THE OLDENBURG CRUCIFIX STRUGGLE OF NOVEMBER 1936: A CASE STUDY OF OPPOSITION IN THE THIRD REICH*

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While there were fairly numerous examples of small-scale resistance to specific measures of the regime, instances of public disaffection on a relatively large scale were rare in the Third Reich. Perhaps the best known is the protest movement which resisted the policy of so-called euthanasia for the handicapped, carried out during the first year of the war, a movement which eventually helped to force the shelving of that policy, at least officially. Another far less well-known case was the Oldenburg crucifix struggle of November 1936. Although it was admittedly more limited in its extent and in its significance than the euthanasia protest, nevertheless a study of this particular conflict may provide an insight into the possibilities and also the limits of opposition to the regime. It may also throw some light on the relations between one particular section of the population and the Nazi state.

Work on public opinion in the Third Reich, on the attitude of the population to policies and practices of the regime has not proceeded very far. We already have numerous analyses of various organisations—the party apparatus, the Gauleiter, the SS and so on. We also have several accounts of specific policies, notably of course foreign policy but also such areas as Jewish policy and aspects of economic policy. Yet we know very little about how the population regarded the regime and about how it reacted to particular policies. We do not really have any clear idea of the composition of the bases of support for, or more negatively, acquiescence in the regime among the people, the balance between such ingredients as intimidation, the satisfaction of material wants such as full employment and welfare measures, and the satisfaction of psychological and emotional needs such as personal or group status through office, the flattery of propaganda, or foreign policy successes. In seeking to understand this aspect of National Socialism, it is important to be as specific as possible, to define support or opposition concretely: support for what and from which

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group? Similarly, what does one mean by opposition? Which particular aspect or policy of the regime was being opposed and how significant was this opposition for those involved? It was after all possible to oppose some aspects while supporting others. Moreover, in a regime such as that in Nazi Germany one cannot expect much political opposition from either groups or individuals. Even in a democracy the majority of people are not politically active; in a dictatorship, where the channels of communication are controlled by the government and where fear of denunciation is all-pervasive, it is even more difficult for ordinary people to develop, let alone express, political opinions which deviate from the official line. A few activists will try and maintain a presence for their particular group and rather more will go into 'inner emigration'. But, as far as the majority is concerned, their attitudes to the regime will be determined largely by what they experience in their daily lives — at work and in their families. To some extent, the regime can shape the way they interpret their experience by providing a framework of explanation — in the most general terms through an ideology and more specifically through day-to-day propaganda. But, in order to remain effective, ideology and propaganda must provide a means of enabling people to come to terms with or understand the concrete realities in which they find themselves. Where economic and social realities conflict with such an ideology it will increasingly lose its appeal and the effects of propaganda will be blunted. Moreover, attitudes to the regime will also be determined by the extent to which its measures and its propaganda conflict with existing norms and values. Where such values are deeply rooted and strongly held resistance to the regime is likely to prove strongest. With public means of expression closed by the agencies of repression, discontent tends to take the form of passive resistance to the fulfilment of obligations towards the regime — absenteeism or low productivity,² attempts to avoid participation in rallies or collections, ostentatious attendance at church services or ceremonies, or political jokes passed on surreptitiously by word of mouth. It is in such apparently unpolitical gestures that one can sometimes trace the articulation of discontent. For in a regime where no sphere is considered to be outside the realm of politics, every action assumes, at least potentially, a political significance.

Given the nature of the Third Reich, lack of knowledge about the relations between the state and its population is not of course surprising. The cloud of propaganda and fear concealed much. Yet, despite the official claim that Germany was a happy and contented Volksgemeinschaft under the joyfully accepted leadership of the Führer
and his representatives, there were agencies which made it their business to keep a very close watch on the mood of public opinion and, as a result, there was undoubtedly an element of feedback into the system. The Party, the Propaganda Ministry, the Gestapo, the SD, the Generalstaatsanwälte and Oberlandesgerichtspräsidenten and through them the Reich Ministry of Justice, and for a time the Reich Ministry of the Interior through its field agencies, the Regierungspräsidenten and Oberbürgermeister, all these received regular reports on the state of public opinion throughout Germany. This material, some of which has survived, including detailed local reports for some areas, will provide scholars with an often unreliable, but nevertheless invaluable basis on which to build up a picture of public opinion in the Third Reich.\(^3\) In seeking to assess public attitudes both in terms of support and of opposition, it will be essential to take account of the sectional character of German society. For, partly as a result of the lateness of national unification and partly as a result of the rapid but far from uniform industrialisation which coincided with it, Germany contained a large number of subcultures based on regional, religious and occupational lines. There existed communities with a great sense of cohesion based on common regional traditions, religion, occupation and sometimes on a sense of isolation or even alienation from the rest of the community. One of the main objectives of the Nazis had been to overcome such sectional loyalties. They projected themselves as a party representing all regions, all classes, all occupational groups and all religious denominations. And, to some extent, they were successful in overcoming some sectional barriers. The sons of the Guelph farmers of Hanover, for example, marched side by side in the ranks of the SA with the sons of their National Liberal opponents. But it may be argued that, at any rate before 1933, this only occurred where the basis of sectional division was already in an advanced state of decay, as indeed with the Guelph tradition of Hanoverian independence. How far the Third Reich was succeeding in breaking down sectional cleavages and forcing all Germans into a common mould is obviously difficult to assess, given the upheavals of the war and post-war period with their massive population movements. We cannot, for example, draw many conclusions about the continuity or discontinuity of political opinion from a comparison of pre-Nazi and post-Nazi electoral statistics.\(^4\) The two sectional groups which proved most resistant to the penetration of Nazism before 1933 were the industrial working class and the Roman Catholic population.\(^5\) Moreover, where these two groups were present in what one might describe as their purest form, on the one hand, employed in large
factories in big cities where socialist organisations and traditions were most deep rooted, and, on the other hand, employed in agriculture in overwhelmingly rural areas, where their simple piety was least exposed to the corrosion of secular influences, under these conditions their resistance proved strongest.

