

## The Nazis and the German Population: A Faustian Deal?

*Eric A. Johnson, Nazi Terror. The Gestapo, Jews, and Ordinary Germans, New York: Basic Books, 2000, 636 pp.*

Reviewed by

**David Bankier**

Most books, both scholarly and popular, written on relations between the Gestapo and the German population and published up to the early 1990s, focused on the leaderships of the organizations that powered the terror and determined its contours. These books portray the Nazi secret police as omnipotent and the population as an amorphous society that was liable to oppression and was unable to respond. This historical portrayal explained the lack of resistance to the regime. As the Nazi state was a police state, so to speak, the individual had no opportunity to take issue with its policies, let alone oppose them.<sup>1</sup>

Studies published in the past decade have begun to demystify the Gestapo by reexamining this picture. These studies have found that the German population had volunteered to assist the apparatus of oppression in its actions, including the persecution of Jews. According to the new approach, the Gestapo did not resemble the Soviet KGB, or the Romanian Securitate, or the East German Stasi. The Gestapo was a mechanism that reacted to events more than it initiated them. Chronically short of manpower, it did not post a secret agent to every street corner. On the contrary: since it did not have enough spies to meet its needs, it had to rely on a cooperative population for information and as a basis for its police actions. The German public did cooperate, and, for this reason, German society became self-policing.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Edward Crankshaw, *Gestapo: Instrument of Tyranny* (London: Putnam, 1956); Jacques Delarue, *Histoire de la Gestapo* (Paris: Fayard, 1962); Arnold Roger Manvell, *SS and Gestapo: Rule by Terror* (London: Macdonald, 1970); Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head: The Story of Hitler's SS* (New York: Ballantine, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy 1933-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) and idem, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi*

Eric Johnson's book is a study in micro-history, a test case of three cities in the Rhineland - Köln, Krefeld, and Bergheim - that fits into the revisionist trend in the research on the Gestapo. The book is the product of a six-year project that looked into 1,100 files from the Gestapo archives in Köln and the special tribunals that the Nazis established to prosecute suspected enemies of the regime. Most persons accused of political crimes - and of offenses related to a breach of state security in wartime - were, of course, referred to the special tribunals. The best known was the Volksgerichtshof in Berlin, run by Justice Minister Roland Freisler.<sup>3</sup>

To support his conclusions, Johnson also studied archive material from the hearings of the de-Nazification committees and, as a complementary source, interviewed contemporaries - survivors, ordinary Germans, and Gestapo officials. To set this oral documentation project in motion, he distributed, in 1993, a questionnaire among 300 men and women inhabitants of Köln who were born before 1929. About 200 respondents filled in the questionnaire. Johnson interviewed several of them and also conducted follow-up interviews.

The author wishes to answer several questions on this empirical basis: what coercive power did the Gestapo possess? Did the Gestapo terrorize ordinary civilians in their daily lives and, if it did, did the entire population suffer or was the terror limited to specific groups?

Johnson indeed shows that the Gestapo had little coercive power over German society. He does not deny that terror was practiced but claims that it did not affect the ordinary German. The Gestapo neither imposed nor wished to impose a climate of terror and did not force Germans to obey orders, maintain silence, and mindlessly adopt the party line as their neighbors were arrested, deported, and murdered.

---

*Germany* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Gisela Diewald-Kerkmann, *Politische Denunziation im NS-Regime oder die kleine Macht der "Volksgenossen"* (Bonn: J.H.W. Dietz, 1995); Gerhard Paul and Klaus Michael Mallmann, eds., *Die Gestapo: Mythos und Realität* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995) and idem, eds., *Die Gestapo im Zweiten Weltkrieg. "Heimatfront" und besetztes Europa* (Darmstadt: Primus, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Hans-Joachim Wolfgang Koch, *In the Name of the Volk. Political Justice in Hitler's Germany* (London: Tauris, 1989); Richard J. Evans, *Rituals of Retribution. Capital Punishment in Germany 1600-1987* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

