Hitler Exhibit Explores a Wider Circle of Guilt

By MICHAEL SLACKMAN

BERLIN — As artifacts go, they are mere trinkets — an old purse, playing cards, a lantern. Even the display that caused the crowds to stop and stare is a simple embroidered tapestry, stitched by village women.

But the exhibits that opened Friday at the German Historical Museum are intentionally prosaic: they emphasize the everyday way that ordinary Germans once accepted, and often celebrated, Hitler.

The household items had Nazi logos and colors. The tapestry, a tribute to the union of church, state and party, was woven by a church congregation at the behest of their priest.

“This is what we call self-mobilization of society,” said Hans-Ulrich Thamer, one of three curators to assemble the exhibit at the German Historical Museum. “As a person, Hitler was a very ordinary man. He was nothing without the people.”

This show, “Hitler and the Germans: Nation and Crime,” opened Friday. It was billed as the first in Germany since the end of World War II to focus exclusively on Adolf Hitler. Germany outlaws public displays of some Nazi symbols, and the curators took care to avoid showing items that appeared to glorify Hitler. His uniforms, for example, remained in storage.

Instead, the show focuses on the society that nurtured and empowered him. It is not the first time historians have argued that Hitler did not corral the Germans as much as the Germans elevated Hitler. But one curator said the message was arguably more vital for Germany now than at any time in the past six decades, as rising nationalism, more open hostility to immigrants and a generational disconnect from the events of the Nazi era have older Germans concerned about repeating the past.

“The only hope for stopping extremists is to isolate them from society so that they are separated, so they do not have a relationship with the bourgeoisie and the other classes,” Mr. Thamer said. “The Nazis were members of high society. This was the dangerous moment.
“This we have to avoid from happening.”

Increasingly, Germans have put the guilt of the past behind them, reasserting their pride in national identity in many positive ways. But there also have been troubling signs seeping from the margins into the mainstream.

A best-selling book by a former banker promoted genetic theories of intelligence and said that Muslims were “dumbing down” society. A leading politician condemned “alien cultures.” A new right-wing party recently attracted hundreds to a speech by the far-right Dutch politician Geert Wilders.

Even government officials say that immigrant children are picking on native Germans. The media is filled daily with reports of conflict between immigrants, especially Muslims, and Germans.

The planners began discussing this kind of show 10 years ago, Mr. Thamer said. An expert committee viewed it as part of a continuum of penance and awareness that historians say began with the Auschwitz trials.

The process did not always go smoothly. A 1995 exhibition in Hamburg was widely condemned for showing that the Wehrmacht, or regular army, committed atrocities on the eastern front, just like the SS, the Nazi special police. The public was not ready to widen the sense of responsibility for Nazi-era wrongs.

But for this show, museum officials thought the time would be right. And in the end, they said, the timing added special value.

“It would be presumptuous to say that an exhibition could counter the radiance of populism,” said Rudolf Trabold, spokesman for the museum. “We try to achieve what we can afford, and to achieve our mission. But if that outshines the populist power of a Geert Wilders, I myself would not presume to say.”

As he walked through the exhibit on Friday, Eric Pignolet, a Belgian who has lived in Berlin for 22 years, said he was pleased that Germans were no longer saying, “I didn’t know.” But he said he was troubled by parallels between then and now.

“I think if you had someone like him today, it could be very dangerous,” he said halfway through his walk through the displays about Hitler. “There are a lot of people out there who want jobs, who are not happy with the political leadership, who would vote for someone like him if he came along.”
The line had already formed when the museum doors opened at 10 a.m. An estimated 3,000 visitors paid the $8.40 admission fee to see the nearly 1,000 items, including photographs, videos, uniforms and a narrative that explained the early appeal of a man and a party that offered jobs, pride and a sense of purpose, while employing wholesale violence and brutality to those who did not go along.

“This exhibition is about Hitler and the Germans — meaning the social and political and individual processes by which much of the German people became enablers, colluders, co-criminals in the Holocaust,” said Constanze Stelzenmüller, a senior trans-Atlantic fellow with the German Marshall Fund of the United States in Berlin. “That this was so is now a mainstream view, rejected only by a small minority of very elderly and deluded people, or the German extreme right-wing fringe. But it took us a while to get there.”

The museum placed the display downstairs, below street level, so it was dark and silent. Three images of Hitler projected on a mesh screen opened the show; behind them were pictures of cheering crowds, marching soldiers and other demonstrations of popular support. Around the corner were details of how Hitler was embraced early on, by the elite in Munich. “The wives of entrepreneurs, such as Elsa Bruckhmann, vied to be the first to drag Hitler” to a social event, one display said.

“Our teachers in the past, were integrated in that system, and I can remember they wanted to tell us that the German people became the first victim of Hitler, that they were practically mugged,” said Klaus Peter Triebel from Seefeld, near Munich.

The exhibit explains the early appeal of the Nazis, who demonstrated a keen appreciation for the politics of populism’s creating a sense of unity and purpose: “Attending popular sports events, film premiers, they dedicated autbahns and new industrial builds,” read a display.

There were also the familiar striped uniforms forced on prisoners in the concentration camps, and the cold calculation in maps that showed the division of Poland between Germany and Russia.

But over and over, the point was spelled out clearly in the exhibit’s plaques like one, near letters written by children who were sent off to concentration camps, that said: “Hitler was able to implement his military and extermination objectives because the military and economic elites were willing to carry out his war.”

The exhibit, with all its photographs of young and old adoring Hitler, also sought to dispel the notion that the Nazi spirit was simply impossible to resist. It held up Johann Georg Elser as proof that “it was possible for an individual to develop into a resistance fighter.”
Mr. Elser was a carpenter who tried to kill Hitler at the outset of the war and was hanged for his actions.

His story, however, left some viewers to wonder why their parents and grandparents had not rejected Hitler. Why everyone went mad.

“My father was a Hitler Youth,” said Gutfreund Keller, as she walked through the exhibit with her husband and two daughters. “It’s hard to understand.”

Stefan Pauly contributed reporting.