackface minstrelsy and examines her within the context of other stereotyped archetypes, he overlooks the importance of her placement adjacent to white women.<sup>2</sup> However, analyzing the juxtaposition of the white woman with the mammy is central to understanding the evolving ideas of middle class femininity and white expectations for black behavior during the Great Depression. I argue that in the 1930s, the decline of domestic servitude and simultaneous transformation of the white housewife are responsible for the resurgence of the mammy figure in popular culture. I examine film and advertisement media because of their mass market accessibility, their attempt to persuade, and the national attention and acclaim that they often received. Pairings of the mammy with figures of white women illustrated white perceptions of female sexuality, delineated the role of women in society, and defined a new “true womanhood.”

The mammy’s origins and evolutions before the 1930s are complex. She emerged from minstrel shows of the mid-nineteenth century, and became a character trope alongside other figures such as Zip Coon and Jim Crow.<sup>3</sup> Although

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<sup>1</sup> M. M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 23.

<sup>2</sup> For a brief analysis of other black character types used in America, see Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 152-156.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 222.

blackface minstrelsy was dominated by white males seeking to comment on black masculinity, certain racist stereotypes, including exaggerated physical features, found their way into presentations of the mammy.<sup>4</sup> The mammy joined a cast of other minstrel characters such as Uncle Tom and Stepin Fetchit who were complicit to their employer's demands and were happy to serve. Beyond this, the mammy was uniquely a teacher to whites; she had many skills and a great deal of wisdom that white people desired to learn. Aunt Jemima, who became the mascot for pancake mix and other food products, was one of the earliest ubiquitous and recognizable incarnations of the mammy, and her image, including her bright eyes, bandana, and large lips and smile, resembled the mammy present in minstrel shows.<sup>5</sup> Even her name was borrowed from the minstrel song "Old Aunt Jemima, Oh! Oh! Oh!"<sup>6</sup> Beyond entertainment, the mammy's kind and helpful personality allowed Southern propagandists to erase the atrocities of slavery. Despite the northern roots and nationwide appeal of minstrelsy, Catherine Clinton suggests that the mammy acts as a Southern defense against the scrutiny of the North.<sup>7</sup> She argues that "The Mammy was created by white Southerners

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 112-135.

<sup>5</sup> For further reading on the definition of the mammy archetype, see Manring, *Slave in a Box*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 201-202. See chapter 5, "The Moral Bind," (pp. 87-110) for discussion on how the morality of plantation mistresses was used to reaffirm antebellum, Southern ideas of white civilizational superiority.

to redeem the relationship between black women and white men.”<sup>8</sup> Although slaveowners engaged in rape, as well as other forms sexual manipulation and aggression,<sup>9</sup> the figure of the maternal and cordial mammy served to erase associations between moral depravity and slave ownership.

On the other hand, Patricia Hill Collins does not view the mammy as a Southern safeguard against Northern judgement. Instead, Hill asserts that the mammy was “created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service.”<sup>10</sup> She believes that because the mammy cared for her white “‘family’ better than her own, [she] symbolizes the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power.”<sup>11</sup> Although Collins and Clinton propose different reasons for the mammy’s existence, they both seem to suggest that she was a key component of a master narrative which depicted an idyllic relationship between a slave and their owner (and later, between a black servant and their employer). Because the mammy was joyful in her service, slavery and servitude were romanticized as symbiotic relationships between a benevolent white owner/employer and a loyal and industrious slave/servant.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 72.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

In the early twentieth century, the warped nostalgic memories of elderly white Southerners seemed to corroborate claims of the mammy's real existence. The mammy grew famous at this time because, according to Manring, "actual memories had grown dim."<sup>12</sup> That is not to say that the mammy is completely ahistorical; when used within slave communities, the title "mammy" referred to a wise, elderly woman who acted as a role model for younger slaves.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the title was appropriated by white folks. And unquestionably, domestic slaves worked in plantation houses. However, Herbert Gutman found that in reality, "most domestic workers in white households were young single women," hardly the middle-aged mammy featured in popular culture.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, there is no pre-war evidence for a mammy as she is presented in early twentieth century iconography.<sup>15</sup> The mammy encompassed two distinct white perspectives of black identity: that which was mocking (minstrelsy), and that which was longing (false memories). In *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott insists that whites "were attracted to the culture they plundered" and refers to white

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<sup>12</sup> Manring, *Slave in a Box*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black*, 154.

<sup>14</sup> Cheryl Thurber, "The Development of the Mammy Image and Mythology," in *Southern Women: Histories and Identities*, edited by Virginia Bernhard, Betty Brandon, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Theda Perdue (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 95. This quote is an analysis of Herbert Gutman's conclusions in his book *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*.

<sup>15</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater & Film Before World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 60.

appropriation of black culture in minstrelsy as “cultural robbery.”<sup>16</sup> Cultural practices, such as dress, dialect, song, and dance, were borrowed from the only source of identity that whites recognized in black people: their status as slaves (hence the postbellum emergence of the mammy as a slave).<sup>17</sup> In this way, whites created distance from the “Other” by lowering and mimicking them.<sup>18</sup> Lott also references the cultural “reclamation of the ‘folk’” in Depression Era America.<sup>19</sup> The importance of minstrelsy in American folk culture meant that those same minstrel tropes found their way into the burgeoning film industry. This, along with the nostalgia of a perceived better era combined to catalyze the reemergence of the mammy in popular culture. By the 1930s, white Americans had adopted the mammy archetype as an authentic historical figure and manipulated the character to reassert notions of white racial and cultural superiority.

At this same time, the image for the ideal woman was transforming. Barbara Welter coined the prevailing system of values that described the supposedly ideal woman of the Victorian Era as the “cult of true womanhood.” Those values were piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, which represented a social hierarchy that placed women in the home and under the authority of men. Certain responsibilities, such as nursing the sick, completing chores,

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<sup>16</sup> Lott, *Love and Theft*, 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

and teaching religious morals, became the livelihoods of women, whose self-worth was thought to be derived from helping the condition of others.<sup>20</sup> In this framing, a woman ought to be busy yet compassionate, occupied yet passive, motivated yet dainty. However, societal ideas of femininity did not align with the actual labor required for many chores, and “exact[ing] heavy labor from the domestic became essential to protecting the health and refinement of the housewife.”<sup>21</sup> Phyllis Palmer notes that the societal hierarchy which placed physical laborers below white collar workers was mirrored in the private sphere.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the domestic was viewed as dirty, and the housewife as clean. The “pristine identity” of the housewife was affirmed by the presence of a domestic.<sup>23</sup> However, the rise of consumer culture in the 1920s led to a decline in the number of households that employed domestic servants.<sup>24</sup> Products and appliances designed for convenience revolutionized the household and began to displace domestic workers. Because of these products, households increasingly chose to manage their own chores and domestic work.<sup>25</sup> This freedom of choice was taken away from many families during the Great

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<sup>20</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2, pt. 1 (Summer 1966), 156-7, 163-165.

<sup>21</sup> Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 66.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, and Glenna Matthews, “Just a Housewife:” *The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 179.

<sup>25</sup> Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt*, 147-150.

Depression, and the prevalence of domestic servitude continued to drop. As a result, the image of the working housewife began to change.

The mammy and the white housewife of the 1930s share many characteristics. Both do housework, both are teachers, both are nurturing, both are submissive. If not for their physical (often racialized) distinctions, the middle-class white housewife and the mammy are nearly indistinguishable. The physical traits of the mammy, as well as imposed stereotypes like dialect, separated the dignified housewife from the dirty domestic during an era in which many white housewives could no longer afford to hire one. These distinctions thus reaffirmed notions of black inferiority.

In the 1930s, denigrating stereotypes of both white and black female sexuality in film media were used to further segregate and culturally isolate black women from white women.<sup>26</sup> Because film media reached broad audiences, it captured and shaped contemporary attitudes toward race. In the 1939 MGM cartoon *The Bookworm*, a crow dons a Little Bo Peep disguise to trick and capture the bookworm. To do so, he strips the clothes off of a lamp shaped like Little Bo Peep. Bo Peep, an innocent white

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<sup>26</sup> For links between minstrelsy and the emerging cartoon industry, see the introduction to Christopher P. Lehman, *The Colored Cartoon: Black Representation in American Animated Short Films, 1907-1954* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007). To examine how depictions of blackness changed as a result of the Hays Code in 1934, see *Ibid.*, 37-38. All primary source material used in this article falls after that date.



woman, is left in her undergarments, her shapely figure accentuated. Shortly thereafter, Paul Revere emerges from a book to mobilize other characters in an effort to help the bookworm. Revere jumps into the book *Black Beauty* and emerges riding Aunt Jemima.<sup>27</sup> The script of the cartoon reads: "Aunt Jemima comes galloping out with Paul Revere riding piggy-back on her."<sup>28</sup> In this cartoon, both Aunt Jemima and Little Bo Peep are treated as objects: Little Bo Peep is literally a lamp, and Aunt Jemima is treated as a horse would be. However, the two characters can be read as opposites. Whereas Bo Peep is the caretaker of the sheep, Aunt Jemima is the animal. By depicting Aunt Jemima as subhuman, the cartoon implies that the racial order placing blacks under whites is both humorous and natural. Bo Peep embodies the prevailing physical ideal for women, and Aunt Jemima represents nearly the opposite. Aunt Jemima, with her strong physique and nurturing bosom, seems crafted for service. Her uniform and apron only strengthen this perception. Although the mammy and the white woman do not interact in this cartoon, they are still offered as points of comparison. The Aunt Jemima character in this cartoon embodied popular white opinions surrounding black

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<sup>27</sup> She is named only in the script, not in the cartoon itself. The quoted text is found reprinted in Lehman, *Colored Cartoon*, 51, but Lehman cites the original script as *The Bookworm*, script, 1939, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Collection, University of Southern California Archives, 7. Also, because "Aunt Jemima" can also be another generic term for "mammy," her name in this cartoon does not necessarily refer to the pancake mascot.

<sup>28</sup> Lehman, *Colored Cartoon*, 51.

identity at this time, namely that black people possessed certain physical qualities that made them suitable to serve whites.

This comparison between the white woman and the mammy denied notions of slave mistreatment in order to exalt white morality and denigrate African-Americans. In the 1935 acclaimed cartoon *Three Orphan Kittens*, three kittens left at a doorstep wreak havoc on a household after gaining entry.<sup>29</sup> However, upon finding the chaos caused by the cats, she attempts to throw them out, threatening them with violent expressions such as "I'll skin you alive, sho' enough." Suddenly, a young white girl appears, presumably the daughter of the homeowner. The kittens are rescued by this white savior and are kept as pets at her request. Cartoon historian Christopher P. Lehman writes, "Left ambiguous is whether the older woman yields because the girl has exerted her moral authority or her social power. But either way, it is clear who holds the position of superiority."<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the dynamic between them suggests that the girl's social power is *tied* to her moral authority; her family is successful because the members have done good things, such as take in kittens or employ a mammy-esque domestic worker. Depictions of a benevolent employer remove the cruelty

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<sup>29</sup> This cartoon won the 1936 Academy Award for Best Short Film. Clearly, the appeal of this cartoon was broad and was a critical success. It is worth examining based upon those merits.

