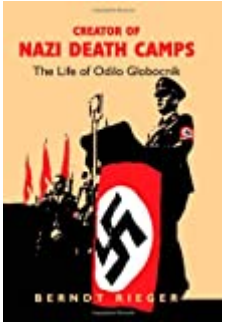
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Ralf Meindl.** *Ostpreußens Gauleiter: Erich Koch - eine politische Biographie.* Einzelveröffentlichungen des Deutschen Historischen Instituts Warschau. Osnabrück: Fibre Verlag, 2007. 535 pp. EUR 35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-938400-19-7.

**Berndt Rieger.** *Creator of Nazi Death Camps: The Life of Odilo Globocnik.* Edgware: Vallentine Mitchell, 2007. xi + 244 pp. $69.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85303-532-9; $35.15 (paper), ISBN 978-0-85303-523-7.




**Reviewed by** Stephan Lehnstaedt (Institut für Zeitgeschichte München)

**Published on** H-German (April, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

## Nazi Leaders in the East

Two major figures of the National Socialist occupation and the Holocaust in eastern Europe are at the center of this review: Erich Koch, Gauleiter of East Prussia and Odilo Globocnik, SS- und PolizeifÃ¼hrer of Lublin District in the General Government. Koch was also Reichskommissar of Ukraine and head of the administration in the districts of Zichenau and Bialystok, while Globocnik was Gauleiter of Vienna in 1938 and later became leader of the murderous Aktion Reinhard and commander of the SS- and police units at Trieste. Considering the importance of these two men's roles in Nazi murders in the East, it is quite astonishing that so far, neither has been the subject of closer examination. Now two studies try to end this deficit. Unfortunately, anyone expecting that the books are on an equal footing will be disappointed, as the analyses vary not only in scope and content, but also in quality. While Ralf Meindl wrote an excellent dissertation on Koch, Berndt Rieger only offers a mediocre survey of Globocnik, one of little use to researchers or the general public.

Rieger, a Carinthian-born physician practicing homeopathy in Bamberg who previously mostly published novels and poems, is more or less an outsider to historical research. He rarely cites archival sources, and those he does use are of a rather general nature; three pages of "select bibliography" cannot compensate for the lack of a solid foundation in his work. Rieger is far removed from modern Holocaust research, a position that leads to several misinterpretations and even erratic descriptions: the naive glossary for instance characterizes the Volksdeutsche Selbstschutz as "a kind of 'neighborhood watch' organization for German settlers in the Polish east" (p. 226)–which is completely wrong, as this Nazi organiza-

tion committed countless crimes in the Polish western territories, terrorizing Jews and Poles and murdering at least ten thousand people.

The relevance of the topics Rieger examines is also questionable. The chapter dealing with Globocnik's post in Lublin is just four pages long in comparison to the fourteen pages that deal with Globocnik's divorce from his wife: The chapter includes sparse facts about his activities in Lublin. The author's name-dropping of the somewhat "famous" Nazis whom Globocnik met, in addition to biographical sketches of these individuals, is rather boring to read and contains lots of chitchat on his private life–a general problem with this Globocnik biography: It is mainly composed of gossip. It is inadequate and inappropriate to write thirty pages on Globocnik's fiancÃ©, Irmgard, who "soon learned to call her Boss 'SS-BrigadefÃ¼hrer' in the office and 'Globus' in bed" (p. 76), compared to a mere thirty pages on the Final Solution. The importance of the respective topics is somewhat uneven, as relatively little light is shed on political activities.

Due to the meager selection of sources, the book cannot explain why Globocnik became a Nazi and later a murderer, although the reader is continuously informed of his feelings during different stages of his private life and career. Obviously, Rieger is convinced of his own interpretations, but he does not offer real proof and thus often remains on a level of sheer guesswork. Even more irritating are several interruptions of the actual biography, in which Rieger recounts his personal meetings and interviews with former-friends or trusted colleagues of his subject. Here it once more becomes clear that the methodological approach of the study is not well-founded, as the interlocutors are not questioned using the means of oral history; instead, we only see unadulterated curiosity about talking to someone who met Globocnik.

