

INTRODUCTION



When the Allied troops occupied Germany in 1945, Nazi symbols were abolished throughout the former Third Reich. The almost ubiquitous Hitler Streets (Hitler-Straßen) were given new names. Wherever the symbolic break with the Third Reich did not take hold in the local population, the occupation forces were there to step in.¹ In the small, French-occupied manufacturing town of Trossingen, Württemberg (located between the Black Forest and the Swabian Alps), the street names were changed on 1 May 1945. But here, along with Adolf Hitler Street, Fritz Kiehn Street had to go as well. The former Karl Street had been given its new name in October 1933 to commemorate the great service that Fritz Kiehn, the owner of the Efka factory, had rendered to the NSDAP, or German Nazi Party, during the *Kampfzeit*, or time of struggle, i.e. before 1933. After the Nazis had seized power in January 1933, Kiehn became “one of the most active members” of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP), who to contemporaries such as the postwar Minister-President of Baden-Württemberg Gebhard Müller was “potentially deeply convinced” of Nazi ideology.² Through money, relationships, and no small amount of his time, Kiehn had supported National Socialism in the region prior to 1933 and had received positions and symbolic capital from the regime in return. He was celebrated as a “leader of the Württemberg economy,” and his fellow citizens saw Kiehn as the “king of Trossingen” who was happy to hold court. Anyone would do well to be in his good graces. In 1935, the city of Trossingen made Kiehn an honored citizen (*Ehrenbürger*), a distinction that he shared with the Führer as well as his Gauleiter Wilhelm Murr, who was Württemberg’s highest party leader.

This distinction too became obsolete in 1945, long before Kiehn, who had enriched himself at the expense of various Jewish businesses, became the last prisoner of the French occupation zone of Württemberg to be freed from detention and declared a “Lesser Offender” (*Minderbelasteter*) by the denazification court (*Spruchkammer*). Although his denazification proceedings and other court proceedings had laid bare Kiehn’s deep involvement in Nazi injustices,

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he rehabilitated himself in stealthy fashion. The further that the shock of losing the war and the collapse of the Nazi regime lay behind them, the more clearly the manufacturer mutated for many of his fellow citizens into a rescuer of the regional economy, one who had faced ostensibly wrongful political persecution and who deserved their loyal support against the criticism from outside the local milieu. His visible position during the Third Reich meant as little to Fritz Kiehn as it did to most of the Nazi offenders. Those who came from the middle class in particular emerged largely unscathed, retained their social capital, and in most cases were able to continue their professional trajectories. Kiehn's career in business was far from over in 1949, when he resumed management of his company at sixty-three, especially since the industrialist continued to prove himself a generous employer and sponsor. By 1955, the Trossingen local council had informally allowed Kiehn's honorary citizenship to be revived, and in 1957 they named a large sports hall after him. In 1960, a street was named after Kiehn once again, when a centrally located square in the city was dedicated to him in honor of his seventy-fifth birthday. In the 1960s and 1970s, he could thus take pleasure and satisfaction in looking back on his life's work. Even if Trossingen was known for manufacturing musical instruments and the social fabric of the city was completely dominated by the long-established Hohner manufacturing family,³ Kiehn too had been given honorary titles and distinctions as a patron of sports, music, and science. His birthdays began to be marked by public ceremony again, with visits from federal and regional political representatives. The speakers on such occasions would acknowledge Kiehn as one of the "most outstanding industrialists in the land." He was celebrated as a man with a "golden heart" who never failed to "let the people around him take part in his ascent as well."⁴

The speakers would gloss over the fact that Kiehn's ascent to his place of honor in the Federal Republic had not been the smoothest. But the Efka factory owner himself made no secret of this, as a *Festschrift* Kiehn commissioned in 1958 gravely puts it: "Once, in 1945, he seemed to face complete ruin." Yet this look back, which fashions the political upheaval of 1945 into a fateful natural phenomenon, leads contentedly into the declaration that, "when after the war the inevitable loomed ... Fritz Kiehn, despite all resistance, found his way back to the pinnacle he deserved. He strode through the muddle, upright and unbroken."⁵

Kiehn had come from very modest beginnings, growing up in a Protestant civil servant's household where there was not enough money for the numerous children to go on to higher education. His business career — shaped in equal measure by his social ambitions, appetite for risk, luck, and hard work — began when he married up into a well-to-do Trossingen family. He arrived in 1908 as an "elegant nobody,"⁶ a simple traveling salesman in fine patent-leather shoes who carried a small trunk and had to tramp through the rainy, manure-covered streets of the village to find the local inn where he was staying. Fifteen years later,

to general astonishment, he was moving his young family into one of the largest villas in the area and acquiring expensive hobbies.