*Three Orphan Kittens* (1935, Walt Disney),

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wo8hbZkscGw&index=22&list=WL&t=0s>.

<sup>30</sup> Lehman, *Colored Cartoon*, 50.

found in inequality. Relationships between a mammy and her master (or employer) were, according to the perspective advanced in the cartoon, humane. Furthermore, the mammy represents "how black women behaved when under proper control."<sup>31</sup> In this case, even the white child is able to assert this control; black authority is weaker than white authority at any age. The cartoon draws upon white master narratives and cultural suppositions to affirm the superiority of white morality.

Economic anxieties about the Great Depression are manifested through the dynamics of black slavery/servitude and white ownership/employment in the 1939 Academy Award winning landmark film *Gone with the Wind*. Scarlett O'Hara (played by Vivien Leigh), a southern belle and the protagonist of the film, depends on the help of Mammy (played by Hattie McDaniel) to complete daily tasks and chores. Scarlett requires Mammy's assistance to help her get dressed; in one scene, Mammy tightly ties a corset around Scarlett before serving her breakfast. Scarlett repeatedly refuses the food from Mammy because she wants to make a good impression at the barbecue later. Scarlett only submits when Mammy reveals that she is aware of Scarlett's lustful desires for Ashley Wilkes.<sup>32</sup> Maria St. John argues that this scene represents a suckling fantasy, in which a dependent Scarlett relies on Mammy for her livelihood. Scarlett plays

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<sup>31</sup> Manring, *Slave in a Box*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> *Gone with the Wind*, directed by Victor Fleming (Selznick International Pictures, 1939), 0:15:33-0:17:53, <https://archive.org/details/Gone.With.The.Wind.1939>.

the role of a baby, and Mammy, the wet nurse. Scarlett needs a bib, stuffs food in her mouth like a child, and frets about belching. According to St. John, “Scarlett does not want to need what Mammy has to offer, but Mammy reminds her not only that she is subject to hunger, but that race—the currency of Scarlett’s contempt for Mammy, the permission for her disregard—is meaningless in the face of hunger.”<sup>33</sup> Scarlett is dependent on Mammy, just as the prosperity of the American South was dependent on black slave labor.<sup>34</sup> It is because of Mammy’s help that Scarlett is able maintain the expectation for feminine beauty of the plantation elite—her cinched waist, voluminous hoop skirt, and lifted breasts lightened with buttermilk.<sup>35</sup> Throughout the film, Scarlett

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<sup>33</sup> Maria St. John, “It Ain’t Fittin’: Cinematic and Fantasmatic Contours of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* and *Beyond*,” *Qui Parle* 11, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1999), 127-136. St. John’s analysis of the corset scene

<sup>34</sup> The morality of slavery is heavily featured in the film. For the South to be benevolent, as the movie suggests, slavery must be depicted as good. In the film, Mammy is given agency and a complex personality to help defend this perspective. She voluntarily stays with the family after emancipation. In some ways, she is considered to be part of the family. For instance, Rhett Butler, Scarlet’s third husband, buys her a petticoat while on his honeymoon.

<sup>35</sup> Donald Bogle, on page 88 of *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*, asserts that because Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* is often vocally critical of Scarlett’s behavior, this portrayal is progressive and dynamic. However, this perspective is refuted by M. M. Manring who suggests that “The archetypal mammy was always outspoken, particularly when it came to offering advice to white women, but that in no way compromised her place in the slave hierarchy or made her any less subservient” (*Slave in a Box*, 158). In the Aunt Jemima ads, Aunt Jemima offers advice to the white housewife. As Manring notes, part of the mammy’s character is to be vocal toward her white superiors. Although *Gone with the Wind* includes a mammy as a central character, her portrayal is not necessarily progressive. See Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An*

relies on this perceived physical and sexual beauty to get what she wants; after all, the purpose of the corset in this scene is to gain the attention of Ashley Wilkes. After Union troops pillage the O'Hara household later in the film, Scarlett is forced to work the land to support the estate. Mammy can no longer bear the full burden of dirt for Scarlett (as Palmer might suggest). Scarlett crafts an elaborate dress from curtains as a disguise of genteel physicality to coax Rhett Butler into giving her money. However, her fall from grace is not lost to Rhett Butler, who remarks that her rough "hands do not belong to a lady—they belong to a field hand."<sup>36</sup> As a result of her labor, Scarlett loses her status as a lady. Her ladyhood is tied up with Mammy who can no longer spend the time to pamper her. The film depicts ideology of the Lost Cause through its representation of happy black subservience and white prosperity that is lost after the Civil War. This nostalgic (though mythological) view of the Civil War was particularly relevant to white American families during the Great Depression, many of which struggled to support themselves. Middle class housewives were no longer the managers of their homes—they were the workers. Scarlett's anxieties about the future, as well as her fortitude and determination, resonated with workers who could no longer afford to live the way they once did.

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*Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Continuum, 2001), 88.

<sup>36</sup> *Gone with the Wind*, 2:14:08-2:18:31.

Outside of entertainment media, advertisements geared toward white consumers included the mammy as a symbol of servitude to depict convenience. Nowhere is this more evident than in advertisements for Aunt Jemima pancakes. Often featured in magazines such as *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping*, these advertisements attempted to create a problem: homemade pancakes are too complicated and too difficult to make, but with Aunt Jemima and her pancake mix, they are a cinch! The box, which featured Aunt Jemima's likeness, represented a slave that the white woman could take home. As Kenneth W. Goings writes, "'A subconscious desire to 'own' a slave or domestic was at the heart of the reasoning process behind the advertising and production of" products featuring the likeness of black servants or slaves.<sup>37</sup> Status was often achieved through material wealth, and the black servant, like cars, jewelry, and clothing, was a physical symbol of that wealth.<sup>38</sup> Thus, Aunt Jemima was a prop used to depict the white dream for wealth and prosperity. Like minstrelsy, these advertisements illustrate that "popular culture [is] a place where cultures of the dispossessed are routinely commodified."<sup>39</sup> She could be bought and existed to serve the white housewife. The characterization of Aunt Jemima placed her as a tool for the white woman to use.<sup>40</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>37</sup> Kenneth W. Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 67.

<sup>38</sup> Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory*, 61.

<sup>39</sup> Lott, *Love and Theft*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose*, 72.

Aunt Jemima was denied her full humanity in the face of the white woman. The goal was not an attempt to depict Aunt Jemima as separate but equal to her white fellow citizens. Rather, these advertisements delegitimized the notion that African-Americans should have agency over their own lives. They created an alternate world in which black people were cheerful and willing participants in a racial hierarchy that favored whites.

The type of white woman portrayed in these advertisements is equally important in understanding the role of Aunt Jemima. In many advertisements, Aunt Jemima is pictured alongside the target consumer: the white housewife (and perhaps her husband).<sup>41</sup> Manring notes that despite Aunt Jemima's forged anachronistic uniform (she is meant to be a slave in an era past slavery), she is never pictured alongside the southern belle, another postbellum archetype retrojected into the antebellum South.<sup>42</sup> Manring asserts that the absence of the southern belle is intentional because the consumer is meant to imagine herself as the belle. This relieves the burden of work from the white housewife and places it on Aunt Jemima, her slave.<sup>43</sup> Aunt Jemima, as a mascot, is more than just a face to remember while shopping. She is the antithesis of the hoped-for

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<sup>41</sup> A minority of Aunt Jemima advertisements cater towards men. The setting for these advertisements is not in the kitchen (the female sphere), but in the outdoors (the male sphere). Activities include hunting and camping. For more information on these advertisements, see Manring, *Slave in a Box*, 142-146.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-141.

consumer—the white housewife who longs to be a southern belle.

Furthermore, the theme of the adept white woman who can learn skills from the black woman is often present in these same advertisements.<sup>44</sup> For instance, in an advertisement titled “Make Mealttime an Adventure,” the white housewife watches as Aunt Jemima makes her special pancakes using the boxed mix.<sup>45</sup> The recipe and image of the housewife going to the grocery store imply that the white woman will be able to make use of Aunt Jemima’s secret. The advertisement “Aunt Jemima’s Magic Meal” follows this same pattern.<sup>46</sup> It introduces the hot cakes as “wonderfully fluffy, tender, [and] light” and includes a “secret recipe” that will give the white cook access to Aunt Jemima’s wisdom. Beyond the recipe, the advertisement features a sample menu that will provide inspiration for the burgeoning cook.

Taken together, it is evident that the purpose of this advertisement is to bestow confidence upon the home cook. The home cook will believe that she is no longer alone in the

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<sup>44</sup> Stephen Fox, in *The Mirror Makers*, suggests that Aunt Jemima played a more innocuous role: “These ads, created by whites for white audiences, did unfortunately represent blacks as whites imagined them, extending but not inventing typical racial stereotypes” (278). Fox goes as far as to suggest that “Trade characters such as Aunt Jemima... of themselves makes no selling arguments” (44). In contrast, I believe that whites harnessed these stereotypes to associate their product with a depiction of the ideal American society. Thus, the figure of Aunt Jemima *does* make a selling argument. Stephen Fox, *The Mirror Makers: A History of American Advertising and its Creators* (New York: William Morrow, 1984).

<sup>45</sup> “Make Mealttime an Adventure,” clipping from unknown magazine, 1936.

<sup>46</sup> “Aunt Jemima’s Magic Menu,” in *Good Housekeeping*, February, 1936.



kitchen; she has someone to help and teach her. Because the advertisements most often featured Aunt Jemima, not the white housewife, making the pancakes, the burden of work was removed from home cook. The white housewife was able to retain her leisurely and angelic image. These ads separate whiteness from blackness and exalt the creativity that a white woman can wield in the kitchen. Therefore, this depiction places Aunt Jemima below the unnamed but ubiquitous housewife, reinforcing a separation based on racial inequality.

