Nazism, War and Genocide

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Cover illustrations

Front cover: Nazi formations marching through Nuremberg during a Party rally. (Source: Stadtarchiv Nuremberg, LR-434-F2-1a; reproduced with permission of the Stadtarchiv Nuremberg.)

Back cover: Women inmates in bunks at Auschwitz. (Sourced from and reproduced courtesy of The Wiener Library, London.)

Nazism, War and Genocide

New Perspectives on the History of the Third Reich

edited by

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Introduction to the Paperback Edition

Nazism, War and Genocide: as the title of this volume suggests, a frighteningly simple set of stories lies at the heart of the history of the Third Reich. At a particular historical juncture a mass movement of radical nationalism and virulent racism captured power in Germany; once in power it prepared and unleashed a war at which it had been aiming from the outset; at the same time it perpetrated a continent-wide genocide—a genocide, moreover, which had been clearly intimated in the early ideological writings of its leadership. The devastating human and material consequences of these events were such that, by the end of the century in which they had occurred, they had become a near-universal moral yardstick for debating the nature of crimes against humanity, and a negative ethical norm against which the standards of civilised society could be defined.

Yet precisely because of the vast dimensions of the crimes, and precisely because of the moral and political challenge they continue to pose, the Third Reich remains one of the most hotly contested periods of world history. Historians continue to argue over the relative prevalence of consent and coercion in sustaining the regime in power, the nature of the decision-making process in the Third Reich, and the nature of the underlying motive force of its radicalism. Similarly, the degree to which Nazi ideology penetrated German society and gave the 'people's community' meaningful cohesion, the breadth of popular and institutional participation in the crimes of the regime, and the extent of wider social knowledge of those crimes remain key areas of disagreement.

This volume brings together some of the world's leading scholars of the Third Reich to offer a series of interpretative essays which address these and related themes. Drawing both on their own research and the latest findings of the wider community of historians in this field—findings summarised and discussed in the editor's opening historiographical survey—they offer a snapshot of the state of scholarship on central aspects of the Third Reich. As individual essays they represent significant contributions to the particular topics on which they focus. Read together, alongside and in the context provided by the others, they provide an insight into the key areas of debate, contention, and, in some cases, ongoing disagreement in this crucial area.

The integrative power of the 'people's community', and the extent to which that integrative power was rooted in the exclusion of persecuted minorities, is examined by Robert Gellately in his essay on social outsiders in the Third Reich. As he emphasises, Nazi terror was not arbitrary, but was focussed overwhelmingly on the persecution of the 'enemies of the people', or, in the racialised vocabulary of the Nazis, 'community aliens'. These outsiders—habitual criminal offenders, gypsies, homosexuals and others widely regarded as sexually deviant, 'asocials' and the supposedly workshy—were defined, in the first instance, by Nazi ideology. But this ideology reflected wider social prejudices, resentments and hatreds harboured by broad sectors of the population. Precisely for this reason the persecution of these outsider groups was not only accepted but also often welcomed by the conformist mass of the ordinary German population. As such, it played an important role in generating the sense of community which the Third Reich aimed to establish. The significance of these outsiders and the centrality of their stigmatisation to the consolidation of the Third Reich after 1933 is underlined for Gellately by the telling fact that down to the late 1930s—until the mass arrests of Jews in the wake of *Kristallnacht*—major German concentration camps such as Buchenwald or Sachsenhausen incarcerated more of these social outsiders than they did Communists or Jews. It was, indeed, the persecution of these groups, rather than the initially less popular attacks on the Jews, that for Gellately contributed so strongly to the strengthening of the dictatorship in the eyes of ordinary people.

Gellately's emphasis on the real affective and ideological bonds underpinning the 'people's community' during the 1930s is, despite the very different focus of his essay, confirmed by Norbert Frei's compelling account of the development of Auschwitz during the war—as a concentration and extermination camp, as a site of economic activity, and as a model colonial settlement for thousands of Germans. Forcefully challenging the popular image of Auschwitz as a sealed-off space, an isolated centre of unimaginable horror deep in Poland, Frei reminds us that it was located on territory fully integrated into the German Reich before 1945. The ever-expanding complex of camps, factories and 'model town' thus became home not only to thousands of SS men and their families, but also to many more German administrators, planners, businessmen, party functionaries and, indeed, to other, even more prosaic agents of colonial domination such as builders, guesthouse proprietors and teachers. These people were part of the shared enterprise of the 'Germanisation' of the town; they shared the ideological understandings of why they were there—and what this meant for the pre-existing residents of the town, including its Jews. The Germans' mass presence both here and at the multitude of other killing fields also gave rise to shared knowledge of genocide, a shared

knowledge which represented the open secret of German society after 1945. It follows that when some ordinary Germans began to address the Holocaust in the early 1960s, the explosiveness of this did not lie in the fact that things were being revealed about which most Germans had hitherto been ignorant—rather, they were daring to speak openly on a subject on which a strong social consensus in favour of silence had hitherto prevailed.

