



Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam, Historisch-Dokumentarisches Department des Ministeriums für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten Russlands. *SSSR i germanskij vopros 1941-1949 [Die UdSSR und die deutsche Frage 1941-1949]*, Bd. 3: 6. Oktober 1946-15. Juni 1948: Dokumente iz Archiva vnešnej politiki Rossijskoj Federacii [*Dokumente aus dem Archiv der Russischen Föderation für Außenpolitik*], b. Moskau: Meždunarodnye otnošenija, 2003. 853 S. EUR 22.00 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-89295-731-7.

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Published on H-German (November, 2005)

The Power of Pointing Fingers

In 1944, as Stephanie Abke documents in her book *Sichtbare Zeichen unsichtbarer Kräfte*, a mailman in Wesermünde reported his female colleague to the authorities for stealing a letter addressed to a soldier that contained cigarettes, an incident for which the woman was sentenced to one year in prison (p. 198). Abke argues that the Wesermünde case, and scores of others like it, can tell us much about social order, community self-regulation, and power relationships in the Nazi period. In this regard, Abke is far from alone. She joins a literature on the subject that has grown dramatically since the 1990s, including several titles published in the same year as hers that deal entirely or in part with the question of how, why, and to what extent Germans reported on one another's illegal or nonconformist activities under National Socialism.[1] To Abke's tremendous credit, however, she does not end her study in 1945, but instead includes the entire postwar occupation period as well. She also includes, for example, the case of a relocated woman in 1947 who reported the farmer, with whom she and her two children were living, for illegally slaughtering livestock (p. 230). This decision to expand the chronological scope of her book reflects Abke's insistence that the practice of denunciation has existed throughout history and across political systems (she could easily have pointed to the nearly contemporaneous example of de-

nunciations in McCarthy-era America). As a result, her book contributes greatly to the scholarship on denunciation in twentieth-century Germany and, indeed, to understanding of the practice in general.

Abke bases her study on the court records and newspaper reports of a rural, agricultural region to the northwest of Hamburg, in present-day Lower Saxony. In addition to the region's good archival sources, Abke uses this narrow geographic focus to highlight the regional variation in responses to the Nazi regime that have sometimes gotten lost in general studies of German society and behavior during this period. Abke examines her sources with a sophisticated awareness of the multiple social functions of communication, and she engages with a number of disciplinary and methodological approaches, including history, sociology, psychology, and communications. "Denunciation," in Abke's analysis, included both informal channels of communication and gossip, through which the community attempted to regulate itself ("horizontal communication"), and official complaints to the authorities, through which the state intervened in that community ("vertical communication").

This broad understanding of denunciation is both a strength and an occasional weakness of the book, since it sometimes has the effect of blurring the meaning of

the term altogether. Abke wrestles in her introduction with defining *Denunziation* and, in particular, with distinguishing it from *Anzeige* (the more neutral term for reporting a crime), but she never arrives at a firm answer (p. 60). This lack of clarity may stem from the fact that denunciation had a different valence in the postwar occupation period than it did during the Nazi regime, and it certainly reflects Abke's chosen strategy of looking at larger patterns of communication, beyond the formally lodged complaints. Nevertheless, it does lead to questions in a number of her chosen cases. Does reporting the theft of a ham in 1942 (as in her example on pp. 179-80), for instance, constitute a denunciation? Certainly in the context of the wartime *Kriegswirtschaftsverordnung* and the imperative to equalize sacrifice, the report of a theft could have much wider social and political implications than merely maintaining law and order, but there should be a clearer determination of when such instances pertained.

In terms of the framework of her study, Abke has chosen to divide her cases according to the object of the denunciation, rather than the subject, and she declares her intention to study denunciation "jenseits moralischer Vorverurteilungen" (p. 25)]. Instead of categorizing and analyzing her examples according to the motivations of those who were doing the denouncing, in other words, Abke has done so according to the behaviors and actions being denounced. Abke does not disregard motivation, however. In fact, another of the book's great strengths is that it focuses on the social tensions that motivated denunciations in the first place, such as a desire to resolve private conflicts, a need to reconstruct the threatened social order, and even a fear of one's own denunciation. Abke stops short, though, of using her cases as a barometer of support for the Nazi regime and its policies or of the postwar occupation authorities. Instead, she argues that researchers need to avoid both a "fixation" on the perpetrators (p. 61) and the assumption that denunciation indicated agreement with Nazi goals (p. 67).

I certainly agree, up to a point, but I hesitate to jettison the question of morality altogether from scholarly assessments of denunciation. Although the practice of reporting on the activities and behavior of others may not necessarily indicate agreement with the policies and goals of the Nazi regime, it does indicate a lack of strong disagreement with them. Abke herself seems to acknowledge the difficulty of separating the study of denunciation from its larger political and moral implications. She concedes that the notion of "dishonorable motives" should play some part in its definition (p. 60), for in-

stance, and she notes that the denunciants were well aware that their targets faced dire consequences, as indicated by the often-heard threat that a simple report could land the target of such a report in a concentration camp (p. 94). Abke's insistence that denunciations not be viewed exclusively through a political-moral prism is both laudable and valuable, especially given her fine point that some "denunciations" reached the authorities inadvertently via gossip and rumor, but this should not mean that denunciations never be viewed through such a prism at all.

In the main section of her book (part I), Abke moves chronologically from 1933 to 1949, doing a good job of discussing which groups and behaviors tended to be targeted as the regime moved from its initial takeover of power to the implementation of its antisemitic policies, the preparations for war, the use of forced labor, its collapse in 1945, and finally into the postwar occupation. Rather than a gradual increase in the number of denunciations after 1933, Abke sees a sharp spike in the spring of 1933, which then tapered off until 1935. Socialists and Communists were the first targets, but since their identities were common knowledge to most people in the region, the denunciants tended to be SA men themselves, who used their denunciations to remove old elites and solidify their own positions of power.