Pairings of the white woman and the mammy are often diverse in content but unified in intent. The white woman typically acts as a point of contrast against the mammy. The young, poised, and dainty white woman is juxtaposed with the buxom, matronly, poor, yet wise mammy. These depictions literally place the black woman in a subservient role since she is a domestic worker whose physical body is ideal for service. In essence, she is subservient because of her race and gender. Used in entertainment and persuasive media, the mammy reaffirms white notions of civility between black and white Americans—it is the responsibility of the black person to always be cheerful, loyal, and willing to help. The mammy's depiction as an antithesis of the white woman segregates her from white society. Ultimately, white voices used the mammy to champion the cause of racial inequality in an era plagued by tumultuous economic conditions that threatened to upend the status quo. The mammy offers a point of

reassurance to uneasy white Americans, and recognizing her role in relation to white women exposes white sentiments toward African-Americans at this time.

# **Nazi Propaganda and German Rearmament: How Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party Presented Re-Militarization to the German Public**

**Chandler Vaught**

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The First World War left Europe a shattered and bloodied continent by 1918. All of the European nations that took part in the global struggle suffered unprecedented numbers of casualties and catastrophic economic losses. The war had left a bitter taste in the mouths of the civilian populations of Europe. Germany was blamed for the calamity by the victorious nations and therefore severally punished under the Treaty of Versailles. The German population suffered the collapse of their nation's economy and government along with becoming the international community's scapegoat. Yet despite the troubles caused by the war, Germany returned to start another global conflict just 21 years after the conclusion of the last one. A return to war is what the Nazi Party wanted as a way to expand Germany's boundaries, but this does not mean that all of the German people wanted another war. How did the Nazi Party manage to convince the German public that their country needed to re-militarize and prepare for a coming

war despite the defeat of World War I and its devastating effects? The Nazis advocated for re-militarization between the years of 1927 and 1941 through a process involving three distinct steps. Support for the German military was built by first establishing a specific and desirable German community, then by convincing this community that their troubles were created by the international system that was unjustly punishing them, and finally by assuring them that the only protection from the tyrannical international system and outside forces was a strong German military.

The rise to power of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany was never a certainty, nor was their grip on power ever assured. The Nazis always depended on a certain level of consent, whether it was given freely or coerced, from the German population. Gaining the consent of the people to govern meant that Nazi officials had to take into account the mood and opinions of their constituents on political, social, and economic issues regarding the nation. Nazi leaders such as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels had to drum up support for their policies within the population to ensure they had the backing of the people. Just as in any state, the Nazis required popular support for their policies and laws despite being a fascist regime. This meant that the Nazis had to have some public support for their plans to re-militarize the nation. Here it is important to mention that the study of how German's received Nazi propaganda is well beyond the scope of this research paper. Gathering statistical analysis on how effective Nazi propaganda was is a

challenge not undertaken here. However, what can be studied, and is the topic of this paper, is the Nazi propaganda itself.

In order to achieve the public support needed for their regime and their policies, the Nazi Party relied heavily on the use of propaganda. Joseph Goebbels, the Reich Minister of Propaganda in Nazi Germany, spoke about the use of propaganda at the 1934 party rally in Nuremberg. In his speech, Goebbels admits that the use of propaganda has a negative connotation but insists that it can be used for good, stating, “we must defend [propaganda].”<sup>1</sup> Goebbels went on to insist that propaganda is neither good nor evil, it is only a means to an end and necessary to the preservation of the state. “Throughout the world today,” Goebbels claimed, “people are beginning to see that a modern state, whether democratic or authoritarian, cannot withstand the subterranean forces of anarchy and chaos without propaganda.”<sup>2</sup> According to Goebbels propaganda was merely a tool the Nazis used, and of course, according to the Nazis, it was a tool they only used for good. “It is not only a matter of doing the right thing,” Goebbels proclaimed to those gathered in Nuremberg, “the people must understand that the right thing is the right thing. Propaganda includes everything that helps the people to realize this.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Goebbels, “Speech to the 1943 Nuremberg Party Rally,” September 6, 1934, in *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism*, edited by Randall Bytwerk (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 41.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Propaganda, such as the speeches and visual works like posters examined in this paper, was the means by which the Nazi Party gained the support of the German people for rearmament. While it was no secret the Nazis were re-militarizing Germany, they were never upfront about their ultimate aims with the rest of the world or their own people. The Nazis were ultimately seeking to start wars of conquest that would see Germany's borders extend well into Eastern Europe. They wanted to become the hegemonic power on the continent, quite possibly even the world. Of course, this goal of conquest was not shared with the German people at large. Instead, Nazi propaganda sought to convince the German public that a strong military was necessary to their survival as the international community was out to victimize them. Goebbels believed that public opinion could be manufactured through the use of propaganda and so used it to help create the belief that a strong military was needed.<sup>4</sup> The goal of winning public support was achieved in three steps. First, the Nazis built upon a long tradition of the German *volk*, or community, by establishing in-groups and out-groups from a sense of who belonged to the German people. Second, Nazi leaders like Hitler and Goebbels spoke out against the international system that they claimed was ruining Germany, alleging that the Versailles Treaty, Bolsheviks, and Jews were working together in a great conspiracy to make slaves out of their pure German

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<sup>4</sup> Ernest K. Bramsted, *Goebbels and National Socialist Propaganda, 1925-1945* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1965), 49.

community. Finally, the military was presented to the German people as a source of pride for the nation because they were defending civilians with their lives against the evils outside their borders. The importance of propaganda for the Nazi party is seen in the closing lines of Goebbels speech in Nuremberg as he stated, "It may be good to have power based on weapons. It is better and longer lasting, however, to win and hold the heart of a people."<sup>5</sup>

The "people" for Goebbels did not include every German. The people the Nazis wanted in Germany were only a select group that was deemed desirable. Nazi propaganda helped the party to define what people were in the in-group and what people were in the out-group. The idea of creating one desirable national identity, or German *volk*, is a central element of research in Claudia Koonz's work, *The Nazi Conscience*. In this work, Koonz argues that the establishment of the German *volk* was an essential step in the Nazis taking control in Germany.<sup>6</sup> The creation of the German *volk* and the establishment of insiders and outsiders was also a necessary step towards convincing this community it was under attack. The narrative of victimization is strong throughout Nazi propaganda and ideology. The Nazis convinced themselves and the rest of Germany that their nation was only weak because it was under attack from outsiders. However, before this narrative could really take hold it was first necessary to define the

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<sup>5</sup> Goebbels, "Speech to the 1934 Nuremberg Party Rally." 51.

<sup>6</sup> Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 1-3.

exact community that was being victimized. According to David Welch, "The central goal of Nazi propaganda was radically to restructure German society so that the prevailing class, religious, and sectional loyalties would be replaced by a new heightened national awareness."<sup>7</sup> The first step to convincing the German public of the benefits of rearmament was therefore to create a new national identity.

Goebbels, as with anything related to Nazi propaganda, was on the front lines of creating this new German *volk*. One of his earliest works, *The Nazi-Soci*, published in 1927 deals extensively with the idea of one common German community united in national spirit and identity. The first section of this work is entitled "Ten Commandments for Each National Socialist." Of the ten, the first six commandments focus on the subject of the individual's role in the greater German community. The list begins with the statement: "The homeland is the mother of your life - never forget that!"<sup>8</sup> The first six commandments then follow:

- 1. Your fatherland is Germany. Love it more than anything else, and more in deed than in word.**
- 2. Germany's enemies are your enemies; hate them with your whole heart.**

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<sup>7</sup> David Welch, "Manufacturing a Consensus: Nazi Propaganda and the Building of a 'National Community' (Volksgemeinschaft)." *Contemporary European History* vol. 2, no. 1 (1993): 1-15, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Goebbels, *The Nazi-Soci* (Accessed from the German Propaganda Archive, Calvin College, 1927).



3. Each people's comrade, even the poorest, is a part of Germany; love him as you love yourself.
4. Ask for yourself only duties. Then Germany will regain its rights.
5. Be proud of Germany; You may take pride in a fatherland for which millions gave their lives.
6. He who insults Germany insults you and your dead. Punch him.<sup>9</sup>

These first six commandments show the importance of uniting Germany under one common identity for the Nazi Party. Numbers 1, 4, and 5 stress the value of putting the nation before the individual and working towards its betterment. Numbers 2 and 6 hint at the violence barely hidden beneath Nazi rhetoric. Anyone not in the group is against the group and therefore must be dealt with, and if need be violently, before they can harm the *volk*. Finally, number 3 deals most directly with establishing a common identity. Hearing a Nazi propaganda piece call for people to love one another sounds ridiculous today, but at the time it was a central part of the Nazi's platform. Loving your neighbor was an important aspect of Nazi Germany, so long as that neighbor was ethnically German.

Goebbels would continue this rhetoric about establishing a common German community throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and into the 1940s. Three weeks before the start of the pivotal *Reichstag* elections in 1932, Goebbels gave a

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

speech in Berlin to drum up support for the Nazi party. In the speech he does not mention what the Nazis will do once in power but does vehemently attack the current government. Throughout the speech are mentions of the general idea of a strong, single German *volk*. "A new Germany has arisen!" Goebbels claims, "It is a Germany that has fought for twelve years against Marxist betrayal and bourgeoisie weakness. You, men, women, and comrades, are the bearers, witnesses, builders and finishers of this unique people's uprising."<sup>10</sup> Here Goebbels makes the indirect claim that the Nazi party and the German people are one and the same, there is no separating the two. By referring to the Nazis as a new Germany, Goebbels pushes the idea of a single German community united through blood, land, history, and of course the Nazi Party.

Numerous other Nazi leaders also spent time spinning the tale of a unified, ethnically homogenous, and purified Germany. Gerhard Wagner and Julius Streicher were such key figures. Unlike the previous excerpts from Goebbels, though, Wagner and Streicher sought to define the German people by who they were not, namely the Jews. A common tactic in creating the sense of community within a people is by defining themselves against another group. For the Nazis this meant excluding Jews, Roma and Sinti, communists, homosexuals, and others deemed "undesirable" from the German *volk*. Wagner was the head of the National

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<sup>10</sup> Goebbels, "The Storm is Coming," July 9, 1932, in *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism*, 36.

Socialist German Physicians' Association and a physician himself. As a doctor he was able to pass off pseudo-scientific reasoning to establish a definitive difference between the superior Aryan race and the degenerate Jews, according to Nazi beliefs. On September 11, 1936 at the Nuremberg rally Wagner spoke on race and population policy to those gathered. "The Nuremberg Laws make further infiltration of Jewish blood into the German national body impossible," he insisted. Wagner here refers to the race laws passed by the Nazis in 1935 that severely restricted the rights and freedoms of Jews in Germany. "To National Socialists, whose racial standpoint is anchored in blood, the broad scope of this historic decision makes all other political and economic aspects of laws regarding Jews of secondary importance."<sup>11</sup> Wagner makes it clear that oppressing Jews and stripping their rights from them is only of secondary importance to the Nazis; far more important is ensuring that they cannot infiltrate the Aryan community.

