

# *Into the Darkness: An Uncensored Report from Inside the Third Reich at War*

by Lothrop Stoddard



1940

## **Chapter 14: Behind the Winter-Help**

As the damp chill of the north European autumn deepens into dark, cold winter, there appear increasingly the manifold activities of the *Winterhilfe* — in plain English, the *Winter-Help*. Once a fortnight, every city, town, and village in the Reich seethes with brown-shirted Storm Troopers carrying red-painted cannisters. These are the *Winter-Help* collection-boxes. The Brown-Shirts go everywhere. You cannot sit in a restaurant or beer-hall but what, sooner or later, a pair of them will work through the place, rattling their cannisters ostentatiously in the faces of customers. And I never saw a German formally refuse to drop in his mite, even though the contribution might have been less than the equivalent of one American cent.

During these periodic money-raising campaigns, all sorts of dodges are employed. On busy street-corners comedians, singers, musicians,

sailors, gather a crowd by some amusing skit, at the close of which the Brown-Shirts collect. People buy tiny badges to show they have contributed — badges good only for that particular campaign. One time they may be an artificial flower; next time a miniature dagger, and so forth. The Winter-Help campaign series reaches its climax shortly before Christmas in the so-called *Day of National Solidarity*. On that notable occasion the Big Guns of the Nazi Party sally forth with their collection boxes to do their bit. I am told that it is considered quite an honor to drop an offering into the cannister wielded by so redoubtable a personage as, say, Hermann Goering.

These collection-box campaigns have been going on every winter since the Nazis came to power. So has another picturesque feature — the *Winter-Help Lottery*.

The sale of these lottery tickets is not restricted to certain periods; it goes on continuously through the entire autumn and winter season. They are sold by men in rather attractive uniforms with red-banded caps and dove-gray capes. Like the Brown-Shirts, these lottery-vendors cover every public place, even the best hotels.

The tickets are enclosed in tightly sealed orange envelopes stacked in rows on a little tray. The vendor approaches you, salutes politely, and offers his wares. Should you wish to buy, you pick an envelope at random and pay him fifty pfennigs — half a Reichsmark, which is worth somewhat over ten cents. Unlike his Brown-Shirt colleagues, the vendor is not insistent and the public does not feel constrained to buy.

There's a good feature about this *Winter-Help Lottery* — you know right away if you haven't won. So purchasers promptly tear open the envelope and take out their folded ticket. Nearly always they are confronted with a large blue *Nicht*, which means "No" and shows they haven't a chance. Needless to say, that's what I drew when I tried my luck. But plenty of persons seem to play the lottery often. In gay

restaurants it's quite a game for a whole group of diners to buy envelopes and greet each loser with peals of laughter — the vendor standing by and enjoying the fun.

However, buyers aren't always losers. In the first place, out of the 6,000,000 tickets which form a series there are nearly 350,000 which carry small prizes called "*premiums*" ranging from 1 to 100 Marks. These minor premiums are paid by the vendor on the spot. Above these come the "*prizes*," which range all the way up to a 5,000-Mark Grand Prize. However, those prizes are not paid offhand. What you get is the right to a prize-winning number in the lottery drawing which will be held three months hence. The prizes and premiums total an even 1,000,000 Marks. The cost of the tickets is 3,000,000 Marks. Since the lottery vendors are all volunteer workers who give their services and get no commission, the net "*take*" of the Winter-Help from several lottery-series sold during the season totals a handsome sum.

Still other money-making devices exist, the best-known of them being the *One-Dish Plan*. Each month during the autumn and winter a certain Sunday is set apart as the sacrificial day. On that Sunday, every patriotic German is supposed to contribute to the *Winter-Help* the cash difference between the cost of a normal Sunday dinner and that of a single-course meal. In all public eating places nothing else is served during the noon hours, so foreigners also must comply. The cost is trifling for the meal itself, but I should hate to have it as a steady diet, consisting as it does of a plateful of stewed onions, cabbage, and potatoes, graced by a lone miniature meat-ball compounded of the cheapest grade of hamburger. In private homes families are not legally compelled to restrict themselves to one-course meals. They can actually eat as they choose. But they are practically compelled to contribute their cash offering in any case. A Brown-Shirt always appears at the door, and the offering is assessed on tariff-rates proportionate to the family's social status and known living-standards.