What seems clear is that where groups existed with strong ties and deeply held beliefs of whatever kind, resistance to the regime tended to be strongest — at least to those aspects of it which conflicted directly with their beliefs. Similarly, particular organisations such as the Army or the civil service, which possessed a highly developed *esprit de corps* and a strongly entrenched set of norms, were also capable of providing barriers to Nazi influence. In addition, such organisations had an independent structure through which they could promote opposition or resistance. The Roman Catholic Church not only had a social basis, which, particularly in rural areas, had shown great cohesion, it also had an organisation with which it could operate independently. Unlike the Army or the civil service, it was not essential to the functioning of the regime. On the other hand, to some extent it was shielded by its international position and above all by its support within the population and the fear of the Government of provoking discontent. The Roman Catholic Church, therefore, possessed unique possibilities for resistance to the regime. The limits of those possibilities were defined partly by the regime itself, but also by the Church’s own conception of its role within society and by the attitudes of its adherents, and the extent to which they coincided with aspects of Nazism. These possibilities and limits became very apparent in the Oldenburg crucifix struggle of November 1936.

Between 1918 and 1945 the state of Oldenburg consisted of an electorate of some 265,000 people (the 1926 figure) divided into nine electoral districts or *Kreise*: the urban *Kreise* of Delmenhorst town, Oldenburg town, and Wilhelmshaven town, and the rural districts of Ammerland, Cloppenburg, Friesland, Oldenburg county district, Vechta and Wesermarsch. Of the population of Oldenburg, 25.4 per cent was Catholic in 1939 and they were concentrated in Delmenhorst, where they made up 18.5 per cent of the population, and particularly in the two *Kreise* of southern Oldenburg — Cloppenburg with 86.6 per cent of the population and Vechta with 92 per cent. Catholics in Oldenburg tended to be particularly pious, perhaps because they bordered on solidly Protestant areas in the North. Whereas in the Reich as a whole 81 per cent of Catholics had fulfilled their minimum duty of attending mass on Easter Sunday in 1924, in Oldenburg the figure was 87.9 per
Catholics in Oldenburg also tended to be much more loyal to the Centre Party than elsewhere in the Reich. In fact, Oldenburg had the highest percentage of Catholics voting for the Centre of any area in Germany. For example, whereas in Bavaria only slightly more than 40 per cent of Catholics voted for the Centre Party’s Bavarian cousin, the Bavarian People’s Party, in the mid-1920s, in Oldenburg 89 per cent voted for the Centre Party. To what extent did the Nazis succeed in eroding the electoral support for the Centre Party in Oldenburg compared with elsewhere?

**Reichstag Election of 31 July 1932**

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<th>Reich</th>
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<td>% of Catholics voting Centre</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>78.9</td>
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<td>% of Centre Party vote</td>
<td>15.7</td>
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**Reichstag Election of 5 March 1933**

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<tr>
<td>% of Catholics voting Centre</td>
<td>42.9</td>
<td>67.1</td>
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<td>% of Centre Party vote</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>% of NSDAP vote</td>
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So that although the March 1933 election saw a drop of approximately 10 per cent in the number of Catholics voting Centre and in the percentage of the Centre Party vote in Cloppenburg compared with July 1932 and a drop of approximately 5 per cent in Vechta, the two Kreise still had majorities for the Centre Party over the Nazis of 2-1 in Cloppenburg and 6-1 in Vechta.

What then was the social structure of these two Catholic Kreise? In 1930 the area of the Arbeitsamt Vechta, which contained the Oldenburg administrative districts (Amtsbezirke) of Cloppenburg, Wildeshausen and Vechta and which corresponded more or less exactly with the two electoral districts of Cloppenburg and Vechta, had a total population of 96,000 with a population density of only 48 inhabitants per square kilometre. In the Lower Saxony area this low density of population was matched only by the equally sparsely populated Lüneburg Heath districts. Of the population, 74.2 per cent were engaged in agriculture, the highest percentage of all the 28 Arbeitsamt districts in Lower Saxony. The farms were large (over 25ha), medium (5-25 ha) and small (under 5 ha) in more or less equal proportions; there were no large estates. There was slightly more arable than pasture with grain production
predominating. Of the population, 12.8 per cent was engaged in industry and handicrafts, mainly connected with the processing of wood in various ways, but with a scattering of other light industry such as cigar manufacturing, agricultural machinery and the ubiquitous brick factories. The remaining 13 per cent were engaged in commerce, services and administration.

To sum up, then, the Kreise of Cloppenburg and Vechta were thinly populated, predominantly agricultural, with no very wide differences in the ownership of property, overwhelmingly Catholic and notably pious. The vast majority supported the Centre Party and had continued to do so even under the pressures characteristic of the March 1933 election. The political, economic and social homogeneity of these Kreise distinguished them from most of the rest of Oldenburg and indeed from most of Germany.

The Nazis had come to power in Oldenburg before Hitler took over the national government. In the state election of 16 June 1932 they had won an overall majority and had formed an all-Nazi government with their Gauleiter, Carl Röver, as Minister-President. Part of their propaganda in this election had been geared to exploit the resentment of some of the Protestant population who felt that the Catholics, who were virtually united in support of the Centre Party, had managed in the past to secure an undue amount of influence in the state compared with themselves, whose political loyalties had been divided among a number of different and competing parties. Indeed, to some extent the Nazis had come to represent the party of Protestant north Oldenburg. While the Centre was gaining 70 or 80 per cent of the vote in the south, the Nazis were gaining 60 or 70 per cent in the rural areas of the north. One must not of course take this explanation too far. Hostility towards the Left was undoubtedly an even more important reason for the high Nazi vote. Moreover, there is no evidence that the Nazi leadership in Oldenburg had any more respect for the Protestants than for the Catholics. In fact, no sooner had they come to power than they were engaged in an acrimonious dispute with the Protestant Church.

In the March 1933 election, as we have seen, the Nazis gained only 29.4 and 13.1 per cent in Cloppenburg and Vechta respectively, well below the Reich average of 43.9 per cent, though a marked improvement on the figures for July and November 1932. The question was, then, what was to be done about 'Black Münsterland' as the Nazis dubbed the two Kreise? The dissolution of the Centre Party in July solved the overt political problem. But a far more intractable problem was posed by what one might call the infrastructure of Catholicism — the existence of the
Catholic youth clubs and, above all, the religious denominational structure of education within the state, the monopoly of the so-called 'confessional schools'. These issues had been dealt with in the Concordat ratified by the Reich and the Vatican on 10 September 1933. Section 2 of Article 31 had covered those Catholic organisations having social or professional purposes, affording them protection 'provided they guarantee to develop their activities outside political parties'. Section 3 empowered the Reich Government and the German episcopate 'to determine by mutual agreement, the organisations and associations which fall within the provisions of this article'.