Julius Streicher, an avid Nazi and anti-Semite, also spoke of the distinctions Nazis wanted to make about their idea of a German community in a speech delivered the day after *Kristallnacht*, when Nazi thugs attacked Jewish businesses and homes along with beating and killing Jews across Germany. Streicher defends the actions of the previous night citing the shooting of a German by a Jewish boy. This single act of violence Streicher attributes to the

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<sup>11</sup> Gerhard Wagner, "Speech Delivered at the Nuremberg Rally," September 11, 1936, in *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism*, 69.

entire Jewish community. "That Jew was the representative and agent of the Jewish people, both through blood and education,"<sup>12</sup> Streicher claims, projecting the actions of one onto an entire group. Indeed, Streicher almost absolves the would-be assassin of his crime by asserting that he could not help it, for his Jewish blood compelled him to be violent. "We know that the Jew received his blood from all the races of the world. Negro blood, Mongolian blood, Nordic blood, Indian blood- the blood of all races flows in this bastard race. This mixed blood forces the Jew into criminal deeds...Thus, this creature went to the German embassy and shot the German counsel in the service of the Jewish people because his inferior mixed blood demanded it of him."<sup>13</sup> In this quote Streicher amplifies Nazi racial discourse about Jews: that they are inferior creatures due to their "blood," a typical pseudoscientific explanation for the Nazi Party's blatant racism.

Streicher also goes on in his speech to defend the actions taken by the Nazi Brownshirts and thugs during *Kristallnacht*, stating that, "We could have killed all the Jews yesterday, but we did not do it. The demonstrations in Franconia were, in general, disciplined, clear, and farsighted."<sup>14</sup> To call the actions that took place during *Kristallnacht*, a night that saw the deaths of over 90 people, "disciplined," shows Streicher's willingness to downplay

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<sup>12</sup> Julius Streicher, "Speech Delivered the Day After the 'Night of the Broken Glass,'" November 10, 1938, in *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism*, 88.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

violence against Jews as well as suggest much worse could, and should, have happened. Today, Streicher's claim that the Nazi Brownshirts could have killed all the Jews in Germany in one night appears as an unsettling foreshadowing of the horrific events to come.

Goebbels, Wagner, and Streicher are a select few of the Nazi leaders that spoke about creating a unified German *volk*. The process and end goal of creating a common German community through the Nazi party was of paramount importance to Hitler. To do this the Nazis sought to not only define who Germans were, but just as importantly define who they were not. Creating a cohesive community gave the Nazis more control over the hearts, thoughts, and actions of the German people. Goebbels also sought the creation of a common identity as it allowed his propaganda machine to more accurately target his recipients. In terms of the war effort, with the creation of a common German *volk* came the myth perpetrated by the Nazis that Germany was unfairly victimized under the international system. This victimization from without was the root cause of the nation's troubles and the only solution to it was a strong military, according to Nazi leadership and propaganda.

The Nazi Party made no secret of its desire to rearm Germany before, during, and after its rise to power. However, they did not share with the rest of the international community or the German people the true aims of this re-militarization. Today, with the power of

hindsight, the world knows the ultimate goal of the Nazi Party's rearmament policy was to conquer as much of Europe as they could and create Hitler's dream of *Lebensraum*, or living space, for an ever ever-increasing population of Aryans. Of course, Hitler did not share his goal of *Lebensraum* with the rest of the leaders of Europe or even his own people at large. Instead Nazi leadership espoused the idea that the rest of the international community was unfairly punishing Germany. Nazis continually claimed that Germans were the victims of Jews, Bolsheviks, and capitalists.

Hitler had clear plans for the rise of Germany from a defeated nation after World War I to the preeminent hegemonic power of the world. Hitler's *Stufenplan*, according to Andreas Hillgruber, would have expanded Germany in stages, first by restoring Germany to the status of a Great Power; second to establish control over central Europe and create *Lebensraum* by defeating the Soviet Union; and finally leading to German expansion in overseas territories.<sup>15</sup> This plan, of course, was not widely shared outside of Hitler's inner circle, as the knowledge of it would have undoubtedly lead to intervention by the Western Allies and the USSR, as well as quite possibly causing unrest inside Germany itself. Instead, Hitler presented German foreign policy as being centered on historical territorial claims rather

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<sup>15</sup> Klaus Hildebrand, *The Foreign Policy of the Third Reich* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1970), vii.

than military expansion.<sup>16</sup> Hitler and the Nazi leadership were also helped by the fact that they had a nineteenth-century parallel for secret re-militarization to follow. After the defeat of Prussia by Napoleon in 1807, the nation found itself forced to reduce its army and national boundaries by half. The military rejuvenation that succeeded the disastrous defeat was helped by Prussian military leaders circumventing the restrictions on the army by training troops for short periods and then holding them as reserves rather than part of their standing army, a tactic Nazi Germany would repeat in the 1930s.<sup>17</sup>

The Nazi claim that Germans were the victims of the international system was based on their treatment in the Versailles Treaty. The main culprit of their victimization, the Nazis constantly attacked the Versailles Treaty as unjust. Most Germans believed the treaty was wrong, that the reparations demanded of them were an unbearable burden, and that the reduction of their borders was excessive long before the Nazis rose to power.<sup>18</sup> Blaming the Versailles Treaty for Germany's hardships was easy enough to do as the treaty required the country to take all the blame for causing World War I and to pay back all the damages suffered by the Allied nations.<sup>19</sup> The Treaty of Versailles also

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Bennett, *German Rearmament and the West, 1932-1933* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Treaty of Peace with Germany (Treaty of Versailles), US-GB-France-Italy-Japan-Germany, June 28, 1919, LOC, Article 231.

shrunk Germany's boundaries as well as stripping the nation of all of its overseas possessions.<sup>20</sup> All of these factors made it easy for the Nazis to convince an already irritated German public that the rest of the world was out to make slaves of their nation.

Hitler spoke about the Nazi Party's relationship and stance towards the rest of the international system and community in a January 30, 1937 speech to the Reichstag. In his speech, Hitler praises the progress Germany has made since the "internal revolution" of 1933 that resulted in the Nazi Party coming to power and discusses the future plans and obstacles he and the nation will have to face in the world.<sup>21</sup> Hitler makes several points in the speech about his willingness to work with other European nations in building stronger political and economic ties, no doubt in an attempt to cover the recent acts of re-militarization Germany had taken.<sup>22</sup> However he still makes clear Germany's staunch opposition to the perceived threat of Bolshevism, stating, "As far as Germany itself is concerned, let there be no doubts on the following points: — (1) We look on Bolshevism as a world peril for which there must be no toleration. (2) We use every means in our power to keep this peril away from our people. (3) And we are trying to make

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., Articles 27 and 118.

<sup>21</sup> Adolf Hitler, "On National Socialism and World Relations," January 30, 1937, accessed from the German Propaganda Archive, Calvin College, translated by H. Müller and Sohn.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



the German people immune to this peril as far as possible."<sup>23</sup> If his point was not heard clearly, Hitler later goes on to state plainly that "I consider Bolshevism the most malignant poison that can be given to a people. And therefore I do not want my own people to come into contact with this teaching."<sup>24</sup> Taken at surface level, this speech would make one believe that Hitler and Nazi Germany were willing to work to find peace with other nations while opposing Bolshevism in the USSR and in Germany. However, this is not the case when analyzing more carefully how the Nazis viewed the international system.

The Nazi Party may have appeared to be willing to work with any nation that was not communist but this is not true. Leaders like Goebbels made it clear that they believed the entire international system, including western capitalist democracies, were controlled by Bolsheviks and Jews. In a 1928 article entitled "The World Enemy," Goebbels claims that "International high finance" has taken control of the world economy and the sovereign rights of Germany.<sup>25</sup> This group is of course made up of Jews and Bolsheviks, according to Goebbels. "They now own our currency and control by far the greatest part of German production, our transportation system, and as a result of their military and diplomatic capacities, Germany's borders," the article states, "The press is almost entirely in their hands; they thus control

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Goebbels, "The World Enemy," 1928, accessed from the German Propaganda Archive, Calvin College.

public opinion and determine the parliament and government.”<sup>26</sup> Nazi leaders like Goebbels used their party’s propaganda machine to make such fantastic claims all with the aim of portraying Germany as a victim at the hands of the international system. Goebbels also found a way to connect capitalism with his conspiracy theory of Jewish Bolsheviks controlling the world, claiming, “The Marxist parties are willing tools in the hands of these exploiters of money. With their help, world stock exchanges were able to rob the German people of its possessions. During the world-shattering military struggle they took two million of Germany’s best sons; from their blood Wall Street coined the gold bars that today obligate us to pay tribute.”<sup>27</sup> From the Nazi perspective, communism and capitalism worked together to exploit Germany, and in control of both groups was a select group of Jewish businessmen.

Goebbels also blamed the international system for Germany’s troubles in another essay written in 1927. In it, Goebbels claims that the Nazi Party only demands basic needs for Germans that have been taken from them by the world order like jobs, houses, and food.<sup>28</sup> “The German people is an enslaved people,” Goebbels begins the essay. Making his point directly, he writes, “Under international law, it is lower than the worst Negro colony in the Congo.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Goebbels, “We Demand,” July 25, 1927, accessed from the German Propaganda Archive, Calvin College.

One has taken all sovereign rights from us.”<sup>29</sup> This type of rhetoric was common during the years the Nazis were attempting to gain political power as it allowed them to tap into the anger of people out of work and shamed for their loss in World War I. Hitler downplayed this rhetoric after coming to power and having to actually work with other nations. But it saturated the discourse of Nazi appeals overtly in the years of ascension and covertly when the Nazis assumed power. Perhaps prophetically, Goebbels ends his essay with “Therefore we demand the destruction of the system of exploitation! Up with the German workers state! Germany for Germans!”<sup>30</sup>

While Hitler and other Nazi leaders were convincing the German people of their victimization at the hands of the international system, the German military was undergoing a drastic change in size, scope, and orientation. Aside from the obvious increase in size of the military, the German high command began to go through important changes in their doctrines and military strategies between the years of 1933 and 1935. With the growth in the military came the ability to move away from only considering war as a defensive option. New schools of thought began to replace the old defensive mindset as German generals instead focused on strategies for a new total war, battles of annihilation, and the importance of the first strike against the enemy.<sup>31</sup> They

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> E. M. Robertson, *Hitler's Pre-War Policy and Military Plans 1933-1939* (New York City, NY: The Citadel Press, 1967), 43-44.

developed the infamous *Blitzkrieg*, or lightning war, that would result in the defeat of Poland in 1939 and the fall of France in 1940. In March of 1936 the first real test of German rearmament came when Hitler decided to breach the Locarno Treaty and send military forces into the Rhineland.<sup>32</sup> The events that followed constituted the first great international crisis Hitler had to face. In the end he was successful and the Rhineland was reoccupied without French military intervention. Though the action was spun as a reclamation of rightful German territory, in reality the first military step towards World War II had been taken.