The foreigner doesn't learn that last item unless he happens to have German friends who tell him things. All he usually knows about is the box-collections, the lottery vendors, and the sad experience of a one-dish lunch in a restaurant or hotel. He may learn that annual contributions to the *Winter-Help* average well over 400,000,000 Reichsmarks — nearly \$200,000,000 at the official rate of exchange. The foreigner may marvel that so prodigious a sum could be raised by the methods he has observed. As a matter of fact, it isn't. Most of the money comes in through a carefully worked-out schedule of contributions assessed on corporations, business firms, and individuals from the wealthiest down to all but the poorest peasants and laborers.

Your Nazi acquaintances probably won't mention this to you. If they do, they will almost certainly tell you these are merely patriotic suggestions for voluntary contributions, properly graded. Technically, they are telling the truth, since *Winter-Help* offerings are legally “voluntary.” In the first days of the Nazi regime, quite a few persons took this literally and refused to contribute. That, however, was likely to be followed by unpleasant consequences; so prescribed sharing has become well-nigh universal.

Here, again, we encounter what I have already stated to be a cardinal aspect of Nazi Germany — the fact that what the foreigner sees and casually learns may be only a slight indication of what goes on behind the scenes.

So much for the way *Winter-Help* funds are raised. How are they spent? That is a controversial point. Nazis assure you that these huge sums are efficiently managed and all go for the purposes intended by the donors. They point out that most of the work is done by unpaid volunteers, so the administrative overhead should be small. This may be true, but there is no way of checking such assertions because no detailed, audited balance-sheets are published. Some foreign observers tell you that *Winter-Help* funds have been diverted to other purposes,

much as the still vaster *Labor Front* funds are presumed to have been, according to some assertions by foreign critics of the Nazi regime.

I do not know where the truth lies in this matter, so I merely raise the point in order to make a balanced picture. From what I actually saw and learned, it seems to me that much of the *Winter-Help* funds is actually spent on the poor and needy, and that the institution does a lot of good in many ways. So let us take a look at the *Winter-Help* to see what it is, how it works, and what it accomplishes.

The *Winter-Help* began in the autumn of 1933 — the first year of the Nazi regime. It was a terrible time, with over 7,000,000 registered unemployed and 17,000,000 in dire need. This latter figure included both unemployed and unemployables, especially the aged and the very young. The previous winter, the last under the Weimar Republic, had been grim. The Government dole had, to be sure, enabled the poor to keep body and soul together, but that was about all; and the outlook for the coming winter was equally gloomy.

Then the Fuehrer spoke. His word was: “*No one shall suffer from hunger and cold!*” So Hitler announced a new organization, run by the Party, to be known as the *Winter-Help*. It was not a substitute for Government aid; it was an addition to that aid, designed to bridge the gap between the low minimum of State charity and a somewhat more tolerable standard of life. The aim was to provide coal and garments sufficient to keep a household fairly warm and decently clothed; to supply a bit more food; to distribute Christmas dinners, trees, and children’s toys at the beloved Yuletide. It even promised to step in and relieve unexpected accidents and misfortunes for which the victims were in no wise to blame.

That very first season, the *Winter-Help* “*delivered the goods.*” The Party got behind it to the last man, woman, and child. Over a million volunteer workers donated their services. Vast amounts of food, fuel, and clothing were mobilized and distributed. The hearts of the poor

were cheered — and warmed towards the new regime. That was the intention; for the *Winter-Help* was officially described as:

*“The instrument which enables us to make the most comprehensive appeal to the spirit of national solidarity.”*

In short, an extremely effective form of domestic propaganda.

