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Hitler's Willing Backers

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Once upon a time, not very long ago, Hitler, the Third Reich, and even the Holocaust seemed to hold little interest except for academic specialists, military buffs, armchair historians, and the declining numbers of those who had lived through the years of Nazi rule. One had the sense that nearly everything of importance had already been established about that benighted period in Germany's past, and, with the two Germanys comfortably divided by the Berlin Wall, there was little reason to worry or concern oneself much about the awful power that a united Germany once waged. And then the Wall fell.

In the twelve years that have passed since those glorious days and nights in November 1989, the eyes of the world have once again started focusing on Germany and its people, and often with considerable trepidation. With Germany re-emergent, questions about its recent past

have gained a new vitality, especially those surrounding Nazi terror, the Holocaust, and the role that ordinary German citizens played in implementing Hitler's policies. The answers that several scholars have provided over the last decade have not only been unsettling, they have cast the Nazi dictatorship and the nature of racism, inhumanity, and evil in a whole new light. That, for example, ordinary citizens participated massively in genocide when many had long believed that the destruction of European Jewry was carried out by a relatively limited number of Nazi henchmen, was demonstrated convincingly and provocatively by Christopher Browning in his *Ordinary Men: Reserve Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (Harper Collins, 1992), Daniel Goldhagen in his *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (Knopf, 1996), and by a disturbing photographic exhibition on the crimes of the German army ("Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944"), organized in the mid-1990s by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research.

While a heated debate occasioned by these works and others ensued in Germany and around the world over the actions and motivations of German citizens involved in mass murder and the proper representation of the Holocaust, a related debate smoldered beneath the surface. At issue were wider questions concerning their role in the policing of the entire society and the fundamental nature of terror in the Nazi dictatorship. A significant contribution to this new debate is Robert Gellately's new book, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany*.

Familiar to historians of the Third Reich for his *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy 1933-1945* (Oxford University Press, 1990), Gellately echoes several important themes here heralded in his earlier work. He has now provided us with a broad-ranging study of several of the most fundamental aspects of Nazi society, suggesting that ordinary Germans not only were prepared to turn on Jews, foreigners, and other persons non grata in Nazi Germany, but that they frequently turned on one another to the extent that the Gestapo in its everyday activity only needed to react to the information that the citizenry willingly provided it with. The Gestapo thus had no need of a spy network, which Gellately describes as "mythical."

With ten thematic chapters utilizing an admirable array of sources including newspaper accounts, diaries, mood and morale reports of the SD, Gestapo files, and a solid grounding in the vast secondary literature, Gellately's book informs the reader about the Nazi policing and terror apparatus, Nazi propaganda and policies used to combat enemies of the regime and lawbreakers in general, and, most important, about what he sees as the overwhelming support that the German population gave to Hitler and to many of the most objectionable undertakings of his regime including the persecution of Jews, Gypsies, foreign slave and forced laborers, and the establishment of concentration camps all over Germany. "There was no organized resistance" (p. 264) and this support never seriously wavered, Gellately argues, even as the regime's policies became more and more barbarous with the onset of the war. Indeed, he insists that the population became more anti-Semitic over time and that "at least non-violent forms of anti-Semitism gained Hitler's dictatorship more support than it lost" (p. 28).

After a standard account of Hitler's takeover and a delineation of the Gestapo's and other police and judicial organs' powers in his first two chapters Gellately begins to break new ground in his third chapter, devoted "concentration camps and media reports." Here, and in

several of the following chapters, he demonstrates convincingly that the Nazi regime never intended to keep the German population fully in the dark, as many have believed, about the establishment and existence of concentration camps, the extensive use of death sentences, and several of the other coercive measures it employed with increasing severity as time passed to deal with its enemies and those it deemed undesirable. People could read about them in daily newspapers, where, he explains, "a never-ending series of crime and punishment stories was published during the Nazi years ... designed to fulfill the dual function of legitimating the new system and deterring 'criminality'" (p. 49). People could also often witness in the light of day how Germany, especially during the war years, had become chock-full of concentration camps and foreign-forced and slave laborers. By drawing the reader's attention to these undeniable facts, Gellately does not wish to argue that the Nazi regime made no attempts to hide the very worst of its inhumane undertakings from the people such as the mass murder of the Jews, which he deals with only briefly in his book. Rather what he seeks to show, largely successfully, is that the regime effectively scored propagandistic points with the civilian population by selectively informing them about its efforts to cleanse the society of criminals, political radicals, Gypsies, beggars, tramps, and other "social outsiders" and to put conquered enemy populations to work in the service of the Fatherland.

