



Martyn Housden. *Hans Frank, Lebensraum and the Holocaust.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. ix + 315 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-1579-5.



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“The Vanity of Evil”: Hans Frank and the Management of *Lebensraum*

During the night of October 15/16, 1946, Hans Frank was one of twelve major war criminals executed following the conclusion of the Nuremberg War Trials. With the possible exception of Hermann Göring, Frank’s brutal reign over the rump Polish state left him with bloodier hands than any of his co-defendants. The prevailing historical evaluation of Frank, however, deems him a weak, rather inconsequential figure and this judgment is reflected in the absence of any full-length treatment of his life. Martyn Housden’s study of Frank and his reign in Cracow aims to fill this gap in the historiography.

Housden first takes aim at what he terms the “irrational disinclination” of the historical profession to regard biography as “a valid and necessary part of the discipline” (p. 11). He argues that an examination of an essentially bourgeois professional such as Frank provides insight into why numerous individuals of his ilk joined the National Socialist Party and participated in the Holocaust. In addition, Housden believes that individuals, not the impersonal processes and structures of the National Socialist polycratic system, initiated and carried

out the Holocaust and therefore the lives of these key decision-makers require analysis. Housden attacks Hannah Arendt’s formulation that it was the “banality of evil” and not ideological fervor that greased the gears of genocide. The author also uses Frank’s life to engage with other important debates within the historiography concerning the process of “cumulative radicalization” and the nature of Nazi rule and management of the eastern occupied territories.

Housden argues, rather successfully, that instead of being a weak-willed “yes-man” who merely implemented Hitler’s will, Frank was an able and ambitious, yet romantically inclined professional who successfully demarcated his own fiefdom within the Nazi Empire. Drawn to the NSDAP by his fear of Bolshevism as well as his desire for a strong nationalist leader, Frank epitomized the type of recruit the Nazi Party was looking for in the post-Beer Hall Putsch phase: a member of the professional class who fit the party’s new legalistic approach. Frank proved to be an important asset for Hitler, as he routinely provided effective counsel for Nazi defendants with the touch of a showman. Following the Nazi

seizure of power, Frank coordinated Germany's lawyers under the umbrella of the Bund Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Juristen and became a member of Hitler's first cabinet.

It was in Poland, according to Housden, that Frank truly demonstrated his ability to maneuver within the Nazi polycracy to his own benefit. Determined to forge ahead with his own vision of the Government General, which contrasted with Hitler and other Nazi leaders' view of the area, Frank fought to transform the area from a mere dumping ground of "racial undesirables" into a vital contributor to the German war economy. While the Polish rump state did serve as a reservoir of labor for the Reich throughout the war, it also developed into a major participant in Germany's war economy, shipping tremendous amounts of agricultural produce as well as significant amounts of ammunition and artillery shells to the Reich. *Leistung* ("achievement") became the dominant theme of Frank's personal empire as he continually tried to increase its standing in Nazi-dominated Europe. During the latter stages of the war, Frank showed himself much more adaptable than the majority of the Third Reich's leadership as he tried to mitigate the terror that had permeated the Government General with a more humane policy, designed to win over the Poles. While this was a case of too little, too late, it does signal Frank's more realistic appraisal of the situation.

Housden persuasively attributes both transformations of policy within the Government General to Frank himself, partly due to his background as a middle-class professional and partly due to his unbridled ambition. Housden states that Frank's "legal and administrative experience in government" made him a perfect candidate for creating an occupation administration in a very chaotic and fluid situation (p. 76). He became a "manager of Lebensraum," constructing a viable component of the German war economy, while simultaneously trying to straddle the boundary between ideology and pragmatism (p. 106). This focus on technocratic rule, however, was also motivated by Frank's personality. He recognized that the occupied East gave individuals such as himself nearly unbridled power to create and destroy as they saw fit. The Governor General's initial endeavors to destroy Polish national consciousness were part of a larger ambition to turn the Government General into a gleaming example of German power and culture, the glow of which would reflect on Frank himself. Frank was "determined to write himself into history" (p. 85).

Despite the new trappings of power, Frank viewed

some aspects of the Nazi program with skepticism. Housden traces Frank's opposition to the police's extralegality from the very beginnings of the Third Reich, when he protested murders at Dachau in 1933 as occurring outside the basic foundations of law. According to the Housden, Frank was "too much a professional man rooted in middle class ways to feel comfortable with some of the arrant morality at the heart of the Third Reich" (p. 69). This "loyal opposition" to the Nazi state culminated in a series of four lectures delivered by Frank during the summer of 1942 (p. 155). He stressed the importance of legality as defined by centuries-old traditions and denounced the arbitrary actions characteristic of a police state. The reaction to these speeches, however, emphasizes how inconsequential Frank had become: while he was stripped of several Party titles, Hitler, recognizing Frank's lack of power within the National Socialist system, allowed him to maintain titular rule over the Government General.