Unfortunately, however, the Vatican had dropped its attempt to get agreement on a list of Catholic organisations to be protected under these clauses and to get an agreed definition on party politics prior to ratification of the Concordat. As a result, the future of the Church's non-religious organisations, including its youth movement, had been left unresolved. Although from now onwards increasing pressure was applied to the Catholic youth organisations in Oldenburg, it was clear to the authorities that any attempt to enforce the ban on dual membership of the Hitler Youth and denominational youth groups imposed by Schirach on 29 July 1933 would be at the expense of the Nazi youth organisations; in other words, faced with the choice of joining the Hitler Youth or remaining in their Catholic organisations, they would do the latter. So that it was not until the decree of 1 December 1936 making the Hitler Youth the official state youth organisation and the enforcement of the ban on dual membership which followed it, that this issue was finally resolved by the Catholic youth organisations being gradually forced into dissolution by 1939.

Even more significant both to the Nazis and to the Church than the question of youth organisations was that of education. This too had been defined in the Concordat. Article 23 had guaranteed 'the maintenance of the existing Catholic denominational schools and the establishment of new ones wherever parents requested it and where the number of prospective pupils was sufficiently large. This clause was regarded by the Church as the most significant concession made by the Nazi state. It soon became clear, however, that the Oldenburg government was determined to limit as far as possible the influence of the churches over education.

With the reorganisation of the government following the appointment of Carl Röver as Reichsstatthalter of Oldenburg-Bremen in April 1933, the Ministry of Churches and Schools passed into the hands of Julius Pauly. Pauly had joined the Party in 1931 and was a typical Nazi
recruit of the early 1930s, a 30-year-old lawyer on the make who endeavoured to compensate for his relatively late adherence to the movement by proving his commitment with tough speeches. Pauly was a Protestant from the Oldenburg enclave of Birkenfeld in the Rhineland who, according to rumour had repudiated his religion with the adolescent gesture of scribbling ribald comments on the school bible. The key civil servant recently appointed to the ministry, Anton Kohnen, was also a dedicated Nazi and a fanatical opponent of the churches.

During the spring and summer of 1933, Pauly made it clear to the Oldenburg teachers in a number of decrees that they were expected to demonstrate their loyalty to the new state by becoming members of Nazi organisations. Initially, this seemed to pose few problems. In fact, at a general meeting on 24 April, the Catholic Teachers' Association in Oldenburg had declared its unqualified support for the 'government of the national movement under the Chancellory of Adolf Hitler' and had joined the Nazi teachers' organisation, the NSLB, en bloc. This was of course part of the process of Gleichschaltung or coordination which swept through Germany during the spring of 1933. It was reflected at national level by a similar declaration from the national headquarters of the Catholic Teachers' Association and there seems good reason to believe that the sentiments behind it were for the most part genuine. Nevertheless, the Nazi authorities continued to regard the Münsterland with suspicion. During 1934, Pauly sent round inspectors to discover 'whether the teachers really are National Socialists and are instructing their pupils accordingly'. And, indeed, it was not long before the enthusiasm of the period of 'national uprising' gave way to a process of disillusionment, which was answered by further decrees during 1935.

The first big bone of contention came over Alfred Rosenberg and his anti-Christian writings, which met with stiff opposition from Catholic teachers. As a result of this, on 27 July 1935, Pauly felt obliged to hold a meeting in the Assembly Hall of the Cloppenburg High School for all teachers in the Kreise of Cloppenburg and Vechta. He claimed that while he did not demand that they should teach Rosenberg's opinions in school, Rosenberg should be treated with the respect due to a leading National Socialist. In the course of his speech he put his finger on one of the weaknesses of Nazi education policy at that time: 'Unfortunately,' he said, 'at the moment we still lack suitable text books. If we had them, everything would be much simpler. I can't write all the text books myself. But I expect you to come and see me if you are unable to teach in the way which I have requested and laid down in my decrees'. In view of the acute shortage of teachers, however,
dismissal was not an easy remedy. One way round the problem was to transfer teachers from north to south Oldenburg and vice versa. On 2 October 1933, a law was passed to the effect that teachers of either denomination could be employed in all state high schools. Thus, recalcitrant Catholic teachers could be transferred to the north and replaced by Protestants. But although such transfers could be and to some extent were carried out in the secondary schools in the few towns such as Cloppenburg, they caused far more problems in the much more numerous village Volksschulen. Here a Protestant teacher would be liable to feel very isolated and to meet with serious difficulties from the parents and the local priest.

Initially, it appeared as if the Government would act against the influence of religion in schools by a gradual process of piecemeal attrition, concentrating to start with on the less sensitive areas. Thus, in 1935 religious instruction was ended in all further education colleges (Berufsschulen) and agricultural colleges. Moreover, on 11 June 1936, Pauly issued a new school law which, while confirming the denominational character of the Oldenburg education system, at the same time removed the right of the local priests or pastors to supervise religious instruction in the schools, restricted the amount of religious education and switched it to the last hour of the school day. These measures had met with only a few isolated protests and it appeared as if the policy of avoiding confrontation by a piecemeal approach was achieving success. Five months later, however, the Government met with a massive setback.

The issue which provoked the trouble was in itself a relatively minor affair. On 24 October 1936, a new school building was officially opened in the village of Bösel in Cloppenburg with a ceremony at which Pauly himself was present. The local priest did not attend the ceremony which was held on a Saturday, but on the following day held a consecration ceremony of his own in the school attended by the whole village. News of this event appears to have reached Reichsstatthalter/ Gauleiter Röver who promptly took Pauly to task for permitting such behaviour. Pauly responded by issuing a decree dated 4 November.

The decree began by banning the religious consecration of school buildings on the grounds that as public buildings they belonged to the whole German nation irrespective of their religious affiliations. But the decree went on to argue that, for the same reason, denominational symbols such as crucifixes or portraits of Luther should also not be hung in public buildings. It concluded: ‘in future, ecclesiastical and other religious symbols of the kind mentioned above or of an official character
may not be displayed in state, municipal, and parish buildings and those which are already in place must be removed. A report on the steps which have been taken to implement this decree is required by 15 December’. The decree was addressed to the headmasters of all Oldenburg schools, to the school inspector, and to the state authorities in the field — the Amtshauptmänner and Bürgermeister — and it was not published.

