



Ulrich Herbert, ed. *National Socialist Extermination Policies: Contemporary Perspectives and Controversies. Volume 2, War and Genocide*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000. xxii + 336 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57181-751-8.

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Wrestling with the Holocaust

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A wise teacher once told me that the difference between historians and social scientists is that one group tells a story (the historians) and the other group tests a theory against empirical data (the social scientists). The goal for historians then is to approach the past without a preconceived analytical framework but to allow the sources to suggest a compelling framework of understanding; in other words, the study of history should not be driven by theories. Certainly a noble dream for most of us seeking answers about the past and an ideal easily distorted in the search for understanding. Perhaps this is why over-arching theories of causality have dominated Holocaust historiography for the past quarter-century. On the one side, intentionalists suggest that the Holocaust derived its impetus from either a single person or a single plan. On the other side, structuralists (or functionalists) have argued that the Holocaust evolved from a complex matrix of institutional chaos and political, economic, or military pragmatic policies. Convincing arguments are found on both sides of this discussion, yet neither theoretical model is wholly satisfactory on its own.

In the winter semester of 1996-1997 a new generation of Holocaust scholars presented a series of lectures designed "to leave behind the stale and rigid terms of Holocaust scholarship" (p. vii). Rather than starting with a shared set of common assumptions or meta-narratives about the nature of Holocaust historiography, these lectures redirected the discussion by posing a series of new questions. Ironically, the impetus for shifting the terrain of Holocaust studies was the publication of Daniel Goldhagen's controversial *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996). Popularly received but critically regarded as over-simplistic, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* achieved two important results. First, it moved the discussion back to the actual

events of the Holocaust. Second, the book forced a re-examination of two questions submerged in the public debates and controversies about the nature of the Holocaust: what role did "ordinary Germans" play in the Holocaust? And what about the masses (p. 3)? This seminar was a first step, and Ulrich Herbert's collection of essays, *National Socialist Extermination Policies*, offers a fuller exploration of these questions and issues.

National Socialist Extermination Policies may be divided into four main sections: ideology, political policies, rationalizing genocide, and perpetrators. Ulrich Herbert's essays, "Extermination Policy: New Answers and Questions about the History of the 'Holocaust' in German Historiography" and "The German Military Command in Paris and the Deportation of the French Jews," Walter Manoschek's "The Extermination of the Jews in Serbia," and Michael Zimmermann's "The National Socialist 'Solution of the Gypsy Question'" form the core of the new research dealing with ideological aspects of the Holocaust. Goetz Aly's "Jewish Resettlement: Reflections on the Political Prehistory of the Holocaust," Dieter Pohl's "The Murder of Jews in the General Government," and Thomas Sandkuehler's "Anti-Jewish Policy and the Murder of the Jews in the District of Galicia, 1941/42" examine the influences of political policies and the path to genocide. Christian Gerlach's "German Economic Interests, Occupation Policy, and the Murder of the Jews in Belorussia, 1941/43," Christoph Dieckmann's, "The War and the Killing of the Lithuanian Jews," and Sybille Steinbacher's "In the Shadow of Auschwitz: The Murder of the Jews of East Upper Silesia" appraise the rationalizations leading to mass murder. Finally, Karin Orth's "The Concentration Camp SS as a Functional Elite" delves into one specific group of perpetrators. The chapters are, of course, highly interrelated and resist such an artificial grouping. Such a categorization highlights many of the shared assumptions among the authors and emphasizes

a collective effort to move the field of Holocaust studies “beyond political structural analysis and philosophical truisms to the core historical and moral problem of the genocide of the Jews” (p. 3).

While the essays in *National Socialist Extermination Policies* seek to press new questions against a wide variety of new sources, the fundamental aspects of the intentionalist-functionalist debate continue to shape these new questions and, perhaps, to some extent the new answers. At the center of the intentionalist position is the role of antisemitism and the ideological commitment to carry out genocide. How committed to this project were the masses of the German population? The challenge for Holocaust scholars is balancing a popular need to answer the question “why,” while, still being aware of the complicated intersection of individual people and specific circumstances. It is for this reason that Herbert easily moves beyond Goldhagen’s “pithy formulations and simple, readily digested concepts or theories” (p. 44). Additionally, Herbert forcefully argues that stressing “the incomprehensibility of the event is as unhelpful as monocausal and superficially radical arguments that are said to have some kind of cathartic effect for the public” (p. 43). The answer for Herbert, as well as the other authors in this volume, lies in revealing the details of the people, places, and events, while pulling back the many layers that “flowed together into a uniform procedure—which was then called the ‘Final Solution’” (p. 155).