As Dick Geary's timely essay on the experience of the working class under the regime reminds us, however, the ties that bound the 'people's community' were not always strong and they were far from universal. Acknowledging the findings of recent research which demonstrate that the workers were far from immune from the material, symbolic and ideological blandishments of Nazism, he nonetheless cautions against pushing the evidence too far, and reminds us gently of the political conditions under which workers were forced to respond to the regime. As his piece shows, to the fault lines between 'majority' and 'minority' which Gellately describes in his piece should be added the fissure which ran more firmly down the centre of German society before 1933—that between bourgeoisie and working class. The organised Left were, after all, the first victims of the Nazi regime. While only a small minority of German workers were actually killed or imprisoned in 1933, the effects of the terror were felt far more widely, and the terror apparatus remained a real, constant threat from 1933 onwards. Under these circumstances it is unsurprising that many, indeed most, German workers chose the path of circumspection in their relationship to the regime. Their silence should not, however, necessarily be taken to have represented consent. Rather, it reflected the realities of life under a dictatorship. The limits of the regime's ability to break down working class identities and capture the workers with the surrogate offerings of the 'people's community' is also demonstrated, for Geary, by the speed with which the traditional parties of the German working class re-emerged out of the wreckage of the Third Reich in 1945.

Moreover, as Jill Stephenson's study of relations between ordinary Germans and forced foreign workers in rural areas shows, it was not only those social groups with strong traditions of organised, politically-focussed opposition to Nazism which maintained a certain distance to the regime. In rural southern Germany responses to the various categories of newcomer who arrived in hitherto socially homogeneous village communities were shaped less by the dictates of Nazi ideology than by long-standing traditions and habits of mind with regard to 'outsiders'. Forced Polish workers were often welcomed by local peasant families as a valuable source of much-needed agricultural labour, treated with respect and fairness, and offered the customary familial and social intimacy accorded to all workers on the farm. Religious solidarities between

German and Polish Roman Catholics proved stronger than the supposedly natural ethnic hatreds insisted upon by the Nazis; the sparse population density of rural areas and the lack of Nazi functionaries in some regions made it almost impossible for the regime to police ordinary Germans' behaviour, even on an issue so ideologically crucial. Incoming German evacuees from urban areas suffering as a result of bombing were, by contrast, often resented for their alleged arrogance and their refusal to 'muck in' to village life. Here, again, deeper seated social, cultural and sometimes religious antagonisms between different milieus and different regions of Germany proved stronger than the regime's constant invocations of community and shared sacrifice.

These four essays offer, then, a differentiated picture of the relationship between German society and the Nazi regime, and of the extent to which the regime was able to realise the vision of community it espoused. The purchase of the regime clearly varied greatly according to locale, context, issue and moment. Nonetheless, aspects of its offerings were sufficiently alluring for the 'people's community' to have been perceived and experienced as real by many, and clearly served to mobilise significant numbers of ordinary Germans behind the regime's destructive agendas.

The other four essays focus on the regime itself, both in the extended and the narrower sense. Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann address aspects of the terror system, a feature of the Third Reich which, arguably, has been paid insufficient attention in some recent studies of the period. In her study of the emergence of the concentration camps, Caplan emphasises that, for all the improvisation and arbitrariness that characterised the early history of the terror apparatus, there were numerous continuities with the regimes of punishment and discipline developed in earlier periods of German history. The powers of arbitrary arrest conferred upon the Gestapo drew upon long-standing traditions of police detention during states of emergency. There were strong institutional continuities too, as local police and local government functionaries adapted to the demands (and opportunities) of the new situation by expanding or modifying pre-existing institutions such as workhouses. There were, moreover, strong rhetorical continuities in the language which surrounded the newly extended apparatus of punishment and repression, as local officials and Nazi leaders drew upon the traditional associations of 'work', 'discipline' and 'order' to legitimate the new penal regime. For Caplan the regime's remarkable success in naturalising the concentration camp system within the framework of the wider penal system rested precisely on officials' ability to draw upon the established, the familiar and that which was regarded as 'normal' even as they radically expanded and altered the boundaries of the terror apparatus. Only as Himmler and Heydrich grad-

ually brought the police system under their control did the concentration camp system evolve into the massive SS 'empire' which it was to become during the later 1930s and the war.

Caplan's emphasis on the breadth of Nazi terror is reinforced by Nikolaus Wachsmann's study of the role of the judicial system in the administration of Nazi terror during the war years. Whereas an older literature emphasised the increasing marginality of the traditional apparatus of state in the face of a burgeoning array of special Nazi agencies, and explained the 'cumulative radicalisation' of persecution as a function of that, Wachsmann stresses that the 'legal' terror administered by the conventional judiciary remained central to Nazi penal policy throughout. Legal officials, no less than SS officers, wished to contribute to victory in the war; they may not have been radical Nazi ideologues, but their outlook was still deeply nationalist. During the war, as Wachsmann demonstrates, the terror apparatus expanded and its application increased greatly. However, it was subject to a complex dynamic which affected different categories of victim differently at various stages of the war. In the first half of the war, the main focus of its activities was on foreigners—both on those who lived in territories now annexed to the Reich and those deported to Germany as forced labour. The ongoing popularity of the regime amongst ordinary Germans, which was rooted in the military successes of the first half of the war, meant that the regime felt no need to extend its terrorisation of the German population. In the second half of the war, however, the ever-growing prospect of defeat—and the regime's desire to clamp down on manifestations of defeatism—led to a greatly increased incidence of terroristic justice towards the German population too; the judiciary's need to prove its reliability in the face of Hitler's criticisms also led to a radicalisation of sentencing. In the last year of the war the dynamic changed again. On the one hand, the establishment of flying courts martial represented the final abandonment of anything which might be termed due legal process, and led to a final frenzy of terror on the part of a minority of remaining fanatics. On the other hand, other judges sought to distance themselves from the regime in anticipation of its collapse, and avoided harsh sentencing, so that harsher directives from the regime at the top did not, in practice, necessarily translate into increased terror on the ground overall.