The authorities in the Münsterland were appalled by the decree. The senior government official in Cloppenburg, Amtshauptmann Münzebrock, immediately contacted Pauly and tried to persuade him to revoke it on the grounds that it would provoke strong resistance from the population. Pauly replied that the Church authorities might encourage discontent for a time, but that ‘grass would soon grow over it again’. Having failed to persuade the minister, Münzebrock contacted the district leader of the Party, Kreisleiter Meyer. Meyer had lived in the village of Essen in Cloppenburg since 1922. He had joined the Party rather late — in 1932 — and because of the dearth of Nazis in the area had been appointed local branch leader and was then promoted to Kreisleiter in October 1934. He had a good knowledge of conditions in the area and had apparently developed a reasonably good relationship with the local priest in Essen, Kaplan Niermann. Meyer shared Münzebrock’s concern and, together with his colleague Kreisleiter Voss of Vechta, tried to persuade Rüber in his capacity as Reichsstatthalter to overrule Pauly and revoke the decree — but to no avail.

On 10 November, a copy of the decree was leaked to the senior Catholic official in Oldenburg, the Bischöflichen Offizial in Vechta, Franz Vorwerk. At the same time, Vorwerk was informed that the decree had not yet been sent out to the Bürgermeister or the schools by the Amtshauptmänner, who were, as we have seen, trying to have it withdrawn. Three days later, however, he received word that the decree had been sent to headmasters in north Oldenburg — a step which had clearly committed the government to the decree. On the following day, the fourteenth, he drafted a declaration to be read from the pulpits of all Catholic churches in Oldenburg on Sunday 15 November and distributed it by courier. The declaration concluded as follows: ‘We can never give our consent to the banishment of the crucifix from the place of instruction of our children. We must do everything to prevent this. Join and help us and support the retention of the crucifix in our schools.’ At the same time, the clergy preached on the significance of the issue and referred to the relevant article of the
Concordat which confirmed the legality of denominational education. In other words, they claimed that the state decree was contrary to Reich Law and therefore that opposition to it was justified. Then, on 16 November, Vorwerk sent off a letter of protest to Pauly claiming that the decree was aimed against the denominational schools. On the twentieth, Pauly replied with the argument that children of another denomination might be offended by the public display of denominational symbols. He denied that the decree represented a step in the gradual abolition of denominational schools and suggested as a compromise that the crucifix could be used during the periods of religious education as educational material. Vorwerk replied at once that this suggestion was unacceptable and indeed represented an intolerable disparagement of the crucifix. The Protestants also expressed objections to the decree. On 19 November the Praesidium of the Confessional Synod of Wilhelmshaven-Rüstringen complained in a letter to Pauly about an attack on the Christian faith. And in letters dated 22 November and 2 December, the chairman of the Hauptverein der Gustav Adolf Stiftung protested against the decree and pointed out that their association’s valuable work for the German cause abroad, particularly in the educational field, could be jeopardised if news of the government’s action became known. The school authorities in the Protestant area, however, generally obeyed the instructions to remove the portraits of Luther. But, in the meantime, the dispute had moved beyond the official channels. It had produced an eruption of public protest of a kind that was almost unique in the Third Reich.

The wave of protest in south Oldenburg which followed the news of the decree took a very wide variety of forms. At the beginning of the week following Vorwerk’s announcement, meetings of clergy were held in all the deaneries to discuss the situation and to lay down guidelines. On Wednesday, 10 November, which was Remembrance Day, sermons were given in all the churches on the crucifix issue. At one of these services held at Bethen, a place of pilgrimage, and attended by some 3,000 ex-servicemen, there occurred what was virtually a mass demonstration against the decree. In his address the priest adopted a very militant line which met with tremendous enthusiasm from the congregation who, according to an eyewitness, listened enthralled, oblivious to the pouring rain:

Our comrades died and we fought and bled for our fatherland on earth, so that we will be even more determined to fight and bleed, and if necessary to die for Christ and his kingdom and for the symbol of
Christianity, the crucifix. Someone, who has never smelt the smell of cordite, who has never heard bullets whistling overhead [and here he was clearly referring to Pauly] may be incapable of understanding this. But we war veterans will make him aware that we still know how to fight and if it comes to it to die . . . If anyone now wants to take the crucifix out of our schools . . . the answer is we will never, never, never accept it. That is our final word.42

A flood of protest letters and petitions was sent to the Ministry in Oldenburg.43 They came from both individuals and groups. There were letters from simple farmers; a group of fifty women from the town of Cloppenburg signed a petition; and 139 Catholic young men from Dincklage in Vechta reminded the Ministry that the Nationalists in Spain were ceremoniously bringing back the crucifix after a bloodbath. Beginning on the 21 November a string of deputations began to arrive at the Ministry from numerous parishes.44 The cars bringing them lined up outside the building and gave vent to their protest in rhythmical hooting of their horns. The climax came on 24 November when some 75 cars were lined up outside having brought around 200 people from the Münsterland. The protest also took more symbolic forms.45 In every parish the church bells were rung between 8.00 and 8.30 each evening; in the larger parishes services of prayer were held. The crosses on the farm houses, on the field paths, and on the by-roads were decorated with greenery and people even broke into the schools at night and decorated the crucifix. A large cross was put up on the church tower in Dincklage and illuminated with electric light bulbs so that it could be seen for miles around and later the church in Mühlen followed suit. Women wore jewelry crucifixes prominently displayed.