It was obvious to everyone that Kiehn's lavish lifestyle fed his symbolic conflict with the more established small-town industrialists. But these notables, who had grown up in the Pietist tradition, had already disqualified the social climber for his pretentious manner. The brusque rejection Kiehn experienced at the hands of the leading society figures was another factor in his receptiveness to the early 1930s trend toward radicalization, despite his economic successes.

Kiehn quickly rose to the helm of the local Trossingen NSDAP group, and soon thereafter to Tuttlingen district leader, even becoming part of the Nazi faction in the Reichstag in 1932 and thus compensating for the social recognition he had missed out on before. The high point of Kiehn's career was doubtless during the "Thousand-Year Reich" of the Nazis, during which he not only attained influential positions in the region but also acquired important-sounding titles such as *Wehrwirtschaftsführer* (military industrial leader) and access to Himmler's personal staff as well as to the *Freundeskreis Reichsführer-SS* (Circle of Friends of the Reichsführer-SS). There he enjoyed the company of high-ranking SS (*Schutzstaffel*) functionaries and some of the most important industrialists and bankers in the Third Reich. As a card-carrying Nazi industrialist and unscrupulous Aryanizer who was willing to take risks, the Kiehn of the Third Reich appeared to have managed the transition to the big leagues.

His politically grounded position as "province leader" and regional economic functionary gave the middle-class executive wholly new opportunities for pointed self-expression after 1933,⁷ when the Führer cult around Adolf Hitler and the invocation of the "national community" (*Volksgemeinschaft*) fit right into the staging of patriarchal "industrial leader" Kiehn, his "model Nazi family," and the "factory community" (*Betriebsgemeinschaft*). The propaganda methods typical of the regime, the constant emphasis on social harmony that accompanied these in the local context, and the "beautiful façade of the Third Reich"⁸ manifested in the seas of banners and marching columns became the ideal means for Kiehn's social self-affirmation.⁹ The new political culture accommodated both his personal leanings and the prevailing style of small-town society. The provincial town flourished as a *Volksgemeinschaft* at the same time that it basked in the glory of its ostensibly distinguished *Wirtschaftsführer* (economic leader).

A characteristic feature of Fritz Kiehn's life was the constant intertwining of local and "high" politics, of personal business interests and economic principles of the regime, of family matters and social calculations. This multifacetedness is just one of the reasons it is worthwhile to examine his biography. Beyond the purely biographical interest in him as a character, engaging with the life of this middle-class industrialist, local political leader, and Nazi "business leader" yields complex insights into the internal system of Nazi leadership and Nazi daily life in the province, a subject that few ambitious analytical microstudies have addressed.¹⁰

Kiehn's biography is the story of a social climber who managed to defend his hard-won position in the bourgeoisie through all of the political caesuras of the twentieth century. The common thread of his story is a struggle for social recognition independent of political systems. In other words, it describes the way that one businessman who grew up in the German Empire spent his entire life wrestling to improve his reputation in the patriarchally structured small-town cosmos of Württemberg. Our microhistorical approach not only allows us to portray Kiehn's contradictory path through life; it also helps us to answer general questions about continuities and breaches in twentieth-century German history. Kiehn's biography only becomes understandable within the context of his local realm of impact and experience. Yet its importance goes beyond local history. For example, his career clarifies the link between "the social motivation and Führer bond in National Socialism" that Martin Broszat pointed out decades ago and gives insight into the functioning, contradictions, and long-term effects of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft*.¹¹

As a local political leader, Kiehn belonged to a group that served as a hinge between political leadership and the *Volksgemeinschaft* and was among the most important supports of the Nazi state after 1933.¹² These "province leaders" had a substantial influence on the functioning of the Nazi regime, yet few biographical or sociohistorical studies of them exist.¹³ Kiehn's life as a Nazi functionary traces the political ups and downs of an "old fighter" (*alter Kämpfer*) beyond his term in office. He built himself a career as a representative of the *Mittelstand* industry of small and midsized companies, using the politically realigned structure of Nazi chambers of industry and trade, as well as professional associations, to make it to the top as a regional business leader. We know relatively little about the regional political elites in general, and even less about the role of economic elites in the various associations of the Third Reich. Scholarly studies of the behavior of *Mittelstand* businessmen within the polycratic jungle of the Nazi regime have only been carried out for a few firms and sectors.¹⁴

Until now, research has practically overlooked this group, which is not insignificant in size, and concentrated on big business on the one hand and the old *Mittelstand* of independent artisans, retailers, and peasants on the other. These groups not only exhibit extreme differences from one another, they also possess few commonalities with the industrial middle class, which still represents the majority of German business owners today and continues to have a particularly strong presence in southwest Germany.