Both Caplan's study of the role of civil service officials and Wachsmann's examination of the judiciary remind us that the translation of the regime's agendas into practice rested, to a great extent, on the willingness of large numbers of functionaries across the state apparatus to act out its daily demands. But the policy drive itself did not come from the echelon of mid-ranking collaborators who facilitated the Nazis' measures, however agreeable to those measures they often undoubtedly were. Rather, it came

from the top—from an extended group of leaders, drawn from the 'old fighters' of the movement, at the centre of which stood Hitler himself. For this reason, two of the contributions to this volume revisit the decision-making processes right at the top of the regime—one in respect of Nazi foreign policy, the other in relation to the unfolding of the genocide. Ian Kershaw traces the policy options—if policy options they were—of Hitler and the military leadership during the era of 'strategic vacillation' following the defeat of France in June 1940. Acknowledging the overarching ideological imperative which drove Nazi foreign policy, Kershaw reminds us that nonetheless, in the short- and mid-term, decisions had to be made on the basis of military and strategic necessity, and that various possible scenarios presented themselves as practical means to the ideological ends. The navy, in particular, sought to impress upon Hitler the desirability of the 'peripheral' strategy, which was based on defeating Britain not via a direct attack on the imperial motherland but instead by weakening her hold on the Empire through challenging her in the Mediterranean. This strategy was a more practical version of alternative visions of Germany's path to world domination which held sway in sections of the German navy, visions drawing on those strains of an older German imperialism which emphasised the pursuit of overseas colonies via *Weltpolitik* rather than continental expansion. However, Hitler was only interested in the 'peripheral' strategy as a means of preparing for the attack on the Soviet Union, which always remained his ultimate goal—and it was Hitler, not the navy, who set the military priorities. In any case, diplomatic considerations, centred on the impossibility of balancing out the competing interests of France, Italy and Spain in the Mediterranean, made the pursuit of this strategy impossible. Ultimately, the presence of alternatives was illusory—ideological, political and strategic factors pointed in the direction of the attack on the Soviet Union.

Mark Roseman's contribution, finally, centres on the decision-making process during the crucial phase of transition to the systematic mass murder of the Jews. In particular, he places the protocol of the notorious Wannsee Conference of January 1942 against the background of the evolution of Nazi Jewish policy as revealed by the latest archival research. Here, the focus is on the agendas of the top leadership of the SS, and, in particular, Reinhard Heydrich, whose motives for organising the conference have troubled historians for decades. As Roseman makes clear, the transition to mass murder took place via a series of incremental steps over the course of 1941 and 1942, undertaken in a series of related but nonetheless distinct killing operations in a wide range of localities in the occupied east, rather than as a result of a single directive. As such, the search for the 'smoking gun' document which enables historians to pinpoint a decision by Hitler will probably always prove fruitless. To that extent, it is also

clear that the Wannsee conference was not the moment at which the decision for genocide was taken, but rather one at which the issues of who was in charge, and how it was to proceed, were addressed. Heydrich—and by extension Himmler—were establishing the primacy of their jurisdiction over that of the civilian ministries which were also involved at the very same time that they were ensuring the complicity of those ministries by informing them clearly of what was envisaged.

In focussing on decision-making processes among the elites of the regime neither the authors of the individual pieces nor the editor wish to give succour to the exculpatory agendas of those who wish to pin blame on a small minority of actors only. That is absolutely not the point. If nothing else, Kershaw's and Roseman's essays make abundantly clear that the war was co-prosecuted by a broad military leadership caste which overwhelmingly supported the political leadership's ambitions, and that the genocide was implemented by a very large range of agencies, including, again, broad elements of the traditional ministerial bureaucracy, representatives of which attended the Wannsee meeting itself. The other essays in this volume offer ample evidence of the broader complicity of various agencies and countless individuals in the multiple crimes of the regime.

The point, rather, is to stress that despite all the recent emphasis on the mobilisation of popular fanaticism by the regime, and despite all the insights offered by studies of mass collaboration in the crimes of the Third Reich, a firm understanding of the mechanics and processes of the Nazi state, and of the intentions, decisions and actions of its leading members remains essential to understanding how the policies of the regime unfolded. For this reason, the editor suggests, recent attempts to explain the radical fanaticism of the era as a manifestation of 'political religion' do not do justice to the complex relationship which existed between regime and society during the Third Reich. Neither do they enable us to attribute accurately and carefully the degree of responsibility born by each, or to understand properly the interplay between the two.

