



David A. Hackett. *The Buchenwald Report*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995. xviii + 397 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8133-1777-9.

Reviewed by Harold Marcuse

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The publication in English of important but inaccessible German sources is generally a very welcome occurrence, and the book under review here is no exception. The original "Buchenwald Report" was compiled under the auspices of the Psychological Warfare Division (PWD) of the US Army by a team of former camp inmates shortly after liberation in early April 1945. It was completed within days of the German capitulation on 8 May, making it *one of the first* official investigations of that perverse universe within the Nazi realm. It was not, however, the very first investigation, a point to which I will return later.

The 10-man team of former-inmate authors, many of them Communists, was headed by Eugen Kogon, a conservative Austrian Catholic with academic degrees in sociology and economics, as well as editorial experience, who had spent seven years in that camp after his arrest for oppositional activities. The work of collecting testimonies began on 16 April 1945, and the typescript was completed on 11 May, when more than two dozen former inmates of various nationalities certified that it was indeed an "objective" portrayal. The original report translated here consisted of a 125-page single-spaced typescript dictated by Kogon, with a 275-page appendix of 168 individual reports written by 104 liberated prisoners with special knowledge of certain aspects of the system.

The PWD project of translating the document into English was never realized, perhaps because

other exigencies delayed the project until anti-Communist sentiments ruled out the publication of a document in whose genesis Communists had played a substantial role. Kogon himself, however, reworked the entire German manuscript by the end of 1945, and in 1946 it was published as his justly famous *Der SS Staat*, which was translated into English and published in 1950 as *The Theory and Practice of Hell*. Over the years the few known copies of the original typescript report, including Kogon's, were lost. The report resurfaced in 1987, when Albert Rosenberg, Professor of Social Work at the University of Texas, El Paso, formerly the PWD specialist in charge of the documentation project, gave a copy to the historian of Germany at his school, David Hackett. The late Frederick Praeger, founder of Westview Press and an old friend of Rosenberg's from occupied Germany, agreed to publish the report in translation.

Hackett has not only translated and annotated the entire document, he has supplied a 24 page introduction. The volume is rounded out by a glossary, a brief selected bibliography, and an index. The translation is, on the whole, very smooth. Even untranslatable idioms and camp jargon such as *radfahren* (37) or *Bver*, the "professional criminals" of the camps (31) are usually succinctly explained in a bracketed note, and the glossary is quite serviceable as well. "Senior camp inmate" for *Lageraeltester* is perhaps more cumbersome than "camp elder," but it does make clear that this

functionary was an inmate. I did not take the trouble to compare systematically Hackett's translation with the portions of the German original published by Kogon and Lutz Niethammer (see below), but I did chance upon one slip of meaning: out of an *elastische Trennungswand* set up by prisoners to protect themselves from the SS, Hackett has made an "invisible wall of separation" (83). This metaphor refers to the goal mentioned by Kogon a few paragraphs earlier: an "impenetrable wall." Such nuances, however, will only be relevant in the most specialized studies.

Translated sources are usually aimed at an audience of students, and their utility is heightened by the scholarly apparatus. This is where *The Buchenwald Report* is somewhat disappointing. The index is not complete, as a spot check of the names of the authors of the individual reports reveals. Oskar Berger and Jan Sobottka, for instance, are missing, as are a number of others. Unfortunately, the shortcomings do not end there.

Hackett has annotated the report and some of the individual narratives, but his comments are incomplete and spotty at best. They seem to be based on coincidental finds, primarily from the records of post-trial reviews in the US National Archives. The liberated prisoners writing the reports took care to be very precise in giving the names and ranks of their torturers when dictating their reports. Most readers will wonder what actions were taken based on that information, but Hackett has failed to do the basic legwork. Of eight camp doctors listed on page 63, Hackett offers scant information about three. He did not check the files of the former Berlin Document Center, which often contain notes inserted by post-war investigators, nor did he use the extensive clippings collections of the Wiener Library or the Munich *Institut fuer Zeitgeschichte*. Even the relevant holdings of the Buchenwald Archive were not consulted to a significant extent (cf. 383f, notes 46, 64).

Such biographical research is lacking not only for the Nazi perpetrators; it is hit-and-miss for the survivors as well, many of whom rose to prominence after liberation. For example, we learn that Heinrich Hackmann and Helmut Roscher's death sentences were later commuted to life imprisonment, but we do not learn that these men were freed by 1955. The fate of Ilse Koch, the commandant's wife, is given in fair detail (43), but that of head-sadist Martin Sommer only in the briefest form (204). We learn that the notorious Dr. Hans Eisele was released in 1952, but not that he practiced medicine in Munich until incriminating evidence in the Martin Sommer trial prompted him to flee Germany in 1958. Nor do we learn that Eisele thereafter held a high position in an Egyptian rocket center until his death in 1967. And we do not learn that all of the many Buchenwald brutes sentenced but not hanged by 1951 (that is, most of them) were out of prison by 1956. On the prisoners' side, we learn for instance that Ludwig Fleck, author of a gripping report about Lemberg and Treblinka, later became a distinguished academic in the United States (360), but we do not learn anything about Jewish communist Emil Carlebach and his founding role with the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper in 1945, nor about his role in the Buchenwald survivor's organization and his later life in East Germany. The list goes on.

