Henkel during National Socialism

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The stance of the Henkel company and its leading family members toward National Socialism was shaped by a tension between initial restraint, pragmatic adaptation, and later active involvement.

Hugo Henkel, who assumed sole leadership of the company after the deaths of his brother and father in January and March 1930, was originally a committed liberal. He was politically active in the left-liberal German Democratic Party (DDP) and served in local politics in Düsseldorf until 1933. His entrepreneurial focus was strongly oriented toward technology, efficiency, and expanding international markets. Politically, he rarely spoke out, but the company magazine "Blätter vom Hause," which generally avoided political topics for the sake of labor peace, revealed a certain republican attitude until the early 1930s.

Hugo Henkel initially viewed the Nazi seizure of power in January 1933 with skepticism. In a letter to his son Jost in March 1933, he referred to it as an "interesting time." Nevertheless, he joined the NSDAP on May 1, 1933 – the last day before the admission freeze. After the war, he justified this step as a protective measure for the company. Eyewitnesses such as the Social Democratic works council chairman Viktor Kirberg (in office until 1933 and after 1945) confirmed after 1945 that Hugo Henkel had tried to shield the company from political interference.

In reality, Hugo Henkel quickly adapted to the new regime. He remained a member of the city council, which had been brought into line with Nazi policy, until 1942, and was active in numerous Nazi-affiliated committees. In public appearances, he praised Adolf Hitler's leadership, and the company participated in Nazi propaganda campaigns such as the "Leistungskampf der deutschen Betriebe" (Performance Contest of German Companies.) In 1938, following a tax and foreign exchange affair, he was ousted from company leadership by his power-driven nephew Werner Lüps (1906–1942) and retired to his country estate.

Hugo Henkel's sons also joined the NSDAP. Jost Henkel, who joined the company in 1933, became a party member in 1937. After the war, he claimed that support for Hitler was motivated by a desire to combat communism and a belief that the Chancellor could later be "tamed" – a view common among industrialists. Konrad Henkel, the younger brother, joined the party in 1939 but was not an active supporter.

Overall, however, political statements by company management and family members remained the exception during these years. There is no clear ideological line within the family; rather, pragmatic opportunism prevailed.

The Political Attitude of the Henkel Workforce

The political views of Henkel's workforce during the Nazi era were far from uniform and reflected the societal tensions and upheavals of the time. Growing Nazi influence and increasing conformity led to a complex picture that included adaptation and passive complicity.

On March 21, 1933, works council elections were held at Henkel. At that time, the NSDAP had already seized political power, but not all institutions had been brought into line yet. Voter turnout among workers was around 85 percent, indicating high political interest and a sense of responsibility. The results showed a clear majority for the Social Democratic list, which received 66.5 percent of the votes. Long-time Social Democratic works council chairman Viktor Kirberg was re-elected. Christian unions received 11.9 percent, while the newly formed Nazi list garnered 20.5 percent.

Among white-collar employees, the situation was markedly different. Here, the Nazis received 542 votes and secured four of the five seats on the employee council. According to Kirberg, the proportion of NSDAP supporters among white-collar employees was around 90 percent, in stark contrast to the workers.

At the executive level, affiliation with the NSDAP was particularly strong: of 13 managing directors at the end of the war, 12 were NSDAP members. Among plant managers, engineers, and commercial department heads, party membership exceeded 40 percent. Party affiliation increasingly became a prerequisite for career advancement.

Despite the Social Democrats' electoral success, the works council was brought into line by the NSDAP as early as May 1933. Kirberg was removed but continued to work as a foreman under company management.

The works council was replaced by the so-called "Council of Trust," whose members were no longer freely elected but appointed by company management and the NSBO (National Socialist Factory Cell Organization) representative. The first "election" in 1934 was a farce: only 837 of 2,284 votes were "fully approving," and 436 were invalid. The second election in 1935 also yielded disappointing results for the Nazi unity list. To avoid further embarrassment, elections were abolished by law in 1936.

Despite all indoctrination efforts by the Nazi leadership, many employees remained ambivalent. Nazi ideology was not universally embraced. Participation in Nazi events was often coerced or motivated by fear of disadvantages. At the same time, there were also committed National Socialists, particularly among white-collar employees and executives.

Henkel Under the Leadership of Werner Lüps

Werner Lüps, grandson of company founder Fritz Henkel and son of Emmy Lüps (née Henkel), was one of the most flamboyant and controversial figures in the company's history during the Nazi era. Without academic training but with a strong instinct for power and close ties to the NSDAP – especially to Hermann Göring's circle – Lüps rose to prominence within the company in the 1930s.

He joined the NSDAP in 1933 and used his political connections to advance within the firm. With his extravagant lifestyle and confident demeanor, Lüps embodied the archetype of the young, dynamic, Nazi-influenced business executive.