The hardback version of this book was produced to honour the career of Jeremy Noakes, one of the most distinguished historians of the Third Reich to have worked in the English language in the last forty years. An appreciation of his career, together with a full list of his publications, can be found in that edition, which was published in 2005. One of its key aims was to produce a set of essays which did justice to both sides of Jeremy Noakes' career—to the contributions he has made as a pioneering scholar and to his work as a communicator of scholarly history to a wider audience. We are correspondingly delighted that, in keeping with the spirit of the original enterprise, the publishers have agreed to make it available in paperback form, thereby improving greatly the accessibility of the essays

to students and other readers for whom the original hardback may have been prohibitively expensive. We should like to take this opportunity to renew our thanks to University of Exeter Press for their support of the project, and, of course, to reaffirm our admiration for Jeremy Noakes' exceptional achievements as both historian and teacher.

NG, Southampton, January 2008

Abbreviations

DAF Deutsche Arbeitsfront (German Labour Front)
FAD Freiwillige Arbeitsdienst (Voluntary Labour Service)
GDR German Democratic Republic
Gestapa Geheime Staatspolizeiamt (Secret State Police Office)
Gestapo Geheime Staatspolizei (Secret State Police)
HSSPF Höherer SS- und Polizeiführer (Higher SS- and Police Leader)
IKL Inspektion der Konzentrationslager (Inspectorate of the Concentration Camps)
KdF Kraft durch Freude (Strength through Joy)
KPD Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany)
Kripo Kriminalpolizei (Criminal Police)
KZ Konzentrationslager (Concentration Camp)
NSDAP Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers Party)
RSHA Reichsicherheitshauptamt (Reich Security Main Office)
SA Sturmabteilungen (Storm Detachments)
SD Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service)
SPD Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
SS Schutzstaffel (Protection Squad)
WVHA Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptamt (Economic Administration Main Office)

1

Nazism—A Political Religion?

Rethinking the Voluntarist Turn

Neil Gregor

I

Sixty years after the end of the Second World War, and over seventy years after the Nazi seizure of power, the scholarly and public fascination with the history of the Third Reich continues unabated. The profusion of academic writing on the subject is now such that, if one turns one's back for a moment, one quickly finds a volume of new literature so great that one struggles to master even that which relates to one's own immediate specialism. There cannot be a small town in Germany which has not now been the focus of a study of the rise to power;[1] it feels as if there is hardly a German business which has not had its use of forced labour or its complicity in other criminal acts probed;[2] local and regional studies of the terror apparatus[3] or the experience of bombing[4] seem to multiply in the night. More broadly, the ubiquitous presence of the war and the Holocaust in the popular culture of the western world, saturated as it is with a constant diet of new documentaries, films, novels and popular histories, suggests the presence of a market for such products which verges on the insatiable.

It has often been suggested that this relentless interest is to be seen as the product of a peculiar cultural moment. For some, the end of the Cold War and the reduced predictability of the present have fostered a need to take nostalgic refuge in a more easily comprehensible past.[5] For others, the growing profusion of literature is to be explained in terms of the obsessions of academia itself. According to this view, the over-internalization of the mantra of 'publish or perish' leads historians to produce the same piece of work several times rather than once, while the fact that the broad outlines of the history of the Third Reich are well-known forces scholars—

especially new entrants to a crowded field—to take refuge in ever more locally focused case studies. As David Blackbourn has shown, it is easy to satirize the profession's ability to generate endless books with neatly alliterative titles such as 'Politics in the Palatinate' or 'Sexuality in Saxony', whose tendency is either to confirm for the tenth time the well-known thesis of a canonical study or, taking refuge in the author's unique familiarity with some obscure local archive, to argue knowingly that 'it was all much more *complicated* than that.'[6]

No doubt both of these perspectives capture partial truths. But it is important to note that, independent of such cultural, institutional, or professional pressures, the proliferation of local case studies of Nazi Germany also contains its own logic in terms of how historians' interpretations of the period have gradually been changing. Indeed, the growth of the close study of local events or moments in the history of the Third Reich has been both symptom and cause of a growing understanding over the past fifteen years that many central assumptions of the historiography which pertained until quite recently are in need of substantial revision.

In the first place, much recent scholarship has been devoted to exploring the huge range of sites upon which the Holocaust and the associated crimes of the Third Reich were perpetrated. A literature which up until the late 1980s was patchy in coverage and quite general in focus has expanded immeasurably in the last fifteen years. Most obviously, the history of the main extermination camps—which, up until surprisingly recently, generated iconic images of mass murder more than they provoked close scholarly analysis—has now been largely written. The Institute for Contemporary History in Munich, for example, has run a large project focused on the history of Auschwitz;[7] the history of the Operation Reinhard camps has been written;[8] other well-known sites, such as Theresienstadt, have been the subject of extensive attention.[9] Similarly, we now have not only studies of most of the major concentration camps on German and Austrian soil—Dachau,[10] Neuengamme,[11] Oranienburg,[12] and numerous others[13]—and of many of the sprawling network of 'subcamps' (*Aussenlager*) which grew during the war to satisfy the economy's demands for forced labour at existing or new production facilities,[14] we also have an extensive literature on the hundreds of smaller, hitherto more obscure camps which existed in both Germany and across occupied Europe.[15] To these have been added numerous individual studies of the huge variety of ghettos, work camps, transit camps, work education camps and, most recently, regular prisons.[16]

