

Policing in Nazi Germany

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The nature of policing in Nazi Germany is a subject which continues to fascinate historians. The Gestapo (*Geheime Staatspolizei*) was an integral part of the Nazi terror system but historians have been and still are at odds as to how it actually functioned. Areas of debate have focused on the Gestapo's relationship with German society, its size, and everyday operations. The contemporary belief of a Gestapo spy on every corner that, in turn, helped create a veil of fear over the German people was dismissed by scholars on the grounds that the Gestapo did not possess an 'army of spies'. Current consensus sees the Third Reich as a 'self-policing' state operating within a 'consensus dictatorship' (*Zustimmungsdiktatur*). This thesis was pushed to the forefront of historiography by Professor Robert Gellately in his important 1990 work on denunciations.¹ He successfully moved the argument on from the 1950s view of Nazi Germany, which saw the Gestapo as a ruthless totalitarian state enforcer: an image borne out of Third Reich propaganda.

The first history of the Gestapo appeared in 1962 and reinforced the already popular notion of the Gestapo as an 'omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent' organisation.² Heavily influenced by the published proceedings of the Nuremberg post-war trials, works on the Gestapo produced during the 1950s and 1960s took a top-down approach, focusing on the centrality of key individuals such as Heinrich Himmler, Reinhard Heydrich and Ernst Kaltenbrunner and their role within the creation of a Nazi police state.³ Ten years after the Allied powers sat in judgment at Nuremberg, Edward Crankshaw wrote that the 'influence of the Gestapo crept into every level of German life. Gestapo tentacles extended with disconcerting speed and effectiveness.'⁴ Crankshaw and his contemporaries, who included the famous Hannah Arendt, saw Nazi Germany as a totalitarian dictatorship with the Gestapo acting as a proactive Nazi police enforcer.⁵

During the 1970s, as a result of the 'social turn' in history, historians began to revise the ways in which they worked and some went on to adopt a 'history from below' approach. German historians began to dig deeper into the Nazi past, mining newly available records for information relating

Plain-clothed Gestapo men, 1945.



to the Gestapo and its relationship with German society. The work of Reinhard Mann was pivotal in dispelling the notion of the Gestapo as being an 'all knowing and all seeing' police organisation. Working from the largest collection of Gestapo files which survive in pockets throughout Germany, Mann took a random selection of Gestapo Düsseldorf case files, and demonstrated that the Gestapo was a small organisation.⁶ His work went on to form the catalyst for all future Anglo-American scholarship. Robert Gellately's study of the Würzburg Gestapo files built upon Mann's work, supporting the view of a self-policing society with a small and largely reactive state secret police force. Gellately argues that 'the enforcement of racial policies designed to separate the groups defined by the Nazis as "racially foreign" required the co-operation or collaboration of "ordinary citizens"'. Given the small numbers of Gestapo agents and the often minute detail about private matters that was required for the successful execution of Nazi policies, these simply could not have been enforced without the support of those members of the population who came forward with the necessary information.⁷ Following in his footsteps was another US-based historian, Eric Johnson, whose study of Cologne court files and Krefeld Gestapo case files supported this self-policing thesis. Johnson differed in one area: he did not exaggerate the significance of denunciations, showing Gestapo officers to be brutal and more proactive in their policing.⁸

During the past few decades, new scholarship on the Gestapo has sought a middle ground – one which reinforces the proactive nature of the Gestapo. Richard J. Evans leads this anti-revisionist assault, arguing that the pendulum has swung far too much in the direction of a consensus society. Evans points out that denunciation would have been meaningless without the existence of an authority such as the Gestapo.⁹ He shows that denunciations were actually quite rare, and that the Gestapo was an important part of a polymorphous system of surveillance and control within the Third Reich.¹⁰ My own research on paid Gestapo informers (*Vertrauensleute*) supports Evans's arguments as I demonstrate that the Gestapo was not so thin on the ground as previously thought. The Gestapo spy network comprised both official (paid) and unofficial informers (denouncers) who effectively policed

German society at all levels and assisted the Gestapo in the detection of 'crime' within and outside Germany.¹¹ The recent work of J. Ryan Stackhouse also supports the argument that the Gestapo was a coercive agent of the Nazi police state as he points out that this was, in fact, selective: Heydrich ordered Gestapo officers to act in a professional manner at all times when dealing with the German people, as opposed to the brute force used on those outside the imagined Nazi racial community.¹²

The debate surrounding the nature of policing in Nazi Germany is one that is far from over as historians continue to thrash out the finer points as to whether the Third Reich was a totalitarian or consensus dictatorship, or somewhere in between.

Designing enquiries to help your students to think about interpretations of the Gestapo

The author would urge you to discuss all areas of debate with your students, but also to encourage them to look beyond, exploring the politics of information and the various institutions involved in the monitoring, collection, and evaluation of information on potential enemies of the Nazi state. This suggests a particular interpretations focus: *How far do historians' difficulties in describing the nature of the Gestapo reflect the difficulties of people at the time?* You might also pivot this into an enquiry about the nature of propaganda. Part of the historian's problem is that Nazi

propaganda insisted that the Gestapo was ubiquitous. We can see the advantage to the regime in putting out this message if it were untrue, but does this necessarily imply that it was actually untrue? A fruitful enquiry question might be: *What are the challenges for historians in establishing how the Gestapo operated?* There is another possibility suggested by the author. She shows that the 1970s re-interpretation of the Nazi police state as bottom-up was part of a trend across history, the 'social turn,' so ask *How far have historians of the Third Reich been influenced by trends in history?*

The Editors

Further reading

Evans, R.J. (2005) *The Third Reich in Power: 1933-1939* (London: Penguin). A full overview of the Nazi effort to purge and transform German society during the pre-war period. Part one offers a detailed overview of the Nazi police state with two excellent chapters on 'enemies of the people' and 'instruments of terror'.

Gellately, R. (2001) *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: OUP). This book explores the notion of a consensus dictatorship, providing evidence that the German people knew about the enforcement of Nazi terror, which they actively consented to and even participated in. The second chapter on 'police justice' serves as a good starting point for learning more about the revisionist approach to the nature of policing in the Third Reich.

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- Stackhouse, J.R. (2014) 'Gestapo Interrogations: Myths and Realities' in Andrew, C. and Tobia, S. (eds) *Interrogation in War and Conflict: A comparative and interdisciplinary analysis*, New York: Routledge, pp. 75-92

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