The final step in convincing the German public that re-militarization and rearmament was necessary was to present the military as a symbol of national pride, a bulwark that would protect them from the international system out to make slaves of the German people. It also helped that the rearmament policy helped give jobs to the unemployed and increase the country's economic well-being.<sup>33</sup> Other than being equated with economic success, the German military was presented as a source of national pride. The Nazis were able to instill such pride in their military and connect it to the German public that the nation would end up fighting to the bitter end. Personal commitment and social mobilization were so high within the German public that they would fight until the very end of the war, defending the Reich

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-79.

<sup>33</sup> Phillip Morgan, *Fascism in Europe, 1919-1945* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 147.

Chancellery in Berlin against the Soviets in 1945.<sup>34</sup> The Nazis were able to create such commitment to the military in the German public by permeating it through all aspects of everyday lives.

One of the best, and most interesting, examples of Nazi propaganda infiltrating the everyday lives of Germans in order to promote the military is in the child's game "Stukas Attack." The game board of "Stukas Attack" shows German Stuka bombers attacking military shore installations while a cargo ship sinks offshore. The box art also displays more German aircraft bombing an enemy town and another naval vessel.<sup>35</sup> The object of the game is for one player, the Germans, to move his or her pieces, representing Stukas, across the board to attack the enemy player's base. While moving across the board the German player must avoid enemy searchlights and anti-aircraft fire. The objective of this game, from a propaganda standpoint, is to indoctrinate children into supporting the German military. With a game like "Stukas Attack," the Nazi party sought to infiltrate the personal time of children and use it to teach them about war and supporting the war effort. This strategy of targeting the youth with indoctrination also continued with the creation of groups like the Hitler Youth, which directly sought to

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<sup>34</sup> Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939-1945* (New York City, NY: Basic Books, 2015), 1.

<sup>35</sup> "Stukas Attack" (Board Game), German Propaganda Archive, accessed December 8, 2018, <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/stuka.htm>

instill pride and military discipline to the Nazi party in German children.

Of course, the Nazis targeted more than just children with their propaganda. Most of their effort at gaining support for rearmament went towards German adults and especially men of military age. Posters were a key component of the effort to support the military. Posters could convey to the German public both a need for fighting men as well as the need for civilians of all ages to support the military. One such example of a poster showing support for the military is from the mid- 1930s with the caption that reads, "Through military will to military strength."<sup>36</sup> The poster image portrays a prone German soldier holding his rifle as if ready to fire. The message appears to portray the idea that strength can be achieved through willpower, and thus it is important to believe in the German military and the men serving in it. Another poster promoting the German military shows the profiles of a Nazi Brownshirt and a German soldier standing next to each other. The caption reads, "The guarantee of German military strength!"<sup>37</sup> This poster directly connects the Nazi Party with the German military, suggesting that Nazi Party members are the backbone of the military, as well as the notion that the Nazis have re-strengthened the military. Posters like these and

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<sup>36</sup> "Through military will to military strength" (Poster), German Propaganda Archive, accessed December 8, 2018, <http://www.bytwerk.com/gpa/posters2.htm>

<sup>37</sup> Hans Schweitzer, "The guarantee of German military strength!" (Poster), German Propaganda Archive, accessed December 8, 2018, <http://www.bytwerk.com/gpa/posters2.htm>

many others were part of the Nazi propaganda machine to manufacture civilian support for the military. They portray military service as honorable and a service for the protection of the German nation and *volk*.

Hitler continued to promote the idea of the German military as an honorable shield for the German nation throughout the Second World War. A key example was a speech he delivered on June 22, 1941 to explain to the German people why their military had invaded the Soviet Union, perhaps the most important turning point in World War II. In the speech Hitler places the blame of the new war squarely on the shoulders of Great Britain, claiming that their desire to destroy Germany led them to encircle the Germans with the help of the USSR.<sup>38</sup> Claims like this go back to the 1920s and 1930s when the Nazis were accusing the entire international system of being rigged against the German people. Hitler shifts the blame of the new war to the only other nation Germany was at war with at the time. Thus absolved of wrongdoing, Hitler says that Germany is only protecting itself, furthering the idea that the German military is only for defense of the Fatherland. In fact, Hitler goes beyond the claim that the German army is protecting the German people and claims that it is for the protection of all of Europe. He ends the speech by saying; "The purpose of this front is no longer the protection of the individual nations, but rather the safety of Europe, and therefore the

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<sup>38</sup> Adolf Hitler, "The Führer to the German People: 22 June 1941," June 22, 1941, accessed from the German Propaganda Archive, Calvin College.

salvation of everyone. I have therefore decided today once again to put the fate of Germany and the future of the German Reich and our people in the hands of our soldiers. May God help us in this battle.”<sup>39</sup> Hitler and the Nazis claimed that the German army and rest of the military was a force for good. Its mission was to defend not only the German people, but also the entirety of Europe from the threat of Judeo-communism.

Under the paradigm of protection and self-survival, the Nazi Party pitched rearmament to the German people. This allowed Nazi propaganda to present the military and service in it as honorable, necessary, and part of a higher calling. Young German men did not join the army to conquer other nations; they joined to protect their family and neighbors, according to Nazi officials. The German public was supportive of re-militarization not because all Germans were hungry for another war, but because they were led to believe it would protect them from a world out to make slaves of them. It is difficult to judge how effective the Nazi effort was to build support for rearmament and supporting the military, however the fact that German civilians stuck out the war until the very end as its cities were bombed and invaded by foreign enemies suggests that it was successful to a large degree.

The Nazi Party could not have rearmed the German nation without some level of consent from the German public. Nazi leadership knew that they would have to pitch

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.



to the German people, and the rest of Europe, some sort of non-aggressive reasoning behind their decision to rearm and re-militarize. For the solution they turned to their propaganda machine and set about constructing a narrative for the German public about why rearmament was necessary to their very survival. The first step in this process was to establish a common German identity through the Nazi party and strong nationalist ideas. Creating a strong German *volk* absent of Jews and other undesirable groups was a central principle of Nazi ideology and made the process of manufacturing and controlling narratives much easier for Nazi propaganda. The next step in the process of manufacturing the idea that Germany required a strong military was to convince the German *volk* that their past economic and political hardships resulted from an unjust international system that unfairly punished Germany. The Nazis were able to base the claims of Germany being unfairly treated by other nations on the Versailles Treaty and the economic hardships following World War I and the Great Depression, claims rooted in facts but greatly exaggerated and directed outwards rather than inwards. The problem was created, and a solution was offered: rearmament. The military was then presented to German citizens as a strong, selfless shield protecting them against a world out to make slaves of their nation. In no way did the Nazi Party suggest that Germany should rearm in order to return to war. They knew that the memory of the First World War was too fresh. Instead they found a way to sell

rearmament as a necessity for Germany's protection and wellbeing.

One of the key reasons for the Nazis' rise to power was their ability to offer solutions to the German people for conceived problems, whether they were real or imaginary. Once the Nazi propaganda machine manufactured a problem, such as victimization and unfair treatment of Germany in the international system, Nazi leaders then came forward offering solutions that fit their ideology. Nazi leadership used this tactic in order to present the idea of rearmament to the German public. It would have been impossible for the Nazis to convince Germany to go back to war after the horrific and costly results of World War I. Instead, they misdirected the German people, and the rest of Europe, as to their reasonings for re-militarization. At first, the Nazi proposals seemed reasonable enough. What is so wrong with a nation wanting to protect itself? Not many people can dispute a country wanting to protect its sovereignty. But then, like so many other tragic Nazi policies, the true reasoning behind rearmament became clearer as time passed. The question of protecting itself turned into a question of restoring its original borders, and so the Nazis walked into the Rhineland. Then the questions were raised of protecting ethnic Germans outside of German borders, and so Austria and the Saarland came into the fold without action from the Western Allies. Finally, the question of Danzig was raised, and by the time Britain and France were

prepared to finally say no, Hitler had already armed and mobilized the German nation for a Second World War.

# The Vietminh's Rural Revolution: Ho Chi Minh, Vo Ngyuen Giap, and the Fight to Defeat French Colonialism

**Alex McTaggart**

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Under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh and Vo Ngyuen Giap, the Vietminh was established in 1941 as a revolutionary and anti-colonial army. The experience of eight decades of French colonial abuses against the Vietnamese population significantly influenced Vietminh ambitions to wage war for independence, self-governance, and freedom from foreign intervention. In order to achieve the seemingly impossible task of defeating a modernized and well-trained Western military power with limited resources and inexperienced soldiers, Ho, Giap, and other Vietminh leaders looked to capitalize on the intense anger the Vietnamese rural masses had towards French rule. This paper examines the actions of Ho Chi Minh and Vo Ngyuen Giap leading up to and during the First Indochina War to show how Vietminh leaders used their intimate understanding of Vietnamese colonial history and civilization to create policies that attracted a significant portion of the rural peasantry to join the fight for independence. By linking peasants demands for economic

and social equality with the anti-imperial struggle, Ho and Giap's rural strategy helped propel the Vietminh to victory and free Vietnam from colonial rule.

### **Traditional Vietnam**

Prior to French contact, Vietnam was ruled by a Confucian state (the Empire of Vietnam) that promoted division between the elites and the masses, but which also placed high value on social harmony and stability through access to land and education.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, rural villages were the main unit of Vietnamese society. They were given great autonomy by the government to carry out their own affairs without significant outside interference. This practice, defined by Vietnamese historians as localism, allowed villages to operate as self-sustaining "small republics."<sup>2</sup> One of the imperial government's only interactions with rural inhabitants was through a small annual tax that was applied collectively to villages, preventing any harmful individual economic impact on the poorest members of the peasantry.

An essential part of Confucian social structure is an emphasis on hierarchy, meaning that as a feudal society where elites controlled much of the nation's arable land, pre-colonial Vietnam was not without inequality between the rich and the poor. That being said, the state was sure to

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<sup>1</sup> D.R. SarDesai, *Vietnam: The Struggle for National Identity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992),15.