As an example of how to follow through on this new line of questioning and openness to new sources, Herbert’s study of Dr. Werner Best (in his role as head of the administrative staff section of the military administration in France) sets the standard. Best, a former head of personnel and organization, legal advisor, and chief ideologist for the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin, appears to have been an unlikely choice to hold such a high position within the Wehrmacht’s military administration in occupied France. Tracing Best’s activities in France, and placing the military administration in the context of other power centers, Herbert explodes the myth of separation—especially on ideological grounds—between the Party and the civilian or military wings of the Nazi State. Rather, “conflicts over secondary issues but agreement on principles” characterized the relationships of the military with the other centers of power (p. 136).

Walter Manoschek’s chapter on the extermination of Serbian Jews corroborates an increasing level of cooperation between military occupation forces and the specifically Nazi Party occupation forces (Einsatzgruppen and

Security Police [SD], in particular). Policies of mass murder carried out by the Einsatzgruppen or the SD were handed over to the army in October 1941 (p. 173), showing a remarkable degree of alignment among the civilian, military, and Party authorities in Serbia. “From the beginning, all occupation agencies were in complete agreement over the common goal to make the Jews ‘disappear’” as well as “precisely what means should be used to accomplish that goal” (p. 182). Similarly, Michael Zimmermann’s chapter on the “Gypsy Question” within National Socialist racialized ideologies underscores the place of ideology in the history and the historiography of the Holocaust (p. 189).

Together these chapters by Herbert, Manoschek, and Zimmermann offer compelling proof that the various institutional power bases lacked a common ideological motivation, even though they may have shared similar goals. Although this line of reasoning recalls the structuralist argument, and Zimmermann even places more credence in this proposition. He qualifies complete alignment with the structuralists with a position he defines as “conceptualist,” which “emphasizes the intentions and institutions of mass extermination” (p. 205-206). Instead of creating a middle-of-the-road position between the two poles, Zimmermann’s “conceptualism” opens a new path of exploration, tying together ideological and political-structural aspects of the Holocaust (p. 17ff).

Pushing the idea of “conceptualism” even further, the sections dealing with the political policies, rationalizing genocide, and the perpetrators attempt to bridge the intentionalist-structuralist divide. Dieter Pohl’s chapter on the Holocaust in the General Government characterizes the Nazi State not as a “perfectly functioning super-bureaucracy,” but rather as a “colonial administration that is as corrupt and criminal as it is dilettantish” (pp. 90-91). While displacing the over-arching appeal of the structuralist approach, Pohl’s conceptual use of colonialism comes dangerously close to the pitfall of replacing one structure with another.

From the perspective of this center-periphery model, work emerges as one of the central elements of the varied National Socialist policies of mass extermination. Thomas Sandkuehler’s, Christian Gerlach’s, and Christoph Dieckmann’s application of Pohl’s work, however, is reinforced with the equally consistent use of food and starvation as a weapon. At the heart of this colonial model are the perpetrators—the people who actively (or passively) carried out the policies on the path to genocide. As these authors clearly show, the perpetrators came from all walks of life and backgrounds. They were

radicals; conservatives; Nazi Party members; soldiers and generals in the Wehrmacht; ambassadors and diplomats; civilian administrators and bureaucrats; and, most importantly, “ordinary Germans” and others across Europe, who gave their tacit collaboration. As Herbert states in his introductory chapter, there was “no widespread ideological fanaticism, no mass hysteria, no ‘national project’ was needed for developing the National Socialist extermination policy to be tolerated or even approved” (p. 43). While there were certainly many committed to fulfilling the “Final Solution,” it was “indifference, disinterest, and a striking lack of moral values” among the masses that sealed the fate of European Jews and other minority population groups (p. 43).

This volume was published originally in German in 1998 as *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik, 1939-1945: Neue Forschungen und Kontroversen*. The relatively speedy English translation reflects not only the pace of global markets, but also the recognized im-

portance of these essays in moving the conversations among Holocaust scholars away from the quagmire of the intentionalist-structuralist debate. The valuable and extensive notes at the end of each chapter are augmented by the inclusion of recently accessible sources from the former Soviet Union, Poland, and other Eastern European countries. The bibliographic information alone is worth reading this book! Certainly, Ulrich Herbert’s *National Socialist Extermination Policies* will be required reading for all who seek to understand the Holocaust, which can only be done by “continuing to wrestle with the subject” (p. 44).

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