In contrast to this book, it was a pleasure to read Meindl's work on Erich Koch, which is not only methodologically sound, but also well written. It starts with a convincing review of previous research and available sources concerning Koch and his various posts, which, in combination with a vast bibliography of over fifty pages covering more than nine hundred titles, offers everything one may expect to find on this major Nazi figure; as a matter of course, it also includes Polish research. Moreover, although this is not a classical perpetrator study, but more a political biography, Meindl tells us about Koch's socialization in the qualified workers national Protestant milieu of Elberfeld, as well as his experiences during World War I and during the first years after the war.

Koch was born in 1896 and even before the Great War became a civil servant in the Reichsbahn, which guaranteed him secure economic living conditions. But Koch wanted to get ahead and even study medicine, which was not possible due to lack of funds. His military service during the war led to a certain radicalization of his views, as he met others who were not patriotic nationalists like him, but communists, internationalists, and pacifists. Feeling betrayed by the unexpected defeat of 1918, Koch felt compelled to pursue a national and socialist fight for "Germandom." In Freikorps Erhardt, he was stationed in Munich, where he met Adolf Hitler and began his career as a Nazi. The following chapters on Koch's operations in the Ruhr area and from 1928 onwards in East Prussia offer significant insights into Nazi party politics during the Weimar period. Now based in the Northeast Reich, Koch was a close political and personal friend of Hitler's opponent, Gregor StraÃer of the left wing of the Nazi Party.

In this most cogent part of his book, Meindl also writes a history of the Nazi Party in East Prussia. Unlike Rieger, he does not exhibit much interest in his protagonist's private life, yet his interpretations of Koch's activities and explanations of why he acted as he did are much more analytic and persuasive than in Rieger's coverage of Globocnik. After 1933, Meindl portrays a man who was not particularly involved in Reich politics, but who instead became increasingly a manager of East Prussia–a local leader subordinate only to Hitler himself, and called the *OstpreuÃenfÃ¼hrer*. Koch was backed by Hitler because of his successful "conquest" of East Prussia–and was even supported against a powerful man like Heinrich Himmler, making Koch the only *OberprÃ¤sident* of the Reich, an office to which the SS and police units were formally subordinate.

Always successfully "working towards the FÃ¼hrer," Koch was an apt candidate for further appointments in the East, but these positions had even more horrible consequences for the local population than they had in the Reich, where Gauleiters were not supposed to extinguish the inhabitants systematically. And, although Alfred Rosenberg as Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories tried to stand in Koch's way, the latter was chosen by Hitler, who needed the "best" man for the most important part of his newly conquered domains: Ukraine. The efforts undertaken to accomplish exploitation and extermination here were immense, but rather unsuccessful. Koch only rarely visited his new office at Rowno and, while

he enjoyed his new powers, did not show real interest in lasting arrangements, as he was somewhat overstretched with all his posts and powers. When the Red Army overran East Prussia in 1945, Koch fled, but was arrested and handed over to Poland in 1949, where he was later sentenced to life in prison for his crimes against Polish citizens. He died in prison in 1986.

An actual comparison of these two surveys was neither possible nor would it have been appropriate. Meindl's book is excellent and well worth reading; Rieger's is not. While the account of Globocnik consists mainly of previously known facts and Nazi gossip, the work on Erich Koch, Gauleiter of East Prussia and, amongst other posts, head of the German regime in Ukraine, informs readers about an important Nazi politician and internal party politics, although Koch's administrative practices and German governance in regions of eastern Europe are not particularly well investigated. Even so, for years to come, Meindl's analysis will be a pertinent reference.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-german

**Citation:** Stephan Lehnstaedt. Review of Meindl, Ralf, *Ostpreußens Gauleiter: Erich Koch - eine politische Biographie* and Rieger, Berndt, *Creator of Nazi Death Camps: The Life of Odilo Globocnik*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2009.

**URL:** http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24204

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.