<sup>2</sup> Pham Cao Duong, *Vietnamese Peasants Under French Domination, 1861-1945*(Berkley: University of California Press, 1985), 93

inhibit extremes of wealth and poverty by maintaining communal land in each village that prevented any person from controlling large concentrations of property, while providing a crucial resource for struggling peasants.<sup>3</sup> In fact, one of the only instances of state interference into village life was during times of particular hardship, in which government officials sent by the Emperor prevented economic devastation by redistributing land to the peasantry.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to land, education had a significant role in pre-colonial Vietnamese rural life. Scholars estimate that at the time of French arrival, there were over 20,000 village schools scattered across the countryside. Informed by a Confucian emphasis on learning as a conduit to personal and societal development, the education system in traditional Vietnamese society was important not only to the wealthy urban elites, but also to those residing in rural communities.

**In precolonial Vietnam illiteracy was almost unknown. Among the peasants, even the poorest ones, it was easy to find people, who knew several hundred Chinese characters...This was not due only to the population's thirst for knowledge, but also to the liberal characteristics of the Vietnamese traditional instructional system. Schools could be established freely, without any limitations or controls by the Imperial authorities...This system of education displayed a degree of organization and a popularity which would have been the envy of the most enlightened countries of Europe.<sup>5</sup>**

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 138.

The accessibility of education in pre-colonial Vietnam was a valuable tool for maintaining social stability. Peasants were free to create their own curriculums, and in a country with many regional and ethnic differences, the state's hands-off approach to education was central to maintaining the autonomous nature of village life. Additionally, examinations for Mandarin government official positions were open to all, allowing the potential for anyone to use their education as a path to greater social mobility.<sup>6</sup> Emphasizing traditional Vietnamese culture and language, the widespread presence of schools in rural areas not only created a well-educated peasantry, but also helped maintain and strengthen a distinct national cultural identity in the face of overwhelming Chinese influence in the cities.<sup>7</sup> This proved crucial to creating a strong sense of nationalism in opposition to increasing foreign intrusion in the rural Vietnamese popular consciousness.

### Colonial Legacies

With the arrival of the French colonial presence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the relative balance that existed in Vietnamese society for centuries was decimated. Through policies that attempted to control and exploit the population, and especially the peasantry, the French administration

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<sup>6</sup> Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle For Indochina* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954)

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<sup>7</sup> SarDesai, *The Struggle for National Identity*, 17.

broke down the localism that had been central to villagers' experience.<sup>8</sup> After pacifying the countryside, the French began taking large swathes of agricultural land and establishing connections with Mandarins, large landowners, and other members of the Vietnamese elite. The existing self-sustaining economy was replaced by an exploitative capitalist system that hardened feudal structures, rapidly facilitating economic and social divisions.

Colonial policies created a plantation-based agricultural system that actively attempted to increase rich landlords' holdings at the expense of poor peasants, in an effort to sustain the French government's aspirations to make Indochina a *colonie d'exploitation*.<sup>9</sup> The French administration quickly seized large swathes of communal lands in villages, giving them to rural elites in exchange for collaboration, and in the process took away a crucial resource to insuring the economic stability of the peasantry. This change in land policy had a disastrous impact on millions of rural residents. As the Vietnamese historian Pham Cao Duong explains, "The diminution and takeover of communal lands during the colonial period fated a substantial portion of the Vietnamese peasantry to virtual pauperization."<sup>10</sup> Poor peasants who had previously been able to provide for their families by supplementing their small harvests with those of the communal fields were

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<sup>8</sup> Hammer, *Struggle For Indochina*, 73.

<sup>9</sup> Cao Duong, *Peasants Under Domination*, 58

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.



forced to sell their land and become tenant farmers or risk starvation. This was all part of the French plan to create an agricultural economy that centralized land and wealth in the hands of a few powerful French colonists and Vietnamese landlords, who would then use cheap labor of landless peasants to provide French corporations large harvests of cash crops at very low costs.<sup>11</sup>

Without land, many poor peasants could not afford to pay the high rents imposed on tenant farmers, and thus were forced to work on plantations where they were treated like animals. While rich plantation-owning landlords lived in absolute luxury, many having private airplanes, sending their children to schools in France, and owning multiple expansive estates, for the peasants who worked for them, life was defined by acute misery and suffering.<sup>12</sup> Most plantation laborers were paid no more than the equivalent of three cents for a working day that could last up to 12- 15 hours. To make matters worse, workers were regularly subject to severe beatings from plantation owners and overseers, which in many reported cases led to death.<sup>13</sup> The most obvious example of the brutality associated with the colonial economy occurred on rubber plantations, where between 1917 to 1944 over 30 percent of all workers died. A popular colloquial saying of the time described the conditions

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>12</sup> Cao Duong, *Peasants Under Domination*, 121.

<sup>13</sup> Troung Buu Lam, ed., *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism, 1900-1931*, ( Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003),42.

plantation laborers were subjected to, "How healthy and beautiful are the rubber trees! Under each of them, a corpse of a worker is buried."<sup>14</sup> Through their work on plantations, many peasants' contact with the colonial system was closely linked to violence, oppression, and exploitation, fostering widespread hatred of the French presence.

The loss of land and dignity was only the beginning of the French colonists' exploitation of the Vietnamese peasantry. Among the many oppressive policies forced on Vietnamese peasants, taxation had an exceptionally negative impact. Writing in 1913, Nguyen Thoug Hien, an early leader of the anti-colonial movement, summarized the experience of the Vietnamese masses under the French administration. Hien described the oppressive colonial tax system that entrenched the peasantry into deep poverty as one of the "evil policies" of colonial rule.<sup>15</sup>

**In the past our government taxed us...very lightly. Ever since the French began governing us, the tax burden has increased a hundredfold...The peasants could no longer bear [the] situation. The authorities refused to listen to their complaints or heed their requests. To the village that did not pay its full share, they sent a regiment of their terrifying troops with rifles and swords. Then they tied the elders and threw them in jail, while they put the children on leashes or in iron locks ...In brief, on this earth a blade of grass, a tree trunk, a piece**

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>15</sup> Nguyen Thoug Hien, "Tearful Conversation over the Mulberry Fields and the Sea" in *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism, 1900-1931*, ed. Troung Buu Lam (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 166.

**of broken tile, a chip of stone, if any of these had any use for the people, it is inscribed in the French Tax register.<sup>16</sup>**

The burden of oppressively high taxes further destabilized previously self-sustaining villages. To the Vietnamese masses it seemed as if everything had a tax. As a result of abuse and collaboration of Vietnamese notables, the majority of tax increases imposed by the French administration fell on the poor rural population. Local elites used the French tax system to enrich themselves, further impoverishing the already destitute peasantry. Under the French colonial tax policy landless peasants and wealthy landlords paid the same amount in taxes.<sup>17</sup> While this was of negligible impact to the rich, for the peasantry it was devastating. Peasants often had to sell all of their possessions including furniture, houses, lands, and even their children to come up with tax payments.<sup>18</sup> If they did not provide the proper amount of tax money, they had to endure torture at the hands of village officials during which they were beaten until “the victim’s family, not being able to stand seeing him suffer, [would] hurry and get money for the tax.”<sup>19</sup>

Furthering the colonial oppression of the peasantry was the French administration’s decimation of traditional

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 169-172.

<sup>17</sup> Vo Ngyuen Giap and Troung Chinh, *The Peasant Question*, trans. by Christine Eplzer White (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 45.

<sup>18</sup> Cao Duong, *Peasants Under Domination*, 99.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Vietnamese education. As part of the *mission civilisatrice* the French enforced strict standards for the education system, closing all schools that did not meet their requirements, and forcing those that did exist to be completely funded by villagers. With the financial impact of taxation, high rent, and debt, relegating much of the rural masses to dire poverty, very few communities could afford to operate a school.<sup>20</sup> Illuminating this policy's wide-reaching impact is the example of schools operating in Hai Duong province in Tonkin during 1932, where only four out of 109 villages had schools.<sup>21</sup> The rapid decline in school accessibility was devastating to a population that valued education as much as the Vietnamese. As anger towards the colonial administration continued to rise in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the inadequacy of colonial education would become a vital source of propaganda and policy for nationalists seeking to mobilize the peasantry. The French would pay dearly for decades of merciless exploitation.

### **Ho Chi Minh and the Rise of Vietnamese Nationalism**

Born in a rural village deep in the countryside of north central Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, at the time going by his birth name Ngyuen Sinh Cung, had a special understanding of the misery that defined a peasant's existence. Being raised

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 138

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 142.

by a vehemently anti-colonial father, and having witnessed the peasantry's suffering firsthand, Ho developed a hatred of imperialism at an early age. When Ho was a boy his father, a renowned scholar, was offered a position as a Mandarin in the French administration. He refused to accept the powerful post out of protest against French infringement on Vietnamese sovereignty. As a result, he was imprisoned for three years and forced to spend much of his life under house arrest away from Ho and his family.<sup>22</sup>

This formative event in Ho's life put him on a revolutionary path from an early age. When he started school in the imperial capital of Hue, Ho's preexisting anti-colonial views were further strengthened by his interactions with arrogant colonial officials and Mandarins, as well as his experiences with elite classmates who mocked him for being a "country bumpkin." Ho became increasingly outraged by the way Vietnamese elites and French colonists treated average citizens and turned his anger into impassioned activism; in his first official political act he served as an interpreter for peasants protesting high taxes and corruption in 1908.<sup>23</sup> From early in his life it was clear that Ho was a dedicated advocate for the powerless in Vietnamese society.

After spending much of his adulthood abroad, including a significant stay in the Soviet Union where he

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<sup>22</sup> Van Chi Hoang, *From Colonialism to Communism: A case History of North Vietnam* (London: Praeger, 1964), 36.

<sup>23</sup> William J. Duiker, "Ho Chi Minh and the Strategy of People's War," in *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis*, ed. Mark Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 100.

studied communist ideology and revolutionary tactics, in the late 1920's Ho returned to Asia primed to organize and lead a communist movement in Indochina.<sup>24</sup> Settling in the city of Canton China to avoid French police in Vietnam, Ho's primary goal was to establish a broad-based nationalist organization that could defeat French imperialism, while putting forward moderate Marxist reforms.<sup>25</sup> Hoping to encourage unification and increased organization among Vietnamese communists in 1929, Ho wrote the essay "The Communists Must Organize themselves into a Single Party," in which he outlines a peasant-centered Vietnamese communist movement, stating:

**The Communist Party is the avant-garde of the proletariat, and the peasantry is the leader of the proletariat, [therefore] The urgent task of the Communist Party in Vietnam is to lead the ongoing movement of peasants...against the fascist policy of the French imperialists... Poor and middle peasants participate enthusiastically in the agrarian revolution; they must, therefore, be organized throughout the country...[and groomed] into becoming leaders of the masses in the revolution.<sup>26</sup>**

From the earliest stages of the Vietnamese revolution, Ho saw that the best path to independence was through the

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<sup>24</sup> William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2000), 104-105.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 123

<sup>26</sup> Ho Chi Minh, "The Communists Must Organize Themselves into a Single Party (1929)," in *Colonialism Experienced: Vietnamese Writings on Colonialism, 1900-1931*, ed. Troung Buu Lam (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 276-280.

mobilization and empowerment of the peasantry. This has much to do with the fact that coinciding with Ho's return to Asia was a wave of increasing peasant resentment and rebellion in the Vietnamese countryside.