Owners of small companies who offered their services as economic functionaries to the regime after 1933 in the same way as Kiehn and his colleagues Hans Kehrl, Paul Pleiger, and Wilhelm Keppler (whom Paul Erker has described as "card-carrying [Nazi] industrialists" for their intent to bypass the established economic elites with the help of the Nazi economic system) occupied a special position in the *Mittelstand* economy.¹⁵ Their role in economic policy has also

been reasonably well studied. Young, ambitious members of the *Mittelstand* (such as mechanical engineering entrepreneur Paul Pleiger [1899–1985] and textile manufacturer Hans Kehrl [1900–1984]), who, as regional economic functionaries, had put themselves forward for higher commissions, were tremendously important to the Nazi state: they combined ideological dependability, unscrupulous striving, and an expert understanding of economic and technological issues with antipathy toward the traditional bourgeoisie. As head of the Reichswerke Hermann Göring, Pleiger managed the largest industrial group in Europe during the war and on repeated occasions would emphatically defy the interests of Ruhr-area industry. The motto of Kehrl, himself the son of an industrialist, was “throw the old bums out”;¹⁶ Kehrl ruthlessly pursued the use of synthetic materials in the textile industry and rose to become the leading organizer of the German war economy under Albert Speer in 1943. Wilhelm Keppler (1882–1960) is another prominent but significantly older member of the *Mittelstand* within the Office of the Four-Year Plan worth mentioning. Keppler was a partner in a small chemical factory who had already been declared a “Special Representative of the Führer on Economic Issues” by 1933 and a “Special Commissioner for German Raw and Processed Materials” by 1934.¹⁷ Kiehn did possess contacts to Keppler and Kehrl, but unlike them he did not push his way to the higher echelons of the regime. His arena remained the regional level. In other regions as well numerous small business owners functioned as political leaders alongside other groups. We still know almost nothing of the work and lives of these functionaries.

Despite his regional focus as a business owner and Nazi functionary, Kiehn repeatedly came into contact with “high politics.” He moved in circles that included top Nazi leaders: his social and political ambitions had made him a generous donor who successfully deployed his financial resources to establish connections to important party and SS representatives. Kiehn’s network of high-ranking contacts changed as a result of internal party disputes that the manufacturer became caught up in several times beginning in 1933. Invariably, however, he was able to secure backing from one or another influential clique within the Hitler state.

Kiehn’s biography illustrates the polycratic clash of jurisdictions between rival groups and institutions that was particularly pronounced in Württemberg. It also sheds light on the background of the murder of Hermann Mattheiß, who in Württemberg in 1934 became the sole victim of the purge carried out by the SS and party leaders against the SA (Sturmabteilung). What’s more, Kiehn’s life story provides new insight into the run-up to the alleged suicide of his political ally, Gregor Straßer.

Kiehn’s ascent after 1933 also shows the extent to which corruption, party loyalty, and nepotism were fundamental structural characteristics of the *Führerstaat*, not least when it came to eliminating Jews from the economy. Here the tightening of legal norms went hand in hand with radicalization, because regional forces

diligently “worked toward the Führer.”¹⁸ Newly accessible sources have made the nature of the special interest-driven “bureaucratic execution” of the Nazi “race project” even more apparent than when the German edition of this book was published, as well as to what degree largely indifferent actors were complicit in the running of the regime. The case of Kiehn and his competitor, Gustav Schickedanz, who owned a mail-order firm and a brewing concern, underlines this phenomenon and highlights the terrible practice of Aryanization: apart from both being “old fighters,” the two of them did not behave like radical anti-Semites aiming to exterminate the Jews, yet nonetheless (and to the great detriment of Jewish victims) they engaged in a ruthless contest to Aryanize the economy.¹⁹

Exploring this theme through biography provides a focus on the victims—as well as the perpetrators, long neglected in the literature. Individuals materialize behind the abstract term of “Aryanization”: on one side, Jewish business owners who saw the basis of their livelihoods brutally destroyed, and on the other, their adversaries, who with a mixture of “initiative,” profit-driven greed, and pseudo-legal formalism made resolute use of the opportunities to enrich themselves that the Nazi regime offered. In Kiehn’s case, the business and political dimensions, the social and the everyday intermingled in an inextricable tangle. This *mélange* is characteristic of Kiehn’s career as well as of the mechanics of the Nazi regime. This is why Kiehn’s biography must not be reduced to his economic and political impact. The social and cultural-historical aspects of his resume are essential to understanding the complexity of his life.