Beginning in 1935, Abke finds a rise in the denunciation of Jews for overstepping their increasingly constricted civil rights. This practice drew on the pre-existing antisemitism in the region as well as on the ever tighter restrictions mandated by the Nuremberg Laws. Abke notes, however, the reluctance of some rural Germans to denounce Jews, given their longstanding personal and professional relationships with local Jewish cattle traders, veterinarians, and butchers. This section of the book is relatively short, perhaps given the paucity of sources and the fact that by 1938, Jewish life in the region had been almost completely extinguished.

As the war began, denunciations increasingly targeted those who either shirked their larger social responsibilities or who violated local norms and standards, including those who hoarded, those who slaughtered animals or produced butter covertly for their own use, those who refused to donate money to war-related causes, and those who failed to observe the *Eintopfsonntag*. As Abke carefully notes, people often reported such activities for personal reasons, especially a sense of bitterness at the inequality of sacrifice, which they then re-situated as violations of Nazi policy.

In an especially strong section, Abke argues that there was a strong willingness during the war to denounce women who had sexual relations with POWs and forced laborers. Moreover, unlike many other cases, very few of these denunciations were anonymous, which Abke interprets as a sign of the moral certainty and authority of the denunciant (p. 169). Abke also refutes the postwar myth that women were disproportionately active in denouncing others. That myth has fed on certain celebrated cases, like that of Helene Schw rzel, as well as on the widely accepted thesis that the weakest members of society resort disproportionately to denunciations as weapons against those more powerful. Abke concludes that there were, in fact, fewer female denunciant than male (p. 322), and she argues that the weapons-of-the-weak thesis is an overgeneralization. In cases that involved the unequal distribution of resources, examples of weaker members of society denouncing stronger ones were certainly more prevalent, as with the servant who reported her employers for eating excessive amounts of meat during a time of rationing (p. 144). However, in cases that involved sexual morality, it was much more often employers who denounced their female servants.

Abke is equally strong when it comes to the postwar section on denunciations during the British occupation of this region. Cases after 1945 reflected the new fault line that ran through these communities, with longstanding residents on one side and newly arrived refugees on the other. The massive influx of refugees, which began as early as 1942 and continued until after the war, strained the delicate social balance in many communities. Kreis Bremerv rde, for instance, ballooned from 49,000 residents in 1939 to 81,000 by 1950 (p. 32). While those with deep roots in the region tended to use denunciations as a means to re-stabilize the traditional prewar society and hierarchies, newcomers tended to seek the opposite effect—to de-stabilize that same hierarchy and establish more secure positions for themselves. A number of people, including some victims of Nazi persecution, also turned to denunciations as a way to settle old scores. Abke notes, though, that very few people cooperated in official denazification efforts and that a surprising number continued even after the war to denounce those who had been opponents of the Nazi regime (p. 213). Women also continued to be targeted for their sexual practices, this time for sleeping with occupation troops, and Abke further points out that no women who had been convicted and sentenced under the Nazis for sleeping with a POW or forced laborer ever received compensation after the war for their prosecution.

Sichtbare Zeichen is based on Abke's 2002 disserta-

tion, and it would have benefited from deeper revisions in a few areas. The introduction spans 75 pages and could stand to be shortened, as could certain sections of her analysis, which sometimes repeat conclusions and interpretations made earlier. In addition, the book's editors have often added their own parenthetical context and clarification to certain passages, which perhaps reflects the very short turnaround time from manuscript to publication. This state of affairs is revealed in the occasional typo as well, as when the book refers to "the pogrom of November 6" (p. 122).

Apart from those relatively minor considerations, however, Stephanie Abke has written an impressive book that encourages historians once again to confront the 1945 divide and to consider the ways in which the practice of denunciation served similar social purposes before, during, and after the war. *Sichtbare Zeichen* is theoretically sophisticated, convincing in its conclusions, and deserving of a place on the bookshelf of anyone interested in this field of research.

Note

[1]. Robert Gellately wrote one of the earliest and certainly most influential studies of denunciation in 1990. See *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy, 1933-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). See also Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, *Accusatory Practices: Denunciation in Modern European History, 1789-1989* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). In terms of more recent scholarship, Vandana Joshi published a study of denunciation in the same year that Abke's book appeared. See *Gender and Power in the Third Reich: Female Denouncers and the Gestapo, 1933-45* (Houndsmill and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); see H-German review at <<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=170921096028994>>. At least two other books from 2003 give significant attention to the practice of denunciations, including Matthew Stibbe, *Women in the Third Reich* (London: Arnold Publishers, 2003); H-German review at <<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=217131106339334>>; and Michael P. Hensle, *Rundfunkverbrechen. Das H ren von "Feindsendern" im Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin: Metropol, 2003); H-German review at <<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=183461127321785>>. Abke even notes that many German archivists have responded to the increasing scholarly interest in this area by incorporating the keyword *Denunziation* into their cataloging systems (p. 55).

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Citation: Erik Jensen. Review of Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung Potsdam; Historisch-Dokumentarisches Department des Ministeriums für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten Russlands, *SSSR i germanskij vopros 1941-1949 [Die UdSSR und die deutsche Frage 1941-1949], Bd. 3: 6. Oktober 1946-15. Juni 1948: Dokumente iz Archiva vnešnej politiki Rossijskoj Federacii [Dokumente aus dem Archiv der Russischen Föderation für Außenpolitik]*, b. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 2005.

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