Amidst the global depression in the late 1920's, the dual impact of rapidly falling rice prices and the colonial administration's ever-rising tax burden fostered widespread economic dissatisfaction among the Vietnamese peasantry and working classes.<sup>27</sup> Food riots erupted in rural hamlets, marking "the first time in two decades the Vietnamese peasantry showed the potential to become an active force in the nationalist movement."<sup>28</sup> Understanding these conditions, Ho and his comrades saw an opportunity to capture the political power of the peasants' anger towards colonial rule. In 1930, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) was officially established. Shortly after creating the ICP, Ho created a list of ten reforms the party would enact that clearly aimed to connect the ICP to the liberation of the peasantry.

- 1. To overthrow French Imperialism, feudalism and the Vietnamese Reactionary capitalist class.**
- 2. To make Indochina completely independent.**
- 3. To establish a worker-peasant and soldier government.**

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<sup>27</sup>William J. Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900-1941* (London: Cornell University Press, 1976), 219.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

4. To confiscate the banks and other enterprises belonging to the imperialists and put them under the control of the worker-peasant and soldier government.
5. To confiscate the whole of the plantations and property belonging to the imperialists and the Vietnamese reactionary capitalist class to distribute them to poor peasants.
6. To implement the eight-hour working day.
7. To abolish public loans and poll tax. To waive unjust taxes hitting the poor people.
8. To bring back all freedoms to the masses.
9. To carry out universal education.
10. To implement equality between man and woman.<sup>29</sup>

Ho's proposed reforms addressed the most harmful byproducts of the colonial system on the Vietnamese peasantry, and proved to be very appealing in a time rife with revolutionary fervor. Building on peasant food riots of the late 1920's, ICP agents saw an opportunity to wield discontent to expand their influence. In 1930 communist operatives led large strikes at rubber plantations and industrial factories in Annam and Tonkin, combining demands for economic reform with political revolution. In one instance, over 3000 peasants raided a rubber plantation in north Annam, resulting in mass theft and destruction of property. Peasants and workers throughout the region released prisoners, engaged in looting, rioting, and

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<sup>29</sup> Ho Chi Minh, "Appeal Made On the Occasion of the Founding of the Communist Party of Indochina" in *Ho Chi Minh: On Revolution, Selected Writings, 1920-66*, ed by Bernard R. Fall (New York: Frederick A. Prager, 1967), 127.



destruction, driving local officials away from the villages.<sup>30</sup> The strikes were so widespread that it caused a political showdown in Paris, where opposition parties demanded a detailed investigation into the events.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time that the strikes were engulfing Indochina, the ICP began establishing peasant-led Soviets in rural villages in the Nghe Tinh province of north central Vietnam. The soviets were characterized by communist peasant associations which placed the poorest villagers in charge of local administrative duties. Catapulted into power by economic dissatisfaction, the peasants attempted to take steps towards change by reducing taxes and rent, while redistributing land of the wealthy and returning communal holdings to the poor.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, agitators traveled to different hamlets calling for mass meetings and demanding a relief to poverty and oppression, leading to a rapid expansion of Soviets in the region. The revolution was not without violence, as many landlords and rich peasants were treated with brutality, and in some villages, executions were carried out.<sup>33</sup>

Although the French were able to eventually dismantle the Nghe Tinh revolt through brutal crackdowns, the impact of the events was profound. It was one of the most significant uprisings against French rule during the colonial period and was the first time that a national political

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<sup>30</sup> Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism*, 222.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

party coordinated rural discontent into a widespread organized movement. Although many prominent revolutionaries were killed or imprisoned during the rebellion, leading to a decrease in revolutionary activity during the mid-1930's, the events were instrumental in persuading Ho, Vo Ngyuen Giap, and the rest of the ICP leadership that the key to future success laid in the "untapped potential of the millions of Vietnamese rice farmers."<sup>34</sup>

### **Vo Ngyuen Giap and The Peasant Question**

Vo Ngyuen Giap, Ho's most important political and military partner in the fight for Vietnamese independence, was also drawn to the anti-colonial struggle through personal experience. Like Ho, he intimately understood the struggles of the masses, himself growing up in a middle-class peasant family in central Vietnam. Also like Ho, Giap was deeply influenced by his families anti-colonial activism. Almost all members of his family were dedicated nationalists, and his wife and sister-in law were killed by the French police for their anti-colonial activities. As an avowed communist revolutionary, Giap himself had spent significant time in French prisons subject to torture and brutal living conditions.<sup>35</sup> The violence committed against himself and his family by the French colonial state made Giap one of the

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<sup>34</sup> Dukier, *The Rise of Nationalism*, 219.

<sup>35</sup> Hammer, *Struggle For Indochina*, 97.

most dedicated Vietnamese revolutionaries in the late colonial period.

As global tensions rose in the ascent to World War II, the ICP began increasing their revolutionary activities in Vietnam. After the socialist-leaning Popular Front government came to power in Paris in 1936, significant reforms were made to colonial policy increasing the political freedoms of Vietnamese nationalists. In 1937, ICP agents were sent to rural villages to initiate a mass recruitment campaign in order to boost the party's appeal as a supporter of popular discontent.<sup>36</sup> By 1939, the party's membership increased dramatically from under 10,000 followers to over 40,000.<sup>37</sup> This period brought the ICP to the mainstream of Vietnamese politics and was crucial to building a base of followers for plans of initiating a gradual anti-colonial revolution in the years to come.

At this time of increasing communist activity, Giap, with assistance from his influential ICP colleague Truong Chinh, began a thorough study of the living conditions of Vietnamese peasants leading to the book *The Peasant Question*, which was published in 1938. The book was vital to continuing the party's efforts to mobilize the revolutionary potential of the peasantry and would go on to provide a foundation for Vietminh policies during the First Indochina War. Drawing on the memory of the Nghe Tinh

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<sup>36</sup> William J Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 55.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

revolt, *The Peasant Question* set the stage for a new era of revolution.

Giap and Chinh's work centered on the claim that peasants in colonial Vietnam suffered under the "dual exploitation of colonialism and feudalism."<sup>38</sup> The book shows how grim life in the countryside could be for the majority of the Vietnamese population, while emphasizing the immense economic divisions that were created between the elites and the peasantry as a result of colonial capitalism.

All of these people [the elites and colonists] dance and feast on the sweat and tears of the peasant. The rich live in luxury; competing for wealth and honors made possible by the peasant's labor.... peasants make up 90 percent of the population. This 90 percent works very hard out in the fields for a small number of well-fed, satiated and snobbish people who are indifferent to the miserable and wretched plight of the masses.<sup>39</sup>

Intending to arouse nationalist support for the peasantry, the book advances a radical repudiation of the traditional Vietnamese economic hierarchy. This point of view developed out of an understanding of the effects of colonialism and feudalism on Vietnamese society, and specifically its impact on the rural masses. In describing peasants' economic oppression, Giap writes "Indochinese peasants suffer under many layers of exploitation: rent, high taxes, usury, expensive industrial goods, and oppressive

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<sup>38</sup> Giap and Chinh, *The Peasant Question*, 5.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

village notables...Land has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the landlords.”<sup>40</sup> While a select few were living in luxury, the vast majority of Vietnamese, 90 percent of the population, lived at or near dire poverty. Under the influence of those who understood the political power of the peasants’ economic dissatisfaction, including Giap, Ho, and Chinh, the ICP was the first nationalist group in Vietnam to see the obvious: that no independence movement could be successful without obtaining the broad support of the peasantry.<sup>41</sup>

With this knowledge underpinning *The Peasant Question*, Giap concluded that “Any large social reform must have peasant participation in order to succeed.”<sup>42</sup> He continued in this vein with an impassioned recommendation and warning for the future of the revolutionary movement.

**“The peasants are very worthy of our admiration and respect, whenever they become conscious, are organized and have leadership, they are an invincible force...Peasants comprise a majority of the people and suffer under many layers of oppression and exploitation. Therefore, the peasants have a hidden force, worthy of attention and worthy of respect. We must be aware of all the strengths and weaknesses of peasants, but we absolutely must not underestimate them.”<sup>43</sup>**

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<sup>40</sup> Giap and Chinh, *The Peasant Question*, 19.

<sup>41</sup> Dukier, *Rise of Nationalism*, 289.

<sup>42</sup> Giap and Chinh, *The Peasant Question*, 20.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-41.

Giap's work solidified the ICP's focus on the rural villages as the basis for the coming struggle. As World War II shifted the French government's attention away from its colonies, communist forces in Vietnam were ready to take advantage of the favorable geo-political climate to further their goals of independence and revolution. With Giap serving as the de-facto leader of all revolutionary military forces in the years to come, *The Peasant Question* would come to have a substantial influence on the communists' program of mass peasant mobilization.

### **The Vietminh and the Strategy of 'Peoples War'**

After spending years waiting for the right moment to free Vietnam from the grips of colonialism, the start of World War II in Europe presented the perfect conditions for Ho Chi Minh, Vo Ngyuen Giap, and the ICP to begin the fight for independence. In 1940 while in Southern China, Ho heard news of Nazi Germany's occupation of France and immediately began organizing communist forces to capitalize on the situation.<sup>44</sup> Understanding that France could not adequately protect its colonial assets, Ho wasted no time rallying fellow Vietnamese communist leaders to take action. Ho and his comrades moved to establish the Vietminh (the League for the Independence of Vietnam) in 1941 as a revolutionary guerilla organization whose mission

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<sup>44</sup> Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography*, translated by Claire Duiker (New York: Cambridge Univeristy Press, 2007), 69.

was to drive out the French colonists and achieve broad influence among the Vietnamese population. Ho believed that the Vietminh could create a powerful struggle for national independence by mobilizing the discontent of the peasantry.<sup>45</sup>

The first goal of the Vietminh was to establish a base area to centralize their operations and spread their influence. For their base they chose the mountainous Cao Bang province on Vietnam's northern border, as its geography provided cover from French authorities. Before beginning operations in Cao Bang, at the request of Ho, Giap began studying military tactics under the direction of the Chinese communist Party, rapidly forming a plan to apply Mao Zedong's 'People's War' strategy to Vietnam.<sup>46</sup> By the time Ho and Giap returned to Vietnam to start the initial phases of the revolution, Vietminh operatives had expanded their influence throughout the border villages. However, as the communists continued to grow in numbers, the French became more violent in their response, "Cadres were arrested... houses burned, property confiscated. Many villages and hamlets were razed to the ground. Those arrested who had revolutionary papers on them, were immediately shot, beheaded, or had their arms cut off..."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> William J Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 72-73.