The more I studied the *Winter-Help*, the more it appeared to me as an amazing cross between the Salvation Army and Tammany Hall. It would be unfair to put down the whole business as just cold-blooded politics. All the good-will mobilized, the unselfish effort donated, the goods distributed to deserving persons — those things are real, no matter what the attendant political motive. Think what it means to numberless “*forgotten men*” — and women, to be thereby lifted a bit above the squalor line; to have their drab lives unexpectedly brightened, especially at Christmas time. Perhaps all the poor do not share equally in those benefits; perhaps good Party members get the best of what’s going, while ex-Communists are often overlooked. Nevertheless, so many poor people get something that the effect on popular feeling is great and cumulative. And the tendency must be toward winning the good-will of the populace for the Nazi regime. It is the little things that count in getting and holding popular favor. Tammany in New York learned that long ago; and the Nazis are as clever and far more efficient than Tammany ever dreamed of being.

What we may term the Tammany-Salvation-Army technique comes out in everything the *Winter Help* does. Picture to yourselves a typical case. A *Winter-Help* volunteer enters a sordid tenement dwelling in the poorest section of Berlin’s East End. He or she brings the family a basket of food, a packet of clothing, a tiny Christmas tree, or fuel tickets good at the nearest coal-dealer’s. “*Good morning!*” is the cheery opening. “*I bring you this with the Fuehrer’s Greetings!*” Then comes a bit of friendly chat. On leaving, the visitor extends an arm in salute with the inevitable: *Heil Hitler!* Is it not well-nigh inevitable

that the answering “*Heil*” comes spontaneously from grateful hearts? Such is the *Winter-Help* and what it signifies. Now let us go on to consider the even larger social-service organization of which the *Winter-Help* is itself organically a part.

This vast institution bears the appalling title of *Nationalsozialistischevolkswohlfahrt!* Broken down into plain English, that Teutonic jawbreaker means *National Socialist People’s Welfare*. It’s even too much for the Germans, so they always speak of it as *NSV*.

*NSV*, though essentially a Party enterprise, is technically a voluntary organization supported by nearly 11,000,000 members who pay dues with a minimum of one Reichsmark per month. It has over 1,000,000 active workers, of whom only about 20,000 are paid, these being trained social-service specialists in various lines. The vast majority of *NSV* workers contribute their spare time, and they do it generously — many of them as much as three hours per day. Like everything else in Nazi Germany, *NSV* is elaborately organized from a supreme head-center in Berlin down through regional, provincial, and local sub-centers until it reaches the ultimate unit — the so-called “*block*” of forty or fifty families. There can be no doubt that *NSV* is generally popular; otherwise it would be difficult to conceive of 11,000,000 persons paying regular dues and over 1,000,000 contributing so generously of their time the year round. Mere compulsion could not bring that about. What, then, is the reason? The answer to that query involves an understanding of a social set-up and attitude toward life which is radically different from ours. First of all we should realize that *NSV*, like its *Winter-Help* affiliate, is not a substitute for Governmental assistance to the poor and needy. In Germany, total destitution has long been rare, thanks to the system of social welfare begun under the old Empire more than half a century ago, and extended under both the Weimar Republic and the present Nazi regime. Most Germans are thus legally protected against dire poverty and downright starvation. *NSV* supplements State aid in various ways.

And it does so, not in our sense of “*charity*,” but as a duty which the socialized nation, the almost mystical *Gemeinschaft*, owes to each of its members.

Another important point to be understood is that, despite all the assistance which it gives to the poor and weak, *NSV* is even more interested in helping the fit and strong to be fitter and stronger. It seeks to energize the individual by making him constantly feel that he is organically part of the whole nation, and that he literally has the whole nation behind him — so long as he in turn does his duty and seeks to serve the nation of which he is an integral part.

In the Nazi social-service system, the *Winter-Help* has specialized functions. It is concerned chiefly with the relief of temporary difficulties and transient weaknesses or breakdowns of morale. *NSV* takes care of the long pull and deals with social problems which are solvable only in the remote future.

One of the axioms of National Socialism is that the family, rather than the individual, is the true unit of society. For this reason, *NSV* tries in various ways to integrate individuals into healthy, prosperous, fruitful families. Hence its special efforts for the welfare of mothers and children. Its largest and most important section is that known as *Mutter und Kind*. The size of this special organization can be visualized when we learn that it has some 26,000 offices covering every part of the Reich, with medical staffs and assisted by about 230,000 matrons of homes, kindergarten governesses, communal sisters, and nurses. Their activities are manifold, though their aim is not clinical; rather is it investigative and educational. *Mother-and-Child* stations are neither hospitals nor sanatoria. When bad conditions are detected, they are turned over to hospitals or State charities. But mothers by the million have visited these stations, or station agents have visited mothers in their homes. For instance, all infants up to the age of two years are medically examined and the parents are given advice as to proper care and feeding. Through affiliated organizations,

the stations complete their preventive and educational work by enabling mothers and children most in need to have special care, take vacations, go to kindergartens, and so forth.