It was not long before the authorities began to report back to the Ministry in perplexed despair at the deterioration in the situation. Not only had the majority of the teachers refused to remove the crucifixes,46 but the Bürgermeister were also unwilling to take the risk. On 20 November, the Bürgermeister in Lastrup wrote to the Amtshauptmann in Cloppenburg complaining that ‘a completely untenable situation has arisen for the lower levels of the administration. If the decree were to be implemented all contact with the population would be lost. Trust in the state has been as seriously shaken by this decree as one can possibly imagine. For the time being I am not in a position and am not prepared to carry out the decree and request instructions.’447 His opinion was echoed by other Bürgermeister. Thus the Bürgermeister in Friesoy the wrote that ‘whoever is instructed to remove the crucifix will require a strong police escort since if the action is carried out, it will inevitably
lead to open rebellion’.\textsuperscript{48}

What was particularly serious from the point of view of the authorities was the fact that the whole Party apparatus in the two Kreise appeared to be in the process of disintegration. As Vorwerk reported later to his bishop: ‘What was particularly gratifying was the number of old Party members who participated. The most faithful supporter of the crucifix was a Party member with a gold Party badge.\textsuperscript{49} His observation was confirmed in the later report of the Kreisleitung in Vechta which wrote: ‘It is an only too regrettable fact that there were going to be many resignations from the rural local branches if the decree was not revoked.’\textsuperscript{50} Indeed, in one branch the propaganda chief had made himself the spokesman of all the political and SA leaders and declared ‘they would let themselves be beaten to death for their crucifix’. Reports began to come in of farmers refusing to cooperate with the ‘production battle’ and the Winter Aid programme.\textsuperscript{51} People began to resign their offices on the parish councils. The SA in the village of Dümmerlohhausen disbanded itself. Only 50 per cent of the Jungvolk in Daume turned up on parade. The problem was particularly serious because, as the Bürgermeister of Essen (Cloppenburg) pointed out, it had been extremely difficult to set up a Party organisation in this area because of people’s suspicion of the anti-Christian elements of Nazism.\textsuperscript{52} The whole crisis was summed up in a letter from Amtshauptmann Münzebrock of Cloppenburg to the Ministry of the Interior in Oldenburg dated 20 November: ‘Everybody is furious and this anger is by no means confined to opponents of the Party or particularly pious people, but has also seized those who are normally co-operative and do not blindly follow the priests. With one blow a united front of the whole population has been created, which clearly is directed solely against National Socialism.\textsuperscript{53} Although, on 19 November, the legal department of the Labour Front in Cloppenburg telegraphed its support to the Minister and urged on him a policy of ruthless severity,\textsuperscript{54} the two Kreisleiter, Meyer of Cloppenburg and Voss of Vechta, appealed in desperation to the Gauleiter to intervene and save the situation.\textsuperscript{55}

To start with Röver resisted their appeal. The Party held meetings at which the decree was defended and, at a big meeting in Löningen in Cloppenburg on 17 November, he declared that the decree would not be revoked.\textsuperscript{56} By the twenty-fourth, however, the pressure had clearly become irresistible. On that day, Münzebrock was informed that the Gauleiter had decided that the Pauly decree should be withdrawn.\textsuperscript{57} He was ordered to arrange a mass meeting in the Münsterlandhalle in the town of Cloppenburg where Röver would make a speech, at the end of
which he would announce its withdrawal. *Kreisleiter* Meyer strongly advised against this course of action and suggested that a brief statement should be issued instead. Röver, however, insisted that the public would then believe that he was too cowardly to face them.

The meeting was, therefore, arranged for 4.15 on the afternoon of 25 November. Attendance at the meeting was made compulsory for the Party organisations and state officials in the town. But in fact over 7,000 people packed into the hall to hear the speech and the vast majority were ordinary members of the public from the two *Kreise*. According to an eye-witness, as the official party — which consisted of Röver, Minister-President Joel and many other officials, though not including Pauly — entered the hall, they were met by an icy silence. It was broken only when they neared the platform by rather hesitant applause from the ranks of the Party formations and *Arbeitsdienst*. They were followed by a detachment of SA which, significantly, had been brought in from Leer in East Friesland and which was also greeted with silence.

*Kreisleiter* Meyer had tried to persuade Röver to keep the speech brief and to the point but the *Gauleiter* had replied that in that case ‘the audience would go home thinking that they had forced something out of me and I don’t want that’. He evidently hoped somehow to win the respect of the crowd — a reflection of his sublime self-confidence, his overestimation of his powers of leadership, and his ignorance of the feelings of his subjects. He began his speech by declaring that they should follow the lessons of history. He then rambled on about how God had created various races each with its own particular characteristics and that the Germans should stick together and not get involved in bickering since they stood alone facing great difficulties. But before he had gone very far he was interrupted by shouts of ‘We don’t want to hear about that. Get to the point, the decree’. Soon there was chanting of ‘Get to the point’ and ‘the crucifix’. Desperately, Röver began again and started talking about his life as a young business man in Africa before the war where he had learnt the importance of racial purity. But again he was interrupted with shouts of ‘You should have stayed there. What do we want with Africa? We are in Cloppenburg. Get to the point, the crucifix’. The SA was sent to the rear of the hall and a young farmer was led outside. A policeman tried to take his name and address, but he was immediately surrounded by a crowd of young farmers who said: ‘Hier giff et nix to schrieven! Das Notieren makck wi’, which can be freely translated: ‘keep out of it. We’ll do the note-taking around here’. Whereupon, the policeman pocketed his notebook and slunk away.
Meanwhile, in desperation Röver had finally come to the point. He admitted that ‘perhaps it would have been better if the Ministry’s decree had not been issued’. He went on: ‘Kreisleiter Meyer and Kreisleiter Voss came to me and told me: “Gauleiter, you must come to the Münsterland immediately. You must help us”. I told them: “My dear friends, I have been to Löningen and believe that everything is all right there . . .” In the final analysis it must be regarded as a purely educational matter . . . I don’t think Pauly realized what effects it would have. If we make a mistake we have the courage to admit it’. Finally, he pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and read out a decree which restored the crucifixes and Luther pictures. The crowd burst into tremendous applause and pressed for the exit, bringing the proceedings to an abrupt end. That evening, church bells rang all over the Münsterland.

On the following day, the Cloppenburg meeting was reported in the local press as ‘an impressive demonstration of confidence in the Gauleiter by the people of the Münsterland’. His speech was ‘repeatedly interrupted by loud applause and expressions of agreement’. The Münsterland, of course, knew better. But the authorities were determined to try and prevent the truth from becoming known. Ten days after the Cloppenburg meeting, on 5 December, Vorwerk was invited to a meeting with the Gauleiter. A recording of Röver’s speech was played back to him on which all background noise had been eliminated. He was then invited to sign a declaration to be read in all churches to the effect that the official recording had convinced him that Röver’s speech had not been interrupted and that all reports to the contrary were false. The aim was clearly also to publish such a declaration in the press. The Offizial, however, refused. Then, at the beginning of January 1937, Röver wrote to Vorwerk endeavouring to play down the whole issue and inviting him to another meeting which he duly attended on 5 January. Röver once more tried to persuade him to sign the declaration and, on his refusal, alleged that he had promised to do so and accused him of going back on his word. A Party campaign was then initiated in which Vorwerk was accused of failing to keep his word and of misinforming the Bishop of Münster. On 29 January, the Offizial rejected these accusations in a pulpit declaration.