Whereas Gellately's discussion of media reports, propaganda and popular opinion regarding measures taken against criminals, "asocials," and opponents of the regime adds significantly to the understanding of Nazi society, it is not until chapter six ("Injustice and the Jews") that he makes what may be his most controversial argument. In this and in the two following chapters ("Special 'Justice' for Foreign Workers" and "Enemies in the Ranks," respectively) he labors to lay bare what he sees as the extraordinary complicity of the ordinary German population in the application of Nazi terror. He does this through an analysis of a sample of 670 Gestapo case files from three different locations in Germany (Lower Franconia, the Rhine-Ruhr area, and the Palatinate) dealing with three different types of Gestapo investigations: the "social isolation of Jews;" "the social isolation of Poles;" and "reports of listening to forbidden radio broadcasts."

In his analysis, Gellately focuses primarily on the issue of how the Gestapo got the information it needed to begin its investigations. Finding that for all three types of cases, upwards of half began with civilian denunciations. Noting very little evidence of Gestapo spying in

the cases he examines, Gellately argues that Nazi Germany was awash in a “flood of denunciations” (p. 192), that a “denunciatory atmosphere covered the country” (p. 196), and that “the Nazi police were by and large reactive rather than active” (p. 191).

Certainly Gellately’s evidence of the large numbers of denunciations in these cases does point to a considerable degree of civilian involvement in Nazi policing. Further, the individual discussions he provides of several of the Gestapo cases he read show that at times “informing of this kind occurred within families” (p. 194) and also that “German-on-German denunciations took place among friends and acquaintances” (p. 197). But does his evidence really prove that voluntary civilian denunciations were so common and of such vast importance that the Nazi secret police needed and actually had no significant spy network and that it acted primarily as a “reactive” organ? Does this not run the danger of suggesting a kind of collective guilt argument for Nazi crimes that makes few distinctions between arch perpetrators like Gestapo officers, who frequently murdered and tortured their victims, and ordinary citizens, some of whom sometimes used the secret police apparatus to help settle personal disagreements or occasionally passed along tidbits of information to the police or the Party because they believed it to be their civilian duty?

Had Gellately studied a broader range of Gestapo cases, especially those that involved resistance activity, he would have found reasons to draw some different conclusions. For example, he does not analyze cases involving Communist resistance (which he glosses over breezily in his first chapter, stating that “at the outside no more than 150,000 of them were touched directly by some form of persecution” [p. 15]). He also does not analyze the thousands of cases lodged against priests and ministers, or against Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, and other religious opinion makers and groups which were by no means uncommon, and which, like cases lodged against left-wing political groups, seldom began with civilian denunciations, though often involved police spies, tortured confessions, and other evidence pointing to the very active and brutally sadistic role of the Nazi police. Nor does he make note of the fact that denunciations were not needed for the Gestapo to send tens of thousands of Jewish men to concentration

camps after Kristallnacht and to deport tens of thousands more Jewish men, women, and children to their deaths during the Holocaust.

Thus by focusing on a narrow substratum of the kinds of cases the Nazi police handled, and the kinds of cases which arguably could most often only come to the Gestapo’s attention through leads provided by civilians, Gellately makes several generalizations about coercion and consent in the Nazi dictatorship that other scholars will find debatable. Just adding up the percentage of denunciations that initiated some types of Gestapo cases does not necessarily prove all that much.

And one could even quibble that Gellately could do considerably more with the types of cases he does examine. For example, by neglecting to calculate how often family members and friends acted as denouncers in his sample, but by choosing simply to cite a few of the rare instances in which it did happen, he provides the impression that this was typical behavior among family members and friends when it most certainly was not.

In sum, the major problem with Gellately’s book is its failure to recognize distinctions and differences among the German population. By his account, nearly all Germans not targeted specifically as enemies or undesirables by the regime are cast in essentially the same mold: Gestapo officers, though he does not study them in any detail, were simply ordinary German policemen with expanded powers but without a spy network; there were no resisters he gives any credit to; nearly all ordinary German civilians either were or were likely to become denouncers (even family members and friends); and almost everyone supported Hitler. Not interviewing any of the victims, perpetrators, or bystanders himself for his study and not focusing at any length on individuals in his book, he provides a monochromatic picture of Nazi society, lacking in nuance, without much human touch, and at times suffering from distortion.

Still, *Backing Hitler* makes clear that millions of ordinary German citizens were relatively well informed, willing, and frequently active participants in the horrors that were perpetrated on the Third Reich’s very own soil. Those who still want to argue that ordinary German citizens more often suffered coercion than offered consent will have their work cut out for them.

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