<sup>46</sup> Vo Ngyuen Giap, *The Military Art of People's War*, ed. and trans. Russell Stetler (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 73.

<sup>47</sup> Giap, *Military Art of People's War*, 64.

French violence and harassment against villagers and peasants had the opposite effect of pacification. In many villages subjected to French terror, communist recruit numbers surged. Deep-seated anger for the colonial regime boiled over after seeing one's relatives and friends subject to persecution. As an account from a peasant turned revolutionary shows, by the mid 1940's embitterment over decades of colonialism and economic oppression made it easy for the Vietminh to convince rural inhabitants to join their cause.

**My own family were landless peasants; all they had was a house and a small yard. They were hired labourers, working for landowners...If [the landowners] wanted to grab a peasant's land, they would plant some liquor in his home (the colonial administration had exclusive rights to liquor) and tip off the authorities. The peasant was duly prosecuted and had to sell his plot. That is how my uncle was dispossessed.... in the end my uncles had to sell all they owned to pay for the trial...We had nothing left. In 1945, the young uncle to whom all this had happened was the first person in Quoc Tri to join the [Vietminh] self-defense forces; afterwards the whole family served in the Resistance.<sup>48</sup>**

The Vietminh were well aware that antagonism towards the colonial administration and traditional rural hierarchy were present in nearly every hamlet in the countryside; thus, communist operatives aimed to use the

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<sup>48</sup> Michael H. Hunt, "Peasants in the Red River Delta on Their Reaction to the Viet Minh in the Late 1940's" in *A Vietnam War Reader*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010) 24.



peasants' misery as a tool to promote indoctrination. To take advantage of revolutionary sentiment, Ho and Giap organized "Armed-Propaganda Brigades" that were to become the front lines of the Vietminh's efforts to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese population.<sup>49</sup> Under the leadership of Giap, the propaganda units successfully built up guerilla forces in the border regions by spreading a message of peasant empowerment, and positioning the Vietminh as the political antithesis to French rule.

In villages across Tonkin, Vietminh influence rapidly spread throughout the early 1940s, and in response, Ho and Giap began planning for a nationwide revolution.<sup>50</sup> Having established a necessary base of popular support, in August of 1945 the Vietminh took advantage of their vast political networks to orchestrate the swift establishment of a revolutionary government. With the French still reeling from the Nazi occupation during World War II, the conditions were ideal to assert independence. Alluding to the abuses of the French colonial regime, and signaling a commitment to protecting independence through an armed struggle, on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1945, Ho officially established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) by issuing a Declaration of Independence.

**...for more than eighty years, the French imperialists, abusing the standard of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, have violated our Fatherland and oppressed our fellow-citizens. They have acted contrary to the ideals of humanity and justice. In the field of politics,**

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<sup>49</sup> Giap, *Military Art of People's War*, 69.

<sup>50</sup> Dukier, *Communist Road to Power*, 78.

**they have deprived our people of every democratic liberty... They have mercilessly slain our patriots; they have drowned our uprisings in rivers of blood ...In the field of economics, they have fleeced us to the backbone, impoverished our people, and devastated our land ...The Vietnamese people, animated by a common purpose, are determined to fight to the bitter end against any attempt by the French colonialists to reconquer their country...<sup>51</sup>**

Drawing on the experiences of the Vietnamese masses under colonialism, Ho looked to show the population that his government would do whatever it took to defend the people from a reinstallation of French imperialism. Immediately following the Declaration of Independence, a revitalized campaign to mobilize the masses was unleashed in preparation for war. Ho and Giap knew that hardliners in Paris would not give up their lucrative colony without a fight, and building from Mao's success in China, they began instituting a Vietnamese version of 'People's War.'<sup>52</sup>

At the core of the Vietminh's People's War doctrine was the idea that in order to gain the military support of the masses, it was necessary to appeal to demands for social reform. Understanding the peasantry's frustration with the lack of education in the country, one of the first policy actions initiated by the newly established government was a massive anti-illiteracy campaign. The Vietminh quickly

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<sup>51</sup> Ho Chi Minh, "Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1945," in *Ho Chi Minh: On Revolution, Selected Writings, 1920-66*, ed. Bernard R. Fall (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967), 143-145.

<sup>52</sup> George K. Tanham, *Communist Revolutionary Warfare: The Vietminh in Indochina* (New York: Praeger, 1961), 16.

established a network of schools and educational infrastructure in villages across the country, compelling all Vietnamese to learn how to read no matter their age.<sup>53</sup> At the time over 80 percent of Vietnamese were illiterate, but as a result of the government's aggressive efforts, within five years the illiteracy rate was cut to the single digits, and a permanent school was established in nearly every rural village.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to education reforms, the Vietminh expanded their efforts to win over the population in 1945 through Ho's command that all revolutionary forces were to become inseparable from the Vietnamese population. Each soldier was to be a fighter, laborer, and propogandist. Soldiers and political operatives on recruiting missions were to insert themselves into village life, walking and living among the people to show that the Vietminh were there, above all else, to help and defend the interests of average citizens.<sup>55</sup>

Ho and Giap emphasized that soldiers needed to promote friendship with villagers by showing, through peaceful means, why supporting the Vietminh was in their best interest.<sup>56</sup> This was prioritized because Vietminh leadership believed that in order for the Peoples War

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<sup>53</sup> Hoang, *From Colonialism to Communism*, 68.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> David Halberstam, *Ho*, (New York: Random House, 1971), 93.

<sup>56</sup> David G Marr, "Creating Defense Capacity in Vietnam, 1945-1947," in *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis*, eds. Mark Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 86.

strategy to work, the masses “had to be won for the revolutionary cause to the point not merely of acquiescence but of active participation in the struggle.”<sup>57</sup> It was essential for soldiers to break down traditional barriers between the people and the army by actively helping villagers achieve their political, social, and economic aspirations.<sup>58</sup> To accomplish this, soldiers worked side by side with peasants in the fields, provided children with free educational lessons, and organized days of help to assist villages recovering from floods, droughts and other natural disasters.<sup>59</sup> All of these actions were done to show peasants that the Vietminh were firmly dedicated not only to defending the lives and property of villagers, but also to bettering their future.

As Ho and Giap predicted, on December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1946, the French military arrived in Tonkin with the goal of reasserting colonial rule over Indochina, thus beginning the First Indochina War. Under the stress of fighting against a much technologically superior foe, and with little active support for the revolution in Vietnam's urban centers, in the late 1940's and early 1950's ICP leadership began taking more radical measures to drive up the rural population's backing of the Vietminh.<sup>60</sup> Looking to the peasantry, Giap proposed that the best means to achieve increased support

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<sup>57</sup> Tanham, *Communist Revolutionary Warfare*, 142.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>59</sup> Vo Ngyuen Giap, *Peoples War, People's Army* (New York: Praeger, 1962),35.

<sup>60</sup> Dukier, *Communist Road to Power*, 160.

would be to solve the agrarian inequality that had handicapped the Vietnamese masses for decades.<sup>61</sup>

After deciding that more radical measures were necessary to win the enthusiastic support of the rural poor, the Vietminh leadership coordinated a program of sweeping agrarian reforms aimed at decimating inequalities in land ownership and bringing economic justice to the peasantry. In Giap's *The Military Art of People's War*, he outlines the policies behind the agrarian reforms, which included a reduction in land rents, interests rates, and rural taxes, the confiscation of land from colonists and disloyal Vietnamese landlords, and an equitable distribution of communal land and rice fields to the poor.<sup>62</sup> According to Vietminh sources, by making the peasants "the masters of the countryside" the reforms had a substantial psychological impact on the Vietnamese rural masses, creating a newfound revolutionary zeal that facilitated their mobilization to the revolutionary cause for the remainder of the war, and was instrumental in driving the Vietminh to victory.<sup>63</sup>

By addressing agrarian inequality, many peasants joined the Vietminh believing that a communist victory in the war would lead to a more stable economic future. After having suffered under the yoke of feudalism and imperialism for decades, the promise of land and a better life proved to be a powerful recruiting method, bringing tens of

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<sup>61</sup> Hoang, *From Colonialism to Communism*, 71.

<sup>62</sup> Giap, *Military Art of People's War*, 95-96.

<sup>63</sup> Dukier, *Communist Road to Power*, 162.

thousands of volunteer soldiers to the Vietminh side.<sup>64</sup> In Giap's calculations, the rising numbers of peasant recruits helped tip the war in the Vietminh's advantage. This emboldened him to launch the final stage of his People's War strategy; the general offensive to defeat French forces.<sup>65</sup> In a culmination of the Vietminh's strategy of rural revolution, Giap mobilized over 64,000 peasant-soldiers and successfully launched the famous Vietminh assault on Dien Bien Phu, ultimately leading to the liberation of Vietnam from French rule.

## Conclusion

With the vast majority of the Vietnamese population living in rural villages, in order to succeed in the struggle for independence the Vietminh had to mobilize the peasantry. Fortunately for them, Vo Ngyuen Giap and Ho Chi Minh had personal experience with colonial oppression. This made them well aware of the negative impact French rule had on Vietnamese society, and therefore they could easily relate to the struggles of the masses. Using this knowledge to put forth policies that intertwined the fight for political independence from France with the economic and social liberation of the peasantry from generational poverty, Ho and Giap attracted a substantial portion of the rural population to the fight for independence. As this proved to be a decisive factor in securing the Vietminh's victory in

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<sup>64</sup> Giap, *Military Art of People's War*, 89-90.

<sup>65</sup> Dukier, "Ho Chi Minh and The Strategy of Peoples War," 152.

1954, it established a blueprint for the Vietnamese fight against the Americans in the decades to follow.

Founded on the legacy of the Vietminh, the National Liberation Front employed the tactics of Giap's 'People's War' in South Vietnam to gain the support of the rural masses. Just as the Vietminh had done with the French in the First Indochina War, the NLF connected peasant poverty to the struggle against the Americans by promoting the twin goals of anti-imperialism and economic equality. The strategy of mobilizing the peasantry established by Ho and Giap was essential to propelling the Vietnamese to two improbable military victories over Western powers, and thus played a profound role in shaping some of the most important geopolitical events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, while these globally significant developments ensued, to the Vietnamese people Ho and Giap's leadership, above all else, forged a path to freedom. The rural revolution they started led to the defeat of colonialism in Southeast Asia, and the liberation of millions from decades of foreign oppression.