A striking instance of the meticulous way in which *NSV* seeks to foster the public health is its special subsection called *Bettenaktion*. Medical research has established the fact that nothing is more important to health and personal efficiency than good, restful sleep. Subsection “*Bed-Action*” sees to it that each individual has his own bed — and a comfortable, sanitary one, at that. In the past few years, it is officially stated that fully 1,000,000 beds have been distributed free of charge to persons unable to pay for them.

Another important field of service is the raising to normal status of distressed or depressed areas. Certain remote regions, such as the mountainous districts of Lower Bavaria and the Eiffel hill-country in the Rhineland, were chronically impoverished and unable to improve their condition out of their own meager resources. *NSV* pours aid of all kinds into these abnormal districts until today, according to official accounts, some of them have been quite transformed.

Like the other quasi-public institutions of the Third Reich, *NSV* gets out a tremendous volume of educative literature about its own activities. Booklets, pamphlets, illustrated sheets, and small charts are printed and distributed wholesale to the general public, either free or at very slight expense. Its Berlin headquarters maintains a permanent exhibition including large illuminated wall-maps, colored charts, miniature models, and a stereopticon lecture lasting nearly an hour. Its foreign relations representative, Erich Haasemann showed me through, explained in detail, and invited me to visit some of its Berlin activities. The most interesting of these was its distribution center, which I visited next morning.

This center is housed in a rambling old building several stories high in the market district near Alexanderplatz. It is thus handy to the working-class quarters.

Here needy persons come with their distribution-certificates — a sort of chit enabling them to get required articles, both clothing and furniture. They get these chits on recommendation from their Blokwart, the official who looks after each block of forty families. Incidentally, there are nearly 450,000 such units in Greater Berlin.

The Blokwart makes it his business to know intimately the circumstances of each family in his unit. He visits them frequently in their homes, and to him they make known their troubles and requests for aid. Here is how it works: an outdoor laborer needs a new sheepskin-lined jacket. He shows his old one to the Blokwart, who sees it is no longer serviceable. *“That’s right,”* says the Blokwart,

*“you’ve got to have a new jacket if you’re going to be efficient on that job of yours these cold winter days. For you to get sick and perhaps land in the hospital would be bad business for the nation. So here you are. Go and pick one out at the center tomorrow after working hours.”*

Down goes our working man, presents his chit, and is shown to the proper department, where hundreds of jackets, of all sizes, hang on long racks. Like all lines, they are in somewhat different styles and in diverse colors. This is to avoid uniformity in appearance. That aids morale by satisfying personal tastes and heightening the wearer’s self-respect. If all *NSV* recipients were dressed alike, they would have a depressingly *“institutional”* look. It is really extraordinary how such psychological factors have been carefully thought out! I roamed around that warehouse for an hour, looking at huge stocks of everything from clothes and shoes to beds and baby-carriages. Everything seemed to be of good quality, well-made, and of surprisingly tasteful appearance. I was asked to note that there were

full lines of everything, including even the most unusual “*out sizes*” which might not even be made commercially, much less carried in ordinary store stocks. For instance, I was shown a pair of boots so huge that it did not seem possible a human being could have such big feet. Nevertheless, I was told that a few did exist. Those persons were known. So *NSV* was prepared for them.

*NSV* does not manufacture its own supplies. They are bought in the open market, but they must be made by local manufacturers. Prices are thus not strictly competitive — at least, on a national scale. The idea is to spread work and keep local money at home.

These are only the high-lights of a subject with many ramifications. However, they may suffice to give a general idea of the importance of *NSV* in the Nazi scheme of things and in its hold upon the people. Such social services tend to win popular support for the Nazi regime and reconcile the masses to conditions which otherwise might breed discontent and even revolutionary unrest.

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# Version History

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