Alongside this literature on the full range of stationary killing sites in operation during the Third Reich, much recent scholarship has also deepened our understanding of the nature and extent of the mobile killing actions of numerous Nazi agencies. The role of the *Einsatzgruppen* has

been known about, of course, since the Nuremberg Trials, and the precise role of the orders governing their deployment in the broader evolution of genocide in 1941 has been debated for many years.[17] Yet it is only in recent years that the killing acts themselves have come into sharp focus and it is only recently that the interaction of the SS/SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*—Security Service), other German agencies and various local collaborators has been explored. At the same time, crucial studies of individual massacres, both large and relatively small, have added further to our awareness of the diverse manner in which the genocide of the Jews was implemented.[18] The cumulative effect has been to underline that the Nazi campaign of genocide was, in many respects, a far more de-centred process, or set of processes, involving mutually reinforcing interactions between the leadership and its often quite autonomous agents on the ground, than an older historiography, with its one-sided focus on decision-making in Berlin and on implementation at a few, major killing sites, led us to believe.[19]

This is even more clearly the case when one recognizes that a key achievement of the historiography of recent years has been to embed our understanding of the genocide of the Jews firmly within the broader context of the Nazis' pursuit of a visionary racial utopia, with all its murderous consequences for those deemed to be enemies of the 'people's community' (*Volksgemeinschaft*).[20] The connections between the euthanasia programme and the genocide have been demonstrated by a number of scholars,[21] while close study of the practice of 'mercy killing' of so-called 'ballast existences' in Germany's hospitals and asylums has further underlined how the murderous behaviour of the Third Reich was implemented in a range of spaces and places across the whole country.[22] Similarly, studies of the appalling mistreatment of the 5.7 million Soviet prisoners of war taken captive in the Second World War, 3.3 million of whom died of starvation, exposure and disease, or of the millions more foreign forced labourers who toiled under punitive, and sometimes murderous, conditions in the German war economy, have enabled us to connect the history of genocide to the broader programme of racial barbarism pursued by the regime.[23]

This emphasis on the huge range and diversity of the killing sites has, in turn, re-focused historians' understandings of the identity of the perpetrators of the crimes of the Third Reich.[24] In the same way that an often hazy, two-dimensional image of the major extermination camps has finally given way to a much more sharply delineated picture of these sites, an understanding of the SS dominated by stereotypes and assumptions has been challenged, modified and refined by extensive research into its different branches and functions. The image of the brutish, sadistic SS guard has been unpacked by Karin Orth's study of the 'Camp SS', in which she explores the integrative power of violence and its enactment on

innocent victims for the group identity of the guards. Exploring the socializing function of a series of interlocking social and professional networks within this milieu, she demonstrates how the collective practice of violence within the camp system forged shared understandings of how the camps were to be run and their inmates treated.[25] A very different kind of SS perpetrator, meanwhile, has been analysed at length in numerous studies of the SD or the Reich Security Main Office (*Reichsicherheitshauptamt*—RSHA), founded in 1939 as an umbrella organization for the various policing functions which were now brought together under Himmler's control. One such is Ulrich Herbert's biography of Werner Best, who fulfilled, variously, the roles of SD functionary, *Einsatzgruppen*-organizer, Head of Administration in the Military Government of France, and Reich Plenipotentiary in Denmark—and who was thus, clearly, the opposite of the caricature of mindless, brutal sadist of the camps. Another is Michael Wildt's collective biography of the leadership of the RSHA. These have both demonstrated that for many in the 'war youth generation' a profound radical nationalism learned in the immediate post-war years combined with a commitment to secondary virtues such as coldness, hardness, determination and 'objectivity', and with an exceptional talent for organization to produce figures who were both 'theoreticians of destruction' and effective, unquestioning organizers of it, equally at home writing journal papers on population planning or heading up one of the murder squads in the East.[26] A different picture again has been painted of the economic 'experts' in the Economic Administration Main Office (*Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptamt*—WVHA), so that a much more differentiated understanding of the SS is now available.[27]

It was not just the SS/SD-*Einsatzgruppen* who were responsible for the mass murder of the Polish or Russian Jews. Various branches of the police, both regulars and reservists, were also closely implicated in the rounding up and shooting of Jews and other 'enemies of the Reich'. This was especially the case after the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Estimates of how many policemen were involved and what proportion of the murdered Jews they were responsible for vary, and the figures were doubtless different in different areas of the occupied East, but it is clear that a very substantial proportion of such killing activity was the responsibility of the police.[28] They, in turn, were aided by collaborators of one kind or another in just about every country the Germans occupied between 1939 and 1945.[29] Even more significant in terms of what it implies about the numbers of ordinary Germans involved in the crimes of the Third Reich, however, the last fifteen years have witnessed an explosion of irrefutable scholarship demonstrating the close involvement of the *Wehrmacht* in the Holocaust. Building on established knowledge of the army's complicity in the drawing up of criminal orders and its prime responsibility for the