One may, in Johnson's opinion, gauge the prevalent sociopolitical climate in the Third Reich by examining denunciations. The number of informers was relatively small - 1 or 2 percent of the population - and denunciation usually occurred in the wake of disputes between neighbors; seldom did it have an ideological or political background. On this issue, then, Johnson's conclusions are almost consistent with those of other researchers who studied denunciations, such as Robert Gellately, Christl Wickert, and Inge Marssolek.<sup>4</sup> As for the gender and age profile of the typical informer, Johnson found that most were adult men and Nazi party members; fewer were women and young people. This conclusion is certainly unexpected in view of the opinion, commonly held by the public at large, that young fanatics from the Hitlerjugend were the ones most strongly inclined to denounce. Johnson also found no cases of denunciation of parents by their children.

The German population, Johnson maintains, perceived Gestapo terror not as a threat but as an instrument that served the population's interests, especially the need for personal security and membership in the racial community (*Volksgemeinschaft*). He uses statistical tables to show that the oppression was selective and overlooked most of German society. This is because the Gestapo targeted specific enemies for attack: foremost the political left and the Jews and, to a lesser extent, religious and social groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholic priests, and Protestant ministers, as well as homosexuals and asocials. In the war years, the roster of victims of Gestapo actions expanded to include slave laborers who had been brought to Germany from the occupied countries.

A random sample of Gestapo interrogations in Krefeld, for example, shows that more than half of those interrogated and punished belonged to three groups: Jews, left-wing activists, and church officials, and it is totally clear that these three groups made up a small fraction of the population of the area.<sup>5</sup> Another table, summarizing the results of cases presented to the

---

<sup>4</sup> Gellately, *Gestapo and German Society*; Christl Wickert, "Popular Attitudes to National Socialist Antisemitism: Denunciations for 'Insidious Offenses' and 'Racial Ignominy,'" in David Bankier, ed., *Probing the Depths of German Antisemitism* (New York, Oxford, Jerusalem: Beghahn and Yad Vashem, 2000), pp. 282-295; Inge Marssolek, et al., eds., *Denunziation. Historische, juristische und psychologische Aspekte* (Tübingen: Edition Diskord, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> The Krefeld Gestapo's Caseload 1933-1939, Table 7.1, p. 285.

special tribunals, shows that a large proportion of cases were closed without criminal proceedings against defendants who belonged to the three aforementioned groups: Jews, left-wing activists, religious dissidents, and social deviants.<sup>6</sup> The situation of the Jews worsened when the war began, but most Germans, as they admit in their interviews with Johnson, were not afraid of the Gestapo. Quite the contrary: they danced to the strains of forbidden jazz, surreptitiously listened to broadcasts of the BBC, and spread jokes about the regime.

It is true that defendants who were brought before Roland Freisler's folk tribunals almost always received the death penalty. From the time it was established, in July 1934, to the assassination attempt against Hitler in July 1944, this tribunal sentenced more than 5,000 people to death. However, the situation in the local courts was different. Johnson shows that most cases in the courts he studied were closed without litigation, or ended with light penalties for the accused. Johnson's interviews and questionnaires confirm that most Germans felt they could complain privately, crack jokes at the Nazis' expense, listen to BBC radio illegally, and so on, with no fear of severe punishment. In other words, the Germans' allegiance and silence did not originate in fear of denunciation.

If they were not paralyzed by fear, why then did they not marshal the courage to protest against the assaults on minorities in their own country and the murder of millions of Jews in occupied Europe?

The answer, in the author's opinion, has to do with the fact that less than 1 percent of the ordinary German population was persecuted by the Gestapo, and they, as stated, were Jews, political activists, religious dissidents, and social deviants. According to Johnson, the Nazis and the German population concluded a Faustian deal of sorts - the population turned a blind eye to the Gestapo's abuse of the persecuted minorities and remained silent when reports about murders appeared; in return, the Nazis overlooked minor infractions by ordinary Germans.