In his portrayal of Frank, Housden makes several convincing, if not altogether groundbreaking, claims that have a more general application than merely to the Governor General himself. First, the author asserts that personal ambition and a desire for power were the driving forces behind Frank's career. Ideology was not the motivating factor. While Frank firmly believed in various elements of the Nazi program, his antisemitism was a learned trait, purely designed to assist his rise in the party. This thirst for prestige and authority led to his involvement in the horrific crimes committed in Poland. It also explains why Frank, despite his opposition to the more radical activities of the police, never ended his association with National Socialism: ruling as petty-king from Krakow Castle was too intoxicating. It is certainly conceivable that many Germans took advantage of the opportunities offered by the Nazi state to improve their economic and social status. In a telling phrase, Housden characterizes this as the "vanity of evil" (p. 258). Second, the struggles within the Government General were symptomatic of a larger struggle raging throughout German occupied Europe: the technocrats, looking to maximize Germany's potential for war, battled the ideologues, who were more concerned with implementing their racist fantasies than with actually winning the war.

Housden also finds Hans Mommsen's influential formulation of "cumulative radicalization" wanting. Mommsen argued that the Holocaust was not the result of a conscious decision to exterminate European Jewry but was rather the unintended, if not unwanted, outcome of an ad-hoc, chaotic process carried out by Hitler's

closest underlings in their attempts to curry favor with the FÄ¼hrer. In other words, the Holocaust was more the product of a system rather than that of individual decision-making. Housden finds no evidence of such a process affecting policy measures in the Government General, stating that "there was no sign of dynamic pressures within the state generating policy by a process of 'cumulative radicalization'" (p. 174). He argues that decisions made in Berlin and not conflicts between local administrators led to genocide. While Housden is surely correct, if not exactly pioneering, in criticizing Mommsen, he simultaneously neglects the impulses from the local level that played an important role in setting the Holocaust in motion. The absence of such considerations is based in part on his source materials. While Housden makes extensive and productive use of Frank's official diary in reconstructing the Governor General's activities, this document sheds little light on the evolution of genocide in the Government General. As Housden himself makes clear, Frank and his administration were largely bypassed by Heinrich Himmler and his SS in the execution of mass murder. He notes that it was Odilo Globocnik, SS and Police Leader for Lublin, and not Frank, who decided to kill the Government General's Jews in October 1941 while the Operation Reinhard camp, Majdanek, allegedly remained unknown to Frank and his closest advisors until they learned of it from the Soviet press following the Red Army's advance (pp. 149, 212). While Frank certainly shoulders responsibility for the Holocaust in the Government General, it is clear from Housden's own presentation that he was an outsider to the development of the policy.

Housden's attempt to grapple with the theme of "the

banality of evil" is also unsatisfactory. He claims that "the evil on show was hardly just banal. As Hans Frank went about his task of management and construction, he suffused his environment with a vicious ideological content which can only have helped the Holocaust run" (pp. viii-ix). While Frank certainly played a major role in creating an atmosphere of hate and callousness, his position as a Nazi boss demanded such attitudes of him; in this regard, he is more similar to than different from men such as Erich Koch or Hinrich Lohse, who ruled their own eastern empires. An analysis of the "banality of evil" in the Government General needs to focus on the lower-level bureaucrats who fixed train schedules, shipped impounded Jewish furniture from confiscated Jewish apartments to the Reich or calculated how many "superfluous inhabitants" lived within an area. Grappling with this issue requires a much more thorough examination of Government General bureaucracy than Housden provides. Ideology certainly was the decisive factor in the implementation and execution of the Holocaust, but it seems far-fetched to characterize everyone involved in the process as dogmatic ideologues.

Housden's study of Hans Frank is thus rather uneven. While he covers Frank's professional life rather thoroughly, we learn next to nothing of Frank's personal life. Instead of superfluous sections on the background of the Nuremberg Trials and how Frank's personality fits within the modern study of criminology, more analysis on his relationship with his family and others would round-out the picture of his life. While Housden has provided a readable account of how one fiefdom in the Nazi Empire was managed, his portrayal of Frank as a flesh and bones individual feels hollow at times.

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