deaths of Soviet prisoners of war, historians have demonstrated that German soldiers were also responsible for mass shootings of Jews in the Soviet Union.[30] In Serbia the *Wehrmacht* played a leading role in the initiation of genocidal practices before their expansion by the SS—in particular mass executions of Jews in reprisal for partisan attacks on Germans—and was closely involved in the establishment of concentration camps in that region;[31] Christian Gerlach has calculated that the army was responsible for the deaths of around half of all civilians and POWs in White Russia, and has shown the extent to which a quasi-genocidal population policy underpinned its 'anti-partisan' warfare.[32] Contrary to received wisdom concerning the relative distance of the army to the atrocities of the SS in Poland, it is now apparent that the army participated widely in war crimes against Jews and Poles from the beginning of the war onwards.[33] Controversial and painful as it has sometimes been, the cumulative effect of this scholarship has been to destroy for good the notion that the army fought a decent, conventional war in the East, and that atrocities committed by soldiers were isolated, unrepresentative incidents or acts of legitimate, preventative self-defence. Indeed, *Wehrmacht* soldiers were willing volunteers for reprisal shootings of innocent civilians, so much so that on occasion more volunteered than were needed.[34]

In addition to underlining that the range of military and quasi-military agencies actively involved in the killing was significantly greater than an earlier generation of writing implied, historians have also demonstrated that the implication of civilian agencies in the criminal dimensions of occupation was much greater than previously thought. In place of an image of occupation characterized by simple power hunger, plunder and mindless brutality in a chaotic 'frontier' environment, Christian Gerlach has argued powerfully that a more consistent, long-term vision of colonial domination and restructuring was being pursued by a wide range of agencies. Limited disputes over specific policy issues or groups of victims—such as the minority of Jews not murdered immediately but retained in the local economy for work—should not divert our attention from the essential fact that the policy of genocide did not stand in conflict with that of economic exploitation, but rather complemented and reinforced it, and that the vision of population decimation through starvation and deportation was shared by SS and army, labour and agricultural authorities alike. The implication of this is that the civilian occupants of the bureaucratic apparatus broadly shared the vision of exploitation, plunder and murder once thought the preserve of the SS, and collaborated actively in its implementation.[35]

Lest anyone be deluded, finally, into drawing clear lines between criminal acts perpetrated by men at the front and the maintenance of innocence by women at home, recent work on the perpetrators of Nazi crimes has

also tended to reach much less comfortable conclusions about women's involvement.[36] The suggestion that women's contribution to the crimes of the Third Reich lay in their willingness to create private environments which accorded with Nazi notions of domesticity and family life—which was itself an important challenge to earlier convenient notions of universal female victimhood—has been supplanted by the recognition that in their roles as social workers, nurses and administrators German women were closely involved alongside their male colleagues in the implementation of euthanasia, and were thus participants in criminal acts in public places.[37] Moreover, some women were agents of war and colonial domination too. By the end of the war, there were some 500,000 women employed in the German army, and, as Gudrun Schwarz argues,

> they lived and worked in an atmosphere of murder and crime, were bystanders and, as such, witnesses. Many were profiteers, some became accomplices, and still others became perpetrators themselves. When employed as assistants to the military staff, female *Wehrmacht*, SS and '*Kriegshelferinnen*' police helpers were charged with typing the reports of crimes perpetrated by those formations. Those who were signal corps helpers were responsible for communicating criminal orders by way of radio, telephone or telex.[38]

Similarly, in occupied Poland, many women, acting as teachers, Kindergarten workers or party functionaries, embraced and actively pursued policies of racist segregation and persecution against Jews and Poles.[39]

The overwhelming thrust of recent literature, therefore, has been to emphasize that the panoply of organizations actively involved in occupation and murder, the number of German men and women who participated in these crimes, and the range of places in which they committed them, was much, much greater than has hitherto been acknowledged. This, in turn, has naturally had profound implications for historians' understandings of the extent to which ordinary Germans became aware of the crimes not *after*, but *as* they were being committed. For, the more historians have recognized that acts of murder were not confined to a few hidden extermination camps, but perpetrated across Germany and occupied Europe, and the more they have realized that they were committed not just by a few SS rogues but by tens, indeed hundreds of thousands of Germans from all walks of life, the less credible has it become to sustain the idea that the genocide occurred in secret and the bulk of German society remained largely ignorant.

Again, evidence that suggested that many Germans witnessed the crimes of the regime was available from the Nuremberg trials onwards. Hermann Gräbe's famous description at Nuremberg of a mass shooting

near Dubno in the Ukraine mentioned not only his own building firm, which was engaged in construction projects under contract to the army, and the SS men and Ukrainian militia who were carrying out the killing, but uniformed postmen who were allowed to watch the horrific spectacle.[40] It is only recently, however, that historians have begun systematically to explore the nature and extent of ordinary Germans' witnessing of such crimes.