In the meantime, on the Sunday after the lifting of the decree, services of thanksgiving were held throughout Oldenburg. In a letter to all Catholics the Offizial thanked them for defending the cross and warned of further threats to Christianity. On 27 November, Bishop Galen of Münster also sent a pastoral letter to be read out in all the
churche of his diocese on the following Sunday together with a report of the events of November, so that knowledge of these events spread far wider than Oldenburg itself. Indeed copies of the report were sent to other dioceses. In his letter Galen tried to build on the loyalty of the Catholics which had been mobilised by the crucifix issue and to encourage resistance to any further anti-Christian or anti-Catholic measures:

We will avoid all companionship with those who are enemies of the Cross of Christ; we will read no books or papers which disgrace the Cross of Christ and we will not tolerate them in our houses, in shop windows or in show-cases. And if, for the sake of the Cross, it becomes our fate to suffer disgrace or persecution with Christ the crucified, then we do not want to be cowardly or shrink. For we shall think of Him who, by dying on the Cross, won for us eternal life.

The crucifix struggle had ended in a dramatic victory for the Catholics of Oldenburg. The Nazi authorities had been publicly humiliated. Indeed, the report of the NSDAP Kreisleitung in Vechta to the Gauleitung described it aptly as 'a road to Canossa for the NSDAP' and concluded that the self-confidence and prestige of the clergy had increased to a colossal extent. To illustrate this, it quoted a remark made to a Labour Service official: 'We Christians say "good morning" [i.e. not "Heil Hitler"] because we won'. Yet the drama of the occasion was liable to disguise the very limited nature of what had been achieved. This became clearer during the following months and years. Thus, Pauly's ministry successfully resisted attempts to have the Luther portraits rehung in the schools from which they had already been removed. Protests about the exclusion of parish priests from schools and about the lack of religious instruction in the colleges of agriculture and further education and about the transfer of religious instruction to the last hour in the school day were all ignored. The only concession made was to permit two lectures a week in religion at the new teachers' training college in Oldenburg. Otherwise, the main effect of the affair was a delaying one. Thus, whereas in Munich, Württemberg, the Saar-Palatinate and Rhineland areas denominational schools were abolished during 1936 and 1937 by means of referenda held under conditions of intimidation, in Oldenburg the authorities evidently felt obliged to move more circumspectly and waited until 1938. But the end result was the same and by then the authorities clearly felt sufficiently strong to dispense with rigged elections. Thus, at the end of April 1938, Pauly simply
ordered the suppression of small confessional schools and then later moved on to the larger ones. This time attempts by parents to resist were quickly crushed by the Gestapo. Thus protests at the introduction of a non-denominational school (*Deutsche Volksschule*) in the village of Goldenstedt in Vechta at the beginning of May 1938, which took the form of a school strike by the parents, were met by 30 Gestapo officials and the whole gendarmerie of the *Amtsbezirk*; twelve of those arrested were sent to concentration camps and the two curates were banished from Oldenburg. Finally, on 30 June 1938, the *Offizial* in Vechta, Franz Vorwerk, was banished by the police from Oldenburg, and the offices of his *Offizialat* were occupied. Whereas previously they had been caught off balance by the Catholics' reaction, now the authorities were clearly taking no more chances; and the fact that they were now following a piecemeal tactic of closing down the schools one by one enabled them to isolate pockets of resistance. They were also careful to mount a propaganda campaign claiming that denominational schools were divisive and liable to undermine national unity. The fact that these measures coincided with a period of maximum diplomatic prestige for the regime with the recent successful conclusion of the *Anschluss* fresh in people's minds may also have helped to defuse hostility.

How should one assess the more general significance of the Oldenburg crucifix struggle? In a speech to a conference of deans on 28 October 1935 Bishop Galen of Münster had raised the question of 'whether the faithful would be prepared in case of need to “obey God rather than man”. I cannot help feeling that many will weaken in their faith and loyalty and that the strength of the Church will be impaired'. Galen believed that 'most of the faithful were not capable of engaging in an all-out fight'. A year later, a large section of his own diocese had apparently proved him wrong. Yet it would be dangerous to generalise from such a particular case. In trying to remove the crucifix from the schools of southern Oldenburg, the Nazi authorities had chosen the worst possible ground on which to fight. In the first place, the crucifix represented a symbol which the simplest person could understand, identify with and unite behind. It was capable of generating a charge of emotional commitment which the more abstract issue of denominational schools was less able to achieve. The continual chant 'das Kreuz' in the Cloppenburg meeting of Gauleiter Röver and the propaganda use of the cross by ordinary people illustrates this. In effect, the Nazis had been beaten at the propaganda game of which they thought they were the masters. This was ruefully admitted by the *Kreisleitung* in Vechta who reported: 'the blacks* really understand
propaganda'.

But secondly, Cloppenburg and Vechta were exceptional in their degree of social and ideological homogeneity. They were a community with strong ties of solidarity and with a tradition of resisting the dominance of Protestant north Oldenburg now controlled by the Nazis. Finally, as far as the Reich authorities were concerned, the religious question was, for the time being at any rate, of secondary importance. The conflict fell within the period of July 1936 to March 1937 when, for both domestic and diplomatic reasons, Hitler had postponed the series of trials of Rhineland priests and lay brothers for homosexual offences and had sought a rapprochement with the Catholic Church. At this time, a campaign against the crucifix would not fit in very well with the image of Germany as a bastion of Western cultural values against the Bolshevist threat, an image which the regime was assiduously cultivating for diplomatic reasons. It seems, however, unlikely that Hitler himself intervened in this particular dispute — there is no evidence for it. And although there is some evidence that Goebbels strongly criticised the measure and demanded Pauly's dismissal — which was refused by Röver — it seems probable that the issue was decided at Gau level. Here there were hotheads who wished to pursue the Church more vigorously, but by this time the Party was coming to see its main function as ensuring a loyal and contented population. Measures which provoked widespread discontent would have to have a very good justification. The issue of whether or not crucifixes should hang in schools was not one of vital importance in 1936 and therefore the substance of the matter did not place any difficulties in the way of reversing the policy.