Because the systemic transformation in the political system in 1945 changed Kiehn’s life decisively, his biography not least contributes to our knowledge of how Germans have come to terms legally and morally with *individual* involvement in Nazi injustices. This addresses a problem of perception that can only be adequately grasped if we look at it in the context of contemporary society’s examination of its Nazi past. For a long time, the experience of the political upheaval of 1945 went unnoticed. Postwar Germany may have been “researched in all facets of its domestic and foreign policy, but there was scarce psychological reckoning of the ... ‘Volksgemeinschaft,’ which had been discharged from its Nazi usage but absolutely still existed in people’s minds.”²⁰

Biographies are particularly well suited to getting closer to the mentality of the society of the early Federal Republic. Life histories of individual protagonists of the SS policy of terror and annihilation²¹ — and more recently of some of the members of the economic elite — have expanded our level of knowledge considerably.²² Fritz Kiehn’s biography falls within this research context, but it is also a contribution to the social history of the province and the history of mentalities within it. The microhistorical approach transcends political caesuras, thus illuminating the relationship of continuity and discontinuity in the sociopolitical views and cultural preferences not only of Fritz Kiehn as a person, but also of his provincial surroundings. His career in the Third Reich, just like his comeback in the

postwar era, inevitably became a part of Trossingen's recent past, and, in the end, a problem of the political culture of the small German state of Südwürttemberg-Hohenzollern. Continuing to associate with the previously exposed Nazi as a regionally significant business owner plunged the government of the small state into a serious crisis in the early 1950s.

In the 1960s, when Kiehn became involved in the newly founded Lions Club of Tuttlingen, the county seat, there began a juxtaposition between tradition and new beginnings that was typical of post-1945 German history. This organization, founded in the United States and first gaining traction in Germany in the 1950s, embodies a piece of sociocultural Americanization. The Lions Club combines voluntary, private philanthropy with international cooperation and civilian conviviality.²³ The contrasts of the Adenauer era come into painful focus when we note that Fritz Kiehn, of all people — the former NSDAP district leader and important Nazi agitator in the region — helped to anchor this institution where he lived. This is the era when West Germany came to the Western community of values and began to transform itself into a liberal civil society, even as it failed to make a strong break with its Nazi past. Both paths were possible: one of social continuity encouraged through “communicative silence” (Hermann Lübbe), and one of cultural and political reorientation that was largely an external push, that is, from the Western allies. Fritz Kiehn's postwar career reflects both these paths. He defended his economic and social position throughout the systemic changes of 1945, and in the process transformed himself from an “old fighter,” Nazi functionary, and admirer of Hitler into a prosperous and honored citizen of the Federal Republic, who stood firmly on constitutional ground and sincerely admired the Federal Republic chancellor Konrad Adenauer, a former enemy of his party. At the same time, Kiehn made his enterprise into a refuge for ex-Nazis. The brown-shirted past of the patriarchs continued to shape Kiehn's operations and family life until the end of the 1960s. He took in former Third Reich youth leader Baldur von Schirach after his release from Spandau Prison; Schirach's son and also his former aide-de-camp had married into Kiehn's family some years before.

After 1949 Kiehn returned to a secure middle-class existence in both his business and private life. But still, for a time, he polarized the people who knew him. To many Trossingers in the early postwar era, he served as a scapegoat for the military defeat, for the shattered illusion of the Third Reich, for Nazi crimes, or for their own personal misery. One competitor accused him of being an unscrupulous profiteer “they had forgotten [to hang] in Nuremberg.”²⁴ Others, however, demonstrated their loyalty as his staff, neighbors, and fellow club members. Some of his business colleagues from other industries offered Kiehn moral support. And so from the mid-1950s onward, a silence fell about the political past of this executive who had remained in business through it all. This is how, in the year of the manufacturer's death in Trossingen, he was perceived not only as an honored citizen, but also as a sort of “brown-shirted Samaritan.” The obituary in

the local newspaper in 1980 stated that in 1933–1945 Kiehn had “done much for those persecuted at the time. . . . Both his human and entrepreneurial qualities shaped the history of the city of Trossingen: they ensure him an enduring place and an honored memory there.”²⁵