Jens Schley and Sybille Steinbacher, for example, have explored the relationships of the concentration camps Buchenwald and Dachau to their respective local communities, demonstrating that all manner of people entered or observed the camps on a regular basis—delivering food, or carrying out repairs—or came into contact with their personnel.[41] Similar observations have been made about ghettos in the East. Writing of White Russia, again, Christian Gerlach has noted that 'what happened in the ghettos was not only known to a handful of functionaries. . . Soldiers and officers, railway workers, members of the Organisation Todt and other members of the *Wehrmacht* retinue indulged in a form of Ghetto tourism';[42] when the Pinsk ghetto was liquidated, it was apparently observed by 'unknown members of the then Reich railways and Reich post service, who had come to the place of execution out of curiosity and sensationalist desire'.[43] Similarly, the liquidation of the Lublin ghetto was common knowledge among Germans in the area;[44] the fact that the wives of SS men stationed in the camp often joined them for extended periods also indicates that many women, as well as men, witnessed the most brutal aspects of Nazi barbarism.[45] When put alongside existing evidence that a broad range of officials were routinely taken on tours of hospitals, where they witnessed the horrors of the child 'euthanasia' programme, and examined alongside the damning evidence of German soldiers' letters home from the front—in which they describe, often graphically and with approval, appalling crimes against Jews and others—it becomes clear that the idea that most Germans were unaware of the crimes being committed by their colleagues, neighbours, friends and family members can simply no longer be believed.[46] In general, it is difficult to dissent from Saul Friedländer's recent assessment that 'the everyday involvement of the population with the regime was far deeper than has long been assumed, due to the widespread knowledge and passive acceptance of the crimes, as well as the crassest profit derived from them.'[47]

Perhaps only indirectly related to the historiographical shifts outlined above, but connected to them insofar as they have also helped to undermine older interpretative models of the Nazi regime, many studies in recent years have focused on the broader, consensual dimensions of Nazi rule and the role of ritual, propaganda and display in mobilizing and enforcing this.[48] Whereas once historians were inclined to see the Nazi

party rallies merely as the artificial staging of a fictitious 'people's community', at which assertions of unity, conformity and commitment papered over the ongoing political divisions of a conflict-ridden class society, they are now more willing to entertain the notion that for millions of Germans the *Volksgemeinschaft* embodied something subjectively real. According to this view, the rallies were both constitutive and expressive of a genuinely integrative regime, which drew its strength not only from its capacity to terrorize, but also from the attractive offer of inclusion in a community whose 'enemies' were defined as much by 'healthy popular sentiment' (*das gesunde Volksempfinden*) as by the ideological obsessions of a minority of radicals. Propaganda, it follows, did not so much dupe ordinary Germans into believing things which they might otherwise reject, as articulate back to broad sections of the population that which they already intuitively knew; rituals and displays enforced their sense of belonging to a community whose 'outsiders' were defined by ethnic, political, social and cultural resentments that the bulk of the population shared.

The integrating and mobilizing power of the regime's achievements in the 1930s (the rescue of Germany from the Left, the return to work, the restoration of 'German pride' through diplomatic successes) and the ability of the regime to harness the popularity of many of its measures in the reinforcement of Hitler's charismatic aura were such that, according to the prevailing consensus, terror played a much lesser role than was once thought, and the regime's strength rested on a popular acclaim rooted deep in the population.[49] Moreover, through their willingness to denounce neighbours to the Gestapo,[50] to enjoy the spoils of 'aryanization',[51] or otherwise to participate in and benefit from the actions of the regime, ordinary Germans became willing collaborators in a culture of unprecedented criminality in the 1930s, which explains the apparent willingness of so many to commit the deeds outlined above. Resistance, by contrast, was isolated.

In summary: where once historians focused on the coercive dimensions of Nazi rule, they are now inclined to see it as rooted in consensus; where once state and society were deemed to be 'in conflict', they are now seen as collaborators enacting a shared vision. Where once historians entertained the idea that most Germans were passive bystanders to the crimes of a relatively small number of activists, they now focus on the participation of the many. And if it was possible until relatively recently to argue that most Germans remained ignorant, such a view is clearly no longer possible: Germans were not only aware of the crimes being committed across occupied Europe—in many cases they approved. If intentionality was once conceived so narrowly that the ideological drive behind the Holocaust was seen as the preserve of Hitler and a few leading Nazis, the mass murder of Europe's Jews, alongside millions of others, is now

described as the enactment of the Führer's 'genocidal fantasies' which 'came to be shared by millions of Germans'.[52]

II

How might historians integrate this wealth of new empirical research and the insights it affords into a more general history of the Third Reich—one which takes account of the plebiscitary dimensions of the regime's rule, the integrative power of its material and ideological offerings, and the willing participation of many in crimes inspired by a leader who was widely adored? One recent attempt has been made by the leading scholar of Nazi euthanasia, Michael Burleigh. Resurrecting ideas first fashionable in the 1930s, Burleigh has sought in his 'New History' of the Third Reich to characterize National Socialism as a 'political religion'.[53]

There is, indeed, much of potential interest in this model, which never completely went away.[54] It offers a starting point for thinking about the nature of closed systems of belief, the fervent commitment they can generate, and the things they can lead people to do; it prompts reflection on the relationship between thinking and feeling, between the rational and the emotional in politics; it offers a way of approaching the meanings embedded in the cult forms, mystic initiation rites and acts of celebration; and it prompts consideration of the relationship between those who formulate, interpret and communicate dogma and those who receive it. Perhaps most tantalizingly, it provides the possibility of an interpretation which combines recognition of the presence of uncontested authority with acknowledgement of the fact that people willingly submitted to it. As Omer Bartov has recently argued,

> obedience to authority among those whose collaboration is most necessary, the educated professional elites, men and women of religion and faith, teachers and technicians, generals and professors, comes from accepting the fundamental ideas that guide that authority and wishing to help realise them in practice; and. . . this becomes possible only if both the authority and those who obey it share the same prejudices, the same view of the world, the same fundamental perception of reality.[55]

The apparent similarity with religion would seem obvious.