A more serious problem, of course, was the loss of face by the authorities, who were being forced to reverse a policy under pressure from public opinion. It is a striking example of the fact for which recent research is providing more and more evidence that the Nazi regime, despite its totalitarian claims and apparatus, was acutely sensitive to any large scale discontent expressed by those sections of the population whose loyalty it had good reason to doubt. The crucifix issue in particular continued to remain a sensitive one. In 1937 there were protest demonstrations against the removal of crucifixes from schools in Kleve and Bislich in the Rhineland and the Reich Minister of the Interior was obliged to issue an order banning the arbitrary removal of crucifixes from schools by subordinate authorities.

* A pejorative term for Catholics (= Black International).
Finally, in 1941, the Munich Gauleiter and Bavarian Minister of the Interior, Adolf Wagner, endeavoured to remove crucifixes from the schools in Bavaria. But he too was met by similar resistance and on 28 August, like Röver he was forced to revoke this order, though on this occasion Bormann intervened directly.  

What can we learn from this conflict about the attitude of the Catholic population towards the regime? Hostility towards the regime among Catholics even in Cloppenburg and Vechta appears to have been largely confined to those spheres in which the policies of the authorities interfered directly with their religious beliefs and practices — in particular, the role of the Hitler Youth and the influence of Rosenberg and his followers in the education of their children. In this sphere, as the crucifix conflict demonstrates, considerable discontent could be generated by tactically inept actions. Such discontent, focusing round a particular issue, could lead to more generalised opposition to the regime. In this connection a comparison between the Reichstag election results on 29 March 1936 and those of 10 April 1938 is illuminating. In 1936 in Kreis Cloppenburg out of a 99.1 per cent vote the NSDAP gained 98.72 per cent and there were 456 no votes or invalid votes of which 50 came from the town of Cloppenburg. In 1938 on the other hand, with a 98.24 per cent vote the NSDAP gained only 92.33 per cent and there were 2,696 no votes or invalid votes of which 325 came from the town of Cloppenburg. It would seem plausible to attribute this decline in the percentage of the NSDAP vote to some degree at any rate to the experience of the crucifix conflict, since in the electoral district of Weser-Ems as a whole, which embraced both the state of Oldenburg and the Prussian Regierungsbezirke of Aurich and Osnabrück, with a 99.30 per cent vote the percentage in favour of the NSDAP was 97.86 per cent.  

Nevertheless it would be a mistake to make too much of this generalised hostility. For, although of course ultimately there could not be compromise between Nazi ideology and Christian beliefs, at this stage the two could coexist side by side without too much friction. On the whole, the church authorities themselves were anxious to emphasise the areas of agreement and to minimise those of friction. Indeed, the fact that Cloppenburg and Vechta came under the diocese of the uncompromising Bishop Galen of Münster rather than that of their more immediate neighbour, the much more pliable Bishop Berning of Osnabrück, may even have contributed to the forcefulness of the confrontation to the extent that the Offizial could feel sure of firm support from his superior. Apart from the questions of youth
organisations and education, it is doubtful that the regime provoked too much active hostility, though much more research would be necessary to assert this with any degree of confidence. In part this was a result of the nature of the Catholic sub-culture in Germany. 58 Like that of the nation as a whole its value system gave priority to what have been described as 'secondary virtues' such as loyalty, punctuality, cleanliness, conscientiousness in the performance of duty and hard work. These virtues are empty ones in the sense that they lack any moral content; they can be employed to any end. For example, it was characteristic that the SS motto was 'My honour is loyalty'. Such virtues do not involve commitments to deeper human values. For most German Catholics their religion had been subsumed into the system of secondary virtues by becoming identified as a series of very specific duties and rituals. These were affirmations of membership of a particular community but had no wider social relevance. This restricted outlook was partly a consequence of the semi-pariah position of Catholics in Germany since the Kulturkampf. But it was reinforced by the fact that in all religious and moral questions it was customary for Catholics to follow the lead of the Church and its hierarchy rather than feeling an obligation to follow their own consciences. Insofar as the Nazis, therefore, did not interfere with the performance of these rituals and duties, they were unlikely to provoke discontent. Indeed, to the extent that they went out of their way to stress the importance of the traditional German 'secondary virtues' they could expect, and for the most part received, the approval of both the Catholic Church authorities and the laity. Finally, Catholics did not possess an alternative political ideology which could provide them with a basis from which to criticise the regime in political terms. What political conceptions they possessed — an amalgam of corporatist, nationalist, anti-liberal and anti-Marxist values and attitudes — were sufficiently close to aspects of Nazism to make a clear-cut differentiation, let alone a fundamental critique, difficult if not impossible. Moreover, the political expression of Catholicism prior to 1933 had tended to take the form of relatively narrow pressure group activity on behalf of Catholic interests. As a result, with a few notable exceptions, Catholic opposition to Nazism tended to be provoked by injury to their interests or religious beliefs, and remain restricted to that; it did not become a general attack on the regime as a whole.

In analysing people's response to the regime at the grass roots it is clearly important to assess in what ways its policies and actions impinged upon people at this level and, in particular, to assess the role
of the Party. There is a clue to this in a letter from the Bürgermeister and Party branch leader in Essen (Cloppenburg) to Pauly in which he complained that the crucifix issue had ruined all his previous efforts:

It was very difficult to get the right people to co-operate in Essen. For one reason only: they said, 'I don't want to have anything to do with the NSDAP, they are trying to take our faith away from us.' Through personal contacts with individual Party members the demands and requests of Party and state have been completely fulfilled. I can point in particular to the collections for the Winter Aid programme, the delegations to Nuremberg and Bückeburg, the celebration of the 1 May, and the National Day of Wine. And what is particularly important for the Production Battle, the sowing of flax has been carried out in Essen.89

In other words, the role of the Party at this level appears primarily as a propaganda one and, apart from the Hitler Youth, the impact of the Party was felt in terms of the obligation to make periodic gestures of loyalty either of a practical kind through collections or of a demonstrative kind through attendance at particular ceremonies. Although the collections may have become irksome, there was little in these matters to provoke serious discontent.