His rise was made possible by a scheme against his uncle Hugo Henkel. In 1936, Hugo Henkel had been involved in a tax affair that had already severely damaged his reputation. Lüps seized the opportunity to discredit Hugo Henkel with the Nazi authorities. He collected incriminating statements, including Hugo Henkel's allegedly critical remarks about the Nazi regime, which Lüps claimed to have noted down on a menu card during a meeting. With Göring's support, Hugo Henkel was forced to resign in 1938; he had to move to the supervisory board and no longer had any active influence on the development of the company.

Lüps then took over as "operations manager" of the company. Under his leadership, Henkel was systematically brought into line with Nazi ideology. In 1940, the company was honored as a "National Socialist Model Company." Lüps presented himself as a model economic leader, organizing marches, company roll calls, and large-scale propaganda events. His proximity to the NSDAP was motivated not only by ideology, but also by economic considerations.

He was particularly ambitious in his attempt to take over Degussa and transform Henkel into a second major chemical company alongside IG Farben. By 1942, Henkel held about 50 percent of Degussa shares. Lüps planned a comprehensive restructuring of the group, but his aggressive strategy increasingly met resistance – within the company, the Henkel family and from Nazi authorities.

In spring 1942, the internal power struggle escalated. Lüps again accused Hugo Henkel and other executives of bribery. The supervisory board, supported by Düsseldorf Gauleiter Friedrich Karl Florian, opposed him. Lüps was placed on leave and banned from the premises. He sought support from Göring but was abandoned.

On April 16, 1942, Werner Lüps died in a car accident after driving into a bomb crater on his way back from Berlin. His death was initially staged with great splendor – the funeral resembled a state ceremony.

After his death, Dr. Jost Henkel (1909–1961), Hugo Henkel's eldest son, became "operations manager." Dr. Hermann Richter (1903–1982) took over as chairman of the board. The company increasingly distanced itself from Lüps and portrayed him in the post-war period as the sole "black sheep" – a representation that does not do justice to historical reality. Hugo Henkel, too, had conformed to the Nazi regime more than was necessary.

"Aryanizations"

During the National Socialist era, Henkel participated in several cases of so-called "Aryanizations" – the systematic expropriation of Jewish entrepreneurs. These actions primarily served Henkel's economic interests. The company sought access to raw materials, especially fat quotas for soap and detergent production, expansion of production capacities, and securing market shares. Henkel usually did not act directly but used subsidiaries such as Dreiring, Thompson, or Dehydag as buyers.

The "Aryanizations" occurred in a political and economic climate that systematically forced Jewish entrepreneurs to give up their businesses through repression, tax demands, and foreign exchange restrictions. Henkel deliberately took advantage of these opportunities to acquire companies at low cost. Although the transactions were formally conducted in a legally correct manner, Henkel had the discretion to refrain from participating.

The "Aryanizations" affected, among others, the soap and candle factory Heilborn KG in Frankfurt an der Oder (1937), the company Dr. Ing. Ludwig Schön in Vienna (1938), Evona GmbH in Prague (1939), Fistag AG in Vysočany (1940–41), and Hansa Seifenfabrik in Danzig (1938). In many cases, Henkel was not the only interested party and had to compete with other German or foreign companies – sometimes with support from Nazi authorities.

After the war, Henkel attempted to downplay its role, claiming it had acted “in good faith.” However, this portrayal is not supported by the available sources. After 1945, Henkel had to compensate the original owners in several restitution proceedings.

Despite this involvement in the “Aryanization” process, there were also cases of personal support provided to Jewish citizens. For instance, the mother of one of Konrad Henkel’s school friends was saved from deportation through personal intervention. However, such isolated cases do not alter Henkel’s fundamental shared responsibility for the economic exclusion and expropriation of Jewish citizens.

Forced Labor at Henkel During National Socialism

With the outbreak of World War II, Henkel – like most other German industrial companies – faced a growing shortage of labor. The conscription of numerous men into the Wehrmacht forced Henkel to rely on foreign workers to maintain production. Areas deemed critical to the war effort, such as the manufacture of detergents, adhesives, and chemical products, were particularly affected.

Foreign and forced laborers came to Henkel through various channels. Civilian workers were assigned via the Düsseldorf employment office, while prisoners of war were provided by the Wehrmacht command and regional base camps. From 1943 onward, French workers were forcibly recruited by the Vichy regime and sent to Germany. So-called “Eastern workers” from the Soviet Union were also deported and subjected to especially harsh conditions.

At the Düsseldorf-Holthausen site, the proportion of foreign workers peaked at 15.8 percent on December 31, 1943. They came from the Soviet Union, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Poland, Luxembourg, Croatia, Hungary, Czechia, and Slovakia. In other plants, such as Genthin and Rodleben, the number of forced laborers was significantly higher – at times, they made up more than half of the workforce.