Johnson's book is very readable; it is well written and abounds with examples that make the ongoing narrative easy to follow. There is an

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Outcome of Krefeld Gestapo Cases, by Category of Defendant, 1933-1945, Table 9.1, p. 356.

abundance of tables, ample annotation, and a bibliography. As for its contribution to the research, the book in part confirms and expands upon our existing knowledge about the reports on extermination that had circulated in German public circles; in part, it presents interesting research finds. Johnson seems to be the first researcher, for example, who systematically examined transcripts of German-language broadcasts of the BBC - kept in the British radio archives in Reading - for information on what had been broadcast about the murder of European Jewry. Indeed, the German-language station had two daily broadcasts during the war, fifteen to thirty minutes in length, and a few of them included reports about the extermination of the Jews. Obviously, these transcripts shed light on the British broadcasting policy but not on the extent to which the Germans absorbed the reports; however, several diaries of German contemporaries show that the broadcasts were received and that some listeners believed the reports on the murder of the Jews.<sup>7</sup>

Johnson's explanation of the consensus Hitler enjoyed is definitely more sophisticated than Daniel Goldhagen's, but it, too, is not free of problems. First, Johnson's working hypothesis is that the cities chosen - Köln, Krefeld, and Bergheim - are representative of the historical reality that prevailed elsewhere in Germany and that, accordingly, one may generalize about all of Germany on the basis of the conclusions adduced from these locations only. The three cities chosen are indeed differentiated in terms of size, level of urbanization, and social and economic structure. However, not everyone, I believe, would accept the author's working hypothesis that they constitute a representative sample of the entire country. After all, variables of size - large city, medium city, small city - cannot make the Rhineland representative of Germany in any respect, let alone in regard to the attitude toward the Jews. This is mainly because the Rhineland was politically and religiously unique and substantially different from other parts of Germany. The Rhineland was

---

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the diaries of Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933-1945*, 2 vols. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998 and 2000); Karl Dürkefälden, "Schreiben, wie es wirklich war," *Aufzeichnungen Karl Dürkefäldens aus den Jahren 1933-1945*, Herbert and Sibylle Obenaus, eds. (Hannover: Fackeltraeger, 1985). In regard to the BBC broadcasts, see David Bankier, *The Germans and the Final Solution. Public Opinion under Nazism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 113ff; and Jeremy D. Harris, "Broadcasting the Massacres: An Analysis of the BBC's Contemporary Coverage of the Holocaust," *Yad Vashem Studies*, 25 (1996), pp. 65-98.

largely Catholic and had a stronger liberal tradition than other areas in Germany. Furthermore, since the cities chosen had rather small Jewish populations, it is difficult to apply the conclusions adduced from these three provincial towns about the populations' attitude toward the Jews to centers such as Berlin, Frankfurt, or Hamburg.<sup>8</sup>

As for the documentary basis of his work, I find it puzzling that the author makes no reference whatsoever to the "situation reports" of the SD, the district governor (*Regierungspräsident*), the Gestapo station in Köln, or the president (*Oberpräsident*) of the Rhine province. He should have contrasted the depiction of regime-population relations in this material with that portrayed by his own documentation - even if the pictures are similar and, all the more so, if they clash.

With regard to the consensus, it seems to me that Johnson underestimates the repression apparatuses and overestimates the population's cooperation. First, "consensus" does not mean universal acceptance of the stipulations of Hitler and his henchmen. Second, the consensus was fluid and volatile. It is very likely that the regime attracted support when it attacked undesirable minorities. It stands to reason that campaigns against aliens, asocials, Gypsies, thieves, and alcoholics gained support and that the war on prostitution, homosexuals, and vagrancy was received favorably and helped generate a pro-Hitler consensus. It also stands to reason that the Nazis did not need terrorism to keep the regime stable and to benefit from a consensus until the German public internalized the significance of the military defeats in 1943.

