

Life in Nazi Germany 1933-9

Workers and work



When Hitler came to power in 1933, six million Germans were unemployed. His most important task was to find them jobs. During the election he had promised voters 'work and bread' if he ever became leader.

Reichsarbeitsdienst (RAD)

Hitler's first action was to set up a National Labour Service. This organisation gave men jobs in public works schemes. These were jobs such as digging drainage ditches on farms, planting new forests, or building schools and hospitals. The biggest public works scheme was the construction of a network of motorways. Men in the RAD had to wear military uniform, live in camps and were only given pocket money as wages. But for many thousands of men that was better than life with no job - they got free meals and were made to feel proud as they were helping build Hitler's new Germany.

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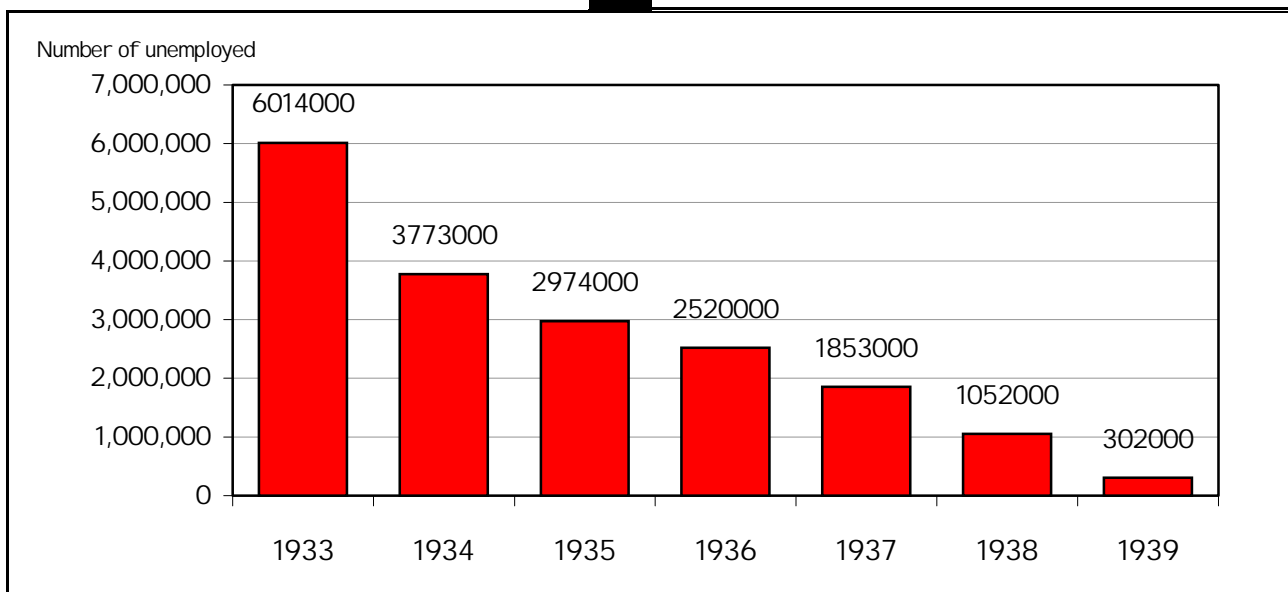
Nazi Propaganda poster for the Reichsarbeitsdienst (National Labour Service)

The attack on unemployment

The results of Hitler's attack on unemployment look very impressive at first sight:

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Unemployment in Germany 1933 to 1939



Yet the drop in unemployment was not all due to the creation of new jobs. Soon after the Nazis came to power many Jews and women were forced out of their jobs. Although their jobs were given to unemployed people, the names of the Jews or women who became unemployed were not recorded on the unemployment registers! Thus the figures do not tell the whole story.

The most important reason for the fall in unemployment during these years was rearmament. Hitler planned to make Germany a strong and independent country. To do this he needed to build up the size and strength of the army.

In March 1935 he started compulsory military service for young men, and set up an air force. The army quickly grew from 100,000 in 1933 to 1,400,000 men in 1939. More men in the army meant 1,300,000 less unemployed. To equip this new army 46 billion marks was spent on weapons and equipment. Thus thousands more were given work creating the tools of war.

As Hitler wanted an independent Germany, he had to make the country self-sufficient in food and materials. He ordered Germany's scientists to find artificial substitutes for food and materials imported from other countries. They quickly developed all sorts of substitutes: wool and cotton from pulped wood, make-up from flour, coffee from acorns and so on. As all these things could be made in Germany, many unemployed found work in new industries.

The German Labour Front

Within months of coming to power, Hitler abolished trade unions. The 'German Labour Front' took their place. It was run by Dr. Robert Ley - he claimed that he understood workers and would

Dr. Robert Ley

“ ...not only keep everything which exists ... [but also] ... build up the rights and protection of workers even further.”

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There *were* some improvements for workers - bosses were not allowed to sack workers on the spot. However, workers were also banned from leaving a job without the government's permission and only a few government run labour exchanges (job centres) could arrange new jobs.

Even worse than this, Dr Ley abolished the right of workers to bargain for higher wages and he made strikes illegal. He also removed the restriction on the number of hours a person could be made to work. By 1939 many Germans found themselves working 60 - 72 hours a week.

Not many complained though. This was not just because they were afraid of what might happen if they did complain. By 1936 the average factory worker was earning 35 marks a week - ten times more than the dole money which six million people were receiving in 1932.



From the BBC History website - www.bbc.co.uk/history

“ Men were forced to go into the Labour Service at the age of eighteen. This lasted for six months and was one of the methods that the Nazis used to cut unemployment. In the Labour Service men worked building roads, digging ditches and reclaiming land. Most of the work was manual. This meant that they toughened up for the army. They lived in camps and marched to work every morning. They were only paid about 50 pence a week, but meals and accommodation were provided.

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GLOSSARY

Rearmament - building up your armed forces, constructing materials needed for war.

Independent - able to look after yourself, not needing any help.

Self-sufficient - having everything that is needed, not requiring any imports.

Trade Union - organisation of workers to demand rights for workers.