There was a significant difference between civilian forced laborers and prisoners of war. The latter were under the command of the Wehrmacht and were housed in separate camps. While the Geneva Convention was partially respected in the case of Western prisoners of war, Soviet prisoners were subjected to significantly worse conditions. Civilian forced laborers, on the other hand, were under the control of the labor offices and were housed in factory camps, often separated according to nationality.

Living conditions for foreign and forced laborers at Henkel varied widely. Western workers received better food and medical care than “Eastern workers.” Housing consisted of barracks on or near company premises. Working hours ranged from 47 to 60 hours per week. Although wages were formally aligned with German standards, deductions, and special regulations – especially for “Eastern workers” – significantly reduced actual pay.

Forced laborers were employed in nearly all areas of the company: production, packaging, gardening, kitchen, fire brigade, and harbor operations.

Control over forced laborers was strict. Contact with German civilians, especially women, was prohibited and severely punished. In 1943, two Ukrainian women were handed over to the Gestapo for leaving the camp without permission. Three Soviet prisoners of war died at Henkel – two from poisoning after allegedly ingesting chemicals by accident, and one was shot following an escape attempt.

Despite the difficult conditions, there was hardly any open resistance. In the final months of the war, the situation of the forced laborers deteriorated further. After the liberation of Düsseldorf and the occupation of the Henkel plant by the Allies in April 1945, many of them initially remained in the camps, especially the "Eastern workers," who, as so-called "Displaced Persons," lived in a legal and social no-man's-land.

Henkel benefited economically from forced labor, although its profitability is difficult to quantify. Like many other companies, Henkel came to terms with the system out of business-related calculation. Responsibility for the fate of the forced laborers was largely ignored.

Together with other German companies that had employed forced laborers during World War II, Henkel joined the German business community's foundation initiative "Erinnerung, Verantwortung, Zukunft" ("Remembrance, Responsibility and Future") in 2000.

Henkel, the "Fat Gap," and Whaling During National Socialism

As part of the Nazi regime's push for economic self-sufficiency, German industry came under increasing pressure to reduce its dependence on imported raw materials. The chemical industry, including Henkel, was particularly affected. The company relied on vegetable oils and animal fats for the production of its detergents and cleaning agents. These raw materials were scarce and expensive, as Germany imported more than half of its fat requirements. The resulting so-called "fat gap" – the difference between demand and domestic production – became a central problem for Henkel.

Efforts to promote the use of domestic fats through blending regulations had already begun during the Weimar Republic. After 1933, the Nazi regime established the "Reich Office for Industrial Fats" (RIF) to control imports and centralize distribution. Henkel, which consumed around 70 percent of Germany's technical fats, was particularly affected. The fat content in the main product Persil had to be reduced from 42 percent to 35 percent in 1934 due to a government order, which also significantly reduced the quality of the detergent.

To address the fat gap, Henkel invested heavily in research and development of synthetic alternatives. In collaboration with chemist Arthur Imhausen, the company founded Deutsche Fettsäure-Werke GmbH in Witten an der Ruhr in 1936. Starting in 1937, synthetic fatty acids were successfully produced from paraffin sludge – a byproduct of coal processing. By 1940, the plant was producing 30,000 tons annually, making it the most important source of synthetic substitutes.

In parallel, Henkel pursued another, albeit unusual, source of raw materials: whaling. In the 1930s, whale oil was identified as a potential substitute for vegetable fats. In 1935, Henkel helped establish the First German Whaling Company (EDWG) and converted the freighter Württemberg into the whaling mother ship Jan Wellem. The first expedition to Antarctica in 1936/37 was technically successful, with over 1,000 whales caught. Economically, however, the expedition was a disaster. Despite state subsidies, costs far exceeded revenues. Subsequent expeditions in 1937/38 and 1938/39 also ran at a loss.

Despite poor financial returns, whaling was heavily exploited for propaganda purposes. UFA films, press reports, and visual media portrayed the enterprise as a heroic adventure in service of national resource supply. Ultimately, whaling contributed only about two percent toward closing the fat gap. With the outbreak of World War II, the ship was taken over by the navy and damaged in 1940. The project ended with significant losses.

Conclusion

The history of Henkel during National Socialism is an example of the widespread gradual adaptation of an originally liberal family business to the dictatorship. Overall, those responsible at Henkel, like many other, acted out of economic calculation and largely ignored the moral dimension. The picture is mixed when it comes to the workforce: while many workers were merely followers, support for the NSDAP was high among employees and managers. The political development at Henkel is typical of many large German companies at that time: initial distance gave way to pragmatic adaptation and involvement in the Nazi regime.