It seems conceivable that the majority of Catholics respected the leadership of Hitler, whose rule had apparently brought economic recovery and diplomatic successes, while deploiring the activities of some of the organisations and representatives of the regime. They did not appear to associate the objectionable features with the Führer. According to the Bürgermeister of Molbergen: "The peasants declared: 'We have been born Catholics and wish for our own sakes and those of our children to stay Catholics while being followers of the Führer Adolf Hitler.'"90 Indeed, it is possible that the key to the legitimacy of the regime in the eyes of the majority of the people lies in Hitler's success in acquiring a status which put him above day-to-day domestic politics, so that he and the regime as such, which was identified with him, were immune from criticism, unlike specific policies and actions which were identified with other individuals or particular organisations and which it was assumed he would have disapproved of had he had knowledge of them.
Notes


3. There are files containing such reports in many state archives, particularly those in Bavaria. A collection of these focusing primarily on the position of the churches is in the process of publication in several volumes: *Die Kirchliche Lage in Bayern nach den Regierungspräsidentenberichten 1933-1943*, vols. 1-3, ed. Helmut Witetschek, vol. 4 ed. Walter Ziegler (Mainz, 1966-73). Dr Ian Kershaw of the University of Manchester is at present engaged on a study of public opinion in Bavaria during the Third Reich and I am grateful to him for a number of helpful comments. For the wartime period in Germany as a whole see the collection of SD reports in H. Boberach, *Meldungen aus dem Reich* (Neuwied, 1965) and the study based on them by M. Steinert, *Hitler's Krieg und die Deutschen: Stimmung und Haltung der Deutschen Bevölkerung im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Düsseldorf, 1970). See also the collection of Regierungspräsidenten reports for the Aachen area in B. Vollmer, *Volks-opposition im Polizeistaat. Gestapo und Regierungspräsidentenberichte 1934 bis 1936* (Stuttgart, 1957); the Gestapo reports for Baden in Jörg Schadt, (ed.), *Verfolgung und Widerstand unter dem Nationalsozialismus in Baden* (Stuttgart, 1975) and the miscellaneous collection of material in F.B. Heyen (ed.), *Nationalsozialismus im Alltag* (Boppard, 1967).

4. For an interesting attempt at such a comparison see T.H. Tilton, *Nazism, Neo-Nazism and the Peasantry* (Bloomington, 1975).

5. For an analysis of electoral support for the resistance to Nazism see the maps and figures in A. Milatz, *Wähler und Wahlen in der Weimarer Republik* (Bonn, 1965).


7. ibid. p. 104.

8. ibid. p. 44.


10. ibid.


12. For the following see *Die Wirtschaftsstruktur im Bezirk des Landesarbeitsamtes Niedersachsen*. Bearbeitet im Landesarbeitsamt Niedersachsen (Hannover, 1930), pp. 1, 4-5, 80.


15. For a study of Catholic youth organisations in the Third Reich which concentrates mainly on the Rhineland see Barbara Schellenberger, *Katholische Jugend und Drittes Reich* (Mainz, 1975).

16. See the correspondence in Niedersächsisches Staatsarchiv Oldenburg
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(NStAO) 134/1158.
17. cf. Lewy, op.cit., pp. 82-3.
27. ibid. p. 25.
28. For the report on these events by Anton Kohnen, the top civil servant in Pauly’s ministry, dated 5 November see NStAO 134/1232.
30. A copy is in NStAO 134/1232.
31. For the following see Münzbrock op.cit. pp. 55 ff.
32. See the Bericht der Bischöflichen Commissariat an den Bischof in Münster. Copy in Bundesarchiv (BA) NS8/256.
34. Vorwerk to Pauly 16.11.1936 NStAO 134/1232.
35. ibid.
36. Vorwerk to Pauly 25.11.1936, ibid.
37. ibid.
38. ibid.
39. See the correspondence of the headmasters of Oldenburg schools in ibid.
40. For the following see: Bericht der Bischöflichen Commissariat an den Bischof in Münster. Abschrift in BA NS 8/256, and Göken op.cit. pp. 42 ff.
42. Göken op.cit. pp. 38 ff.
43. They are contained in NStAO 134/1232.
44. cf. Bericht op.cit. and Göken op.cit. pp. 53 ff.
45. For the following see ibid.
46. cf. Bericht op.cit.
47. NStAO 134/1232.
49. cf. Bericht op.cit.
51. These and the following reports are contained in NStAO 134/1232.
52. The Bürgermeister of Gemeinde Essen to the Minister der Kirchen und Schulen durch den Herrn Amtshauptmann des Amts Cloppenburg 20.11.1936 in ibid.
53. NStAO 134/1232.
54. NStAO 134/1232.
55. cf. Röver speech in Cloppenburg on 25 November in BA NS 8/256.
57. cf. Münzebrock op.cit., p. 60.
58. For descriptions of the meeting see Göken op.cit., pp. 61 ff., Münzebrock, op.cit. pp. 61-2, and the report of an eye-witness in BA NS 8/256.
60. Copy of Röver’s speech in BA NS 8/256.
61. Copy of decree in NStAO 134/1232.
62. See the article ‘Gaulüte Carl Röver spricht in zwei eindrucksvollen Versammlungen’ in Nachrichten für Stadt und Land, 26.11.1936.
63. For the following see Göken, op.cit., pp. 74 ff.
64. An unsigned copy of the declaration is in BA NS 8/152.
69. ibid.
70. See Pauly’s minute dated 4.2.1937 in NStAO 134/1232.
71. See Pauly’s minute on a petition received on 19.12.1936 in ibid.
74. ibid., p. 158 and Münzebrock op.cit. pp. 49 ff.
75. ibid.
76. cf. The Persecution of the Catholic Church in the Third Reich, op.cit. pp. 43-44.
78. Göken, op.cit., p. 80.
81. cf. Münzebrock, op.cit., p. 64.
82. See for example the sensitivity of the regime towards working-class discontent as described in T.W. Mason, ‘Labour in the Third Reich 1933-1939’, Past and Present, XXIV, 1964, pp. 139-41.
85. cf. Münzebrock, op.cit., p. 94.
86. ibid. p. 95.
88. For the following see the very suggestive analysis in Carl Amery, Die Kapitulation oder Deutscher Katholizismus heute (Reinbeck b. Hamburg, 1963) pp. 20 ff.
89. Dated 20.11.1936, in NStAO 134/1232.
90. Bürgermeister Prüllage to the Amtshauptmann in Cloppenburg 19.11.1936 in ibid.