Hackett's introduction is well written, but it, too, is wanting in several respects. It is annoying to find trivial mistakes on page 1, where Hackett gives the wrong liberation dates for Mauthausen and Theresienstadt, even though he cites literature with the correct information. Other flaws are more serious.

Even the scant information Hackett offers in his annotations highlights a contradiction that begs an introductory explanation: the American politics of execution and clemency for convicted mass murderers. After noting that several SS men singled out in the prisoners' reports for their brutality have been granted clemency (34ff), Hackett

notes that in one of the rare cases where the report praises an SS officer for showing "understanding of the prisoners' situation" (Otto Foerscher, p. 37), the man was indeed executed by the Americans in 1946. In the introduction readers ought to learn that the early trials concentrated on proving guilt by circumstance, i.e. the commandant of a camp was automatically held responsible for all atrocities committed within it. Foerscher had been made commandant of the underground rocket factory Dora-Mittelbau, for which he was executed, although he had improved conditions there substantially. In contrast, the later clemency reviews focused on proof of concrete evidence of guilt in specific cases, and limited themselves to the evidence presented at the original trials, so that many of the quotidian murderers were able to have been set free. Cases such as Foerscher's (and Martin Weiss' in Dachau) embittered many former inmates, and merit a few remarks about the fiasco of denazification in Germany.

The most serious issue missing from Hackett's introduction concerns the role of Communist inmates in the administration of the camp, which ranged from strategic collaboration with the SS to pure opportunism to brutal sadism. Kogon could hardly have tackled this question openly, since many Communists were among his co-workers and informants, since he owed his life to them, and because he had been under the surveillance of Communist fellow inmate Stefan Heymann in the camp, and during the writing of the report (and perhaps even in the 1950s)[see *SS-Staat*, section after "Antifascist Celebrations," and Niethammer, cited below, p. 199n67, 205n79, 470]. The issue comes up time and again in *The Buchenwald Report*: in the foreword by publisher Praeger, whose father's death began with a blow from a "communist trusty" in Buchenwald; in Hackett's discussion of what Western scholars have come to call the "myth of the prisoners' 'self-liberation' of Buchenwald" (5); in the role Hackett thinks anti-communism played in the fate of the manuscript

(17ff); implicitly when it is reported that non-German prisoners were suspicious of the German inmate police (50, 87); and in several of the individual reports when Communist former prisoners feel compelled to justify why they selected certain prisoners to be sent on "transports."

In fact, this very issue has become quite contentious in Germany since the fall of the GDR and has prompted a major study: Lutz Niethammer ed., *Der 'gesaeuberte' Antifaschismus: Die SED und die roten Kapos von Buchenwald* (1994). Unfortunately, the discussion and the preparatory work for this study seem not to have been known by Hackett. Not only did Niethammer and his co-authors find another copy of the report Hackett has translated in the SED Central Party Archive (a mimeograph with the main report on 99 pages and some reports missing from the appendix, e.g. #101) [Niethammer, 198n67]; they discovered a report completed by two of Albert Rosenberg's predecessors in Buchenwald on 24 April 1945 that is held by the National Archives in Washington [reprinted in translation: Niethammer, 180-98, cf. 68-71]. Niethammer expands an introductory remark by the authors of that earlier report: 'the full truth will never be known' with the words: 'at least as long as the interviewed prisoners are still in the power of the communist-dominated camp committee in Buchenwald' [68]. Indeed, as mentioned above, Kogon wrote *The Buchenwald Report* under the watchful eye of a Communist informant, and Hackett notes, without explanation, that the appendix contains only about 70% of the individual reports originally collected by Kogon's team (384n64). Niethammer has reprinted seven of the missing reports, all of which are compromising for the Communist functionaries (Niethammer, 206-34).

Niethammer and co-workers have, for the parts of the Rosenberg-report that they publish, performed another task incompletely executed by Hackett: a substantive analysis of the differences between the 11 May 1945 *Buchenwald Report*,

and the text Kogon published as *Der SS-Staat*, after reworking it without Communists looking over his shoulders. To illustrate Kogon's difficult situation, Hackett could have cited one added passage in particular, in which Kogon balances criticism, understanding, and recognition in his appraisal of the behavior of the Communists in the camp (Kogon, *SS-Staat*, sect. "Merits and Failings of the CP"; cf. Hackett, 83; Niethammer, 201n73).

Finally, it is difficult to follow Hackett when he applies Christopher Browning's thesis that German perpetrators were "ordinary men" to the SS in Buchenwald (24). The appended reports contain such vivid testimony about so many brutal sadists, from Sommer to Weissenborn to Eisele to Hinkelmann to Blank, that we are compelled question what "ordinary" must mean. Indeed, Browning himself has been criticized by Daniel Goldhagen for ignoring evidence of gleeful brutality in his sources.

In spite of these deficiencies, *The Buchenwald Report* is a worthwhile addition to the primary literature on the Nazi concentration camps. I have gone to such lengths to point out the shortcomings of the edition and to suggest how some of them can be remedied precisely because I feel that it is an excellent teaching tool. With it students can be given the opportunity not only to learn about the camps, but also to see how history is made, from the gathering of primary material, to its interpretation with inherent biases, to its revised interpretation (Kogon's *SS-Staat*), to its re-revised interpretation (which a teacher could summarize from the Niethammer volume).

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