By then, those who had suffered much under Kiehn two decades earlier had been banished from the collective memory of the small city. Not until after the year 2000 would this gradually change, as the pressures of the general transformation in dealing with Germany’s historical legacy and above all a concentration on the fate of the victims of the regime came to bear on it. The publication of the German edition of this book in 2000 — which had doubtless already been historiographically influenced by that paradigm shift in the culture of memory — brought this transformation into the Trossingen discourse but has not yet put an end to it. Despite all the hostility from some of the locals about our book and the press reports about forced labor in Trossingen, these confrontations with their own history actually touched off a serious debate for the first time about the city’s relationship to its prominent “honorary citizens” and to its own past, sixty-five years after the end of the Nazi regime. This book describes the connection between history that is experienced and history that is remembered, between small-town life and individual biography, between business history and “high politics,” through three changes in the political system — four if we count the cultural shift engendered by the collapse of the East German state in 1989–1990. It explores the economic and political roles Kiehn played before, during, and after the Nazi dictatorship. It analyzes how the end of the German Empire in 1918, Hitler’s seizure of power, the dissolution of the Nazi regime, the French occupational policy, and the denazification of German society each affected Kiehn personally. We study Kiehn’s experience of his environment (with its associated political upheavals), his motivations for his actions, and his perception of himself, but we always come back to the resonance his career had among his contemporaries and their descendants. To describe the life of Fritz Kiehn is to bring almost a century of German social, economic, political, and cultural history into vivid reach, including the real-world consequences of radical political changes that would otherwise be difficult to grasp.

Notes

1. See Werner, *Adolf-Hitler-Platz*, 30.
2. Universitätsarchiv Innsbruck, Akte Fritz Kiehn, letter from Müller to the rector, 12 Apr. 1962.
3. See Berghoff, *Kleinstadt*.
4. TZ, 18 Oct. 1965 and 3 Sept. 1980.

5. Anon., *Fritz Kiehn*, 10.
6. Fallada, *Kleiner Mann*, 162. In original: "talmideleganter [from *Talmi-Gold*, or imitation gold] Garnichts."
7. There continues to be little study of the regional Nazi elites; see Kißener and Scholtyseck, *Führer*.
8. Title of the German-language book by Peter Reichel, *Der schöne Schein des Dritten Reiches*.
9. On the recent debate over the nationalist power of such stagings, see Bajohr and Wildt, *Volksgemeinschaft*; Frei, "Zeitgeschichte"; Gelatelly, *Hingeschaut*; Reichel, *Schein*; Schmiechen-Ackermann, "Einführung"; Selle, "Sinnlichkeit"; Stöver, *Volksgemeinschaft*; Thamer and Erpel, *Hitler*.
10. But see Berghoff, *Kleinstadt*; Rauh-Kühne, *Milieu*.
11. Broszat, "Motivation"; Kater, *Nazi Party*; Frei, "Volksgemeinschaft."
12. Kettenacker, "Aspekte"; Kershaw, *Hitler-Myth*.
13. Arbogast, *Herrschaftsinstanzen*; Fait, "Kreisleiter"; John, Möller, and Schaarschmidt, *NS-Gaue*; Kißener and Scholtyseck, *Führer*; Reibel, *Fundament*; Roth, *Parteikreis*.
14. Berghoff, *Kleinstadt*; Bräutigam, *Unternehmer*; Gehrig, *Rüstungspolitik*; Köster, *Hugo Boss*; Rauh-Kühne and Ruck, *Eliten*.
15. See Erker, *Industrie-Eliten*, 27.
16. "Die alten Säcke müssen weg." Cited in Müller, *Manager*, 9.
17. Müller, *Manager*, and Riedel, *Eisen*, offer details on the occupations of Keppler, Pleiger, and Kehrl, but the biographical dimension has been given short shrift thus far.
18. Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889–1936*, 527–531.
19. Dean, *Robbing the Jews*.
20. Frei, *Eliten*, 303. For a long time, research focused on legislative changes and their continuity effects on the careers of civil servants. See Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik*; Frei, *Eliten*; Rauh-Kühne, "Entnazifizierung"; Berghoff, "Verdrängung."
21. See Herbert, *Best*; Hachmeister, *Gegnerforscher*; Wildt, *Generation*.
22. On the experience of economic elites in the early days of the Federal Republic who enjoyed largely continuous careers, see Erker and Pierenkemper, *Deutsche Unternehmer*; Plato, "Wirtschaftskapitäne"; Berghahn, Unger, and Ziegler, *Wirtschaftselite*; Priemel, *Flick*; Scholtyseck, *Aufstieg*; Hayes, *Degussa*.
23. Biedermann, *Logen*; Gradinger, *Service Clubs*.
24. ASD, NL Erler, Box 85, letter to Erler of 25 Oct. 1950.
25. TZ, 3 Sept. 1980.