Yet Burleigh's approach is not without its problems. In the first place, much of his account is couched in the language of analogy, rather than analysis—of *Mein Kampf*, for example, he says that 'Hitler's refashioned and selective account of his own life consisted of a series of dramatic awak-

enings like Paul on the road to Damascus. . .'[56] This is typical of a prose style which, through constant insertion of the language of 'faith' as a synonym for quite secular 'belief', through open-ended questions ('for what else was the Führer than a Messiah?')[57] or through vague comparisons (the SS as 'a sort of secular priesthood')[58] seeks to suggest the applicability of a model rather than demonstrate it rigorously.

Secondly—though this is of course a problem with the book, rather than the model it espouses—for a study which claims to offer a new history of the Third Reich Burleigh's account is often focused on quite different targets. Most obviously, there are substantial digressions into the history of the Soviet Union. What starts out as a potentially stimulating attempt to rehabilitate a language of 'totalitarianism' through analysis of the aggressive tyranny which mass conformity and shared fervent belief can generate over the minority of those who wish, happen, or are deemed to be different, thus turns into a quite conventional rehearsal of outdated Cold War models.

The accompanying jibes at left-wing scholars whom Burleigh sees as blind in one eye are typical of a style which misses few opportunities to take passing shots at the apparently related forces of Maoism, left-liberalism and 'political correctness'.[59] There are digs at contemporary believers in social ownership,[60] digs at 'hippies gone to seed in seaside towns';[61] even a description of the RSHA man Alfred Six turns into mockery of the 'faux radicalism' of the generation of 1968.[62] Precisely what was 'faux' about the radicalism of one who played a leading role in *Einsatzgruppe* B Burleigh does not explain. When he tells us that prejudices against gypsies in 1930 were understandable because, amongst other things, 'their children had odd habits' and 'property values were depreciating' the boundary of good taste has been reached;[63] it is symptomatic of the absence of analytical rigour in the book that Burleigh does not consider whether falling property values were in fact a symptom of the Depression, and resentments against gypsies a manifestation of a wider tendency to blame the ethnically and culturally different for a crisis whose roots lay completely elsewhere. As the late Tim Mason observed, 'if historians have a public responsibility, if hating is part of their method. . . it is necessary that they should hate precisely', and Burleigh falls short here.[64]

It is not, however, just in these passing attacks that Burleigh reveals his politics. Far more interesting, and ultimately far more problematic—because indicative of a problem not just with the book but with the model—is the ideological script which resonates through his own account of the regime as a manifestation of 'political religion'. Both his characterization of the context which produced Nazism and his identification of the perpetrators reveal a partial, one-sided perspective on the period which sits at odds with much of the most compelling recent scholarship.

Firstly, the characterization of the Nazi movement and regime as a 'political religion' has unmistakeable echoes of an older theoretical literature on nationalism which described its emergence primarily as a product of secularization. Indeed Eric Voegelin, the author of one of the canonical texts of the theory of political religion, cited extensively by Burleigh, argued in his 1938 tract that

> this world is in a deep crisis, in a process of withering away, which has its cause in the secularization of the spirit. . . It is appalling to keep on hearing that National Socialism is a retreat into barbarism, into the dark Middle Ages, to times prior to the new progress towards humanity, without the speakers being aware that the secularization of life which the idea of humanity brought with it is precisely the ground on which anti-Christian religious movements such as National Socialism could first grow.[65]

As a great deal of research on both twentieth-century nationalism and Christianity has shown, however, these were far from mutually exclusive discourses. Modern 'scientific' antisemitism did not so much supplant older forms of Christian antisemitism as co-exist or elide with them. For one, Christian leaders were quite capable of articulating a highly racialized language of antisemitism which was at times indistinguishable from the utterances of the Nazi leadership,[66] and it is well known that parsons were among the opinion formers in Prussian villages who led the rural embrace of the new movement.[67] Conversely, the antisemitic caricatures of *Der Stürmer* contain many images of Germany being crucified, Christ-like, on the cross of reparations, or of the commercialism of greedy Jews undermining a proper, traditional German Christmas; much Nazi propaganda continued to contrast 'Jews' with 'Christians', not 'Jews' with 'Germans', and thus to draw on older notions of otherness.[68] In *Triumph of the Will*, Hitler famously descends from the skies in a plane whose fuselage makes the shadow of the cross on the ground; echoes of traditional Christian antisemitism, alongside more general elements of providentialist rhetoric, can be found in *Mein Kampf* itself, which is in many ways a very nineteenth-century text.[69] Nazi ideology, indeed, provides a perfect illustration of Paul Gilroy's suggestion that, for all their apparent modernity, more recent representations of the Jew 'have a lengthy history and that modern inventions, elaborations of that figure were reworked from ample materials inherited from a previous time in which the cosmos, the global and the divine were quite differently configured'.[70]

Recent scholarship has shown, then, how Nazism drew much of its rhetorical force from conventional Protestant nationalism and otherwise drew on religious language; the embrace of the 'national uprising' by