The author is apparently correct when he states that were it not for the consensus and, at times, the support of the Germans, Hitler could not have annihilated European Jewry. However, the author does not seem to prove this; instead, he asserts it as a logical inference on the basis of the *argumentum ex silentio*. Johnson's consensus theorem suffers from a basic methodological problem that he does not solve adequately - it is based largely

---

<sup>8</sup> On attitudes toward Jews in different parts of Germany and the extent of the spread of antisemitism, see Oded Heilbronner, "The Role of Nazi Antisemitism in the Nazi Party's Activity and Propaganda: A Regional Historiographical Study," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 35 (1990), pp. 397-439. For a contrasting approach, see Yaakov Borut, "Antisemitism in Tourist Facilities in Weimar Germany," *Yad Vashem Studies*, 28 (2000), pp. 7-50.

on an examination of the German population's willingness to engage in denunciation. The fact that only 1 percent of the public volunteered to cooperate in this way makes it difficult to draw inferences about an entire population's willingness to collaborate.

The book also falls short in its discussion of Gestapo officers. Johnson sketches portraits of the station commander and the head of the Jewish desk at the Gestapo station in Köln and concludes that Gestapo men were not ordinary Germans. This conclusion is inconsistent with his own statistics. These show that most Gestapo operatives who had held middle and lower ranks in Köln and Krefeld before the Nazi accession to power had been professional policemen who had worked for the Ordnungspolizei and the Kriminalpolizei. When the Gestapo was established, they volunteered to serve and were trained for this service at the police school in Berlin-Charlottenburg.

Here it should be noted that Holger Berschel's research on the Gestapo station in Düsseldorf reached a similar conclusion, i.e., that most Gestapo operatives in Düsseldorf were police professionals and not officials brought in by the Nazis.<sup>9</sup> There may be reason to differentiate between station commanders, whom the Nazis brought in, and mid- and low-ranking officials who had been professional police back in the Weimar Republic days.<sup>10</sup>

As to the question of terror and manpower, while direct terror was not applied, it should be borne in mind that this was not an open society. Notably, Gestapo operatives were not alone in running the repression apparatus. The population was constantly monitored by some two million junior members of the party (*Blockwart*) who raised funds, made sure buildings were festooned with party emblems, and produced reports on the population's behavior. This description of affairs ties in with the conclusion that the German public was free to commit minor infractions as long as the Nazis were able to conduct their war.

This is a very provocative theory that requires a stronger factual basis. First, Johnson derives his knowledge of the population's behavior from interviews and not from contemporary documentation. Second, his reliance on

---

<sup>9</sup> Paul and Mallmann, *Die Gestapo im Zweiten Weltkrieg*.

<sup>10</sup> This possibility is supported by Michael Wildt's findings on the RSHA. See his *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes*, Habilitation, submitted to the University of Hanover, 2001 (unpublished).

testimonies that he took both from Nazis and from ordinary Germans is naive and insufficiently critical. Third, his theory - that the population held its silence amidst attacks on leftists as part of a Faustian deal - seems puzzling. After all, these attacks were not aimed at an inconsequential minority such as Jews or Jehovah's Witnesses, or against social misfits such as homosexuals or alcoholics. The targets were trade-union activists, Communists, and Socialists, who were far from an inconsequential minority if we recall that the Social-Democratic and the Communist parties had a combined strength of thirteen million votes before the Nazi accession to power.

These remarks, however, do not detract from the value of this interesting and instructive book, which helps to expand and deepen our knowledge about the Nazi terror apparatus and its relations with the German population.

*Translated from the Hebrew by Naftali Greenwood*

**Source: *Yad Vashem Studies*, XXX, Jerusalem, 2002, pp. 427-436.**