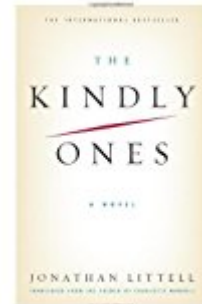




Jonathan Littell. *The Kindly Ones*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell. New York: HarperCollins, 2009. 984 pp. \$29.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-135345-1.



Reviewed by Peter Fritzsche (Department of History, University of Illinois)

Published on H-German (February, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

The Executioners Speak

Jonathan Littell's complex, provocative novel about Holocaust perpetrators, *The Kindly Ones*, appeared nearly three years ago in the original French. It earned estimable reviews, sold over eight hundred thousand copies in France alone, and won the 2006 Prix Goncourt. Reactions to the German edition last year were more muted, with many reviewers finding that the work's mix of homosexuality and genocide obscured more than it revealed. Written at a furious pace over a few months, but indebted to years of research, the book, which appears now in English translation, poses fundamental questions about the logic of genocide and the politics of representing the Holocaust. Readers follow Max Aue, an imaginary SS officer with the rank of Obersturmbahnführer (the equivalent of a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army) who was born in 1913, some ten years after the generation of *Freikorps* activists, as he travels on assignment from "one end of German Europe to the other" over the course of World War II (p. 12). He is at once a perpetrator and an observer, whose recollections, recounted in first-person narration, constitute an extraordinary thousand-page documentation of war and genocide. At the same time, they offer a fictional reconstruction of the motiva-

tions and responses of German participants. The narrator cites Hans Frank's speeches from the archives, illustrates his own philosophical and literary musings with quotations from Herodotus, Robert Brasillach, and Stendhal, points out what Hugh Trevor-Roper and Alan Bullock do not (or cannot) know, and recalls (imaginary) conversations with Adolf Eichmann while rebutting Hannah Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil. Initially assigned to Einsatzkommando 4a, which shadows the Sixth Army from the Bug to the Volga, Aue eventually arrives at most of the stations of the SS empire.

The narrative opens with German armies crossing the "gray water of the Bug" (p. 27) on June 22, 1941. Aue quickly becomes a witness to pogroms against local Jews; travelling to Lemberg to get new orders, he sees the massacres in full swing, with bloodied Jewish men hauling the victims of the NKVD out of the former Soviet prison and adolescent Ukrainian paramilitaries chasing and beating half-naked Jews down the streets. In the novel, the pogroms clinch the argument that the SS should handle administrative matters in the rear without Wehrmacht interference, and Aue's Ein-

satzkommando becomes practiced at rounding up and murdering the men, women, and children of Jewish communities throughout Ukraine. Aue is among the shooters at the “Great Action” in Babi Yar at the end of September. He even prepares a commemorative photo album that earns him the praise of Heinrich Himmler. The following year, during the German offensive in spring and summer 1942, Aue finds himself in Crimea and the Caucasus, although a homosexual encounter lands him in Stalingrad, where the noose around the Sixth Army is already tight: “If they sent you here, it’s because they don’t think you’re indispensable,” his best friend, Thomas Hauser, informs him (p. 355). Airlifted out on one of the last transports to leave Stalingrad thanks to a bullet in the head and an exchange of dog tags—the plotline is improbable—Aue makes his unexpected recovery in Berlin, where, in 1943, an officer with contacts could still amuse himself—“at the Golden Horseshoe they had a black hostess ... at the Jockey Club the orchestra played American music” (p. 443)—and in Paris, where he hobnobs with the literati of the collaboration. Lucien Rebatet even takes him to Café Flore. Later, Aue is assigned to the staff of Rudolf Brandt, Himmler’s personal adjutant, and is charged with overseeing the regime of Jewish slave labor. In this capacity, Aue inspects the work camps in the General Gouvernement, overhearing the *genocidaires* gossip as they drink in Cracow’s Deutsches Haus (T-4, gas vans, Sobibor), conferring with Auschwitz’s commandant, Rudolf Höss, and witnessing in Birkenau the arrival of a convoy of Jews from France. Aue has tea with Eichmann in Berlin, audits Himmler’s October 1943 speeches in Posen, and accompanies Albert Speer to Dora-Mittelbau. He also participates in the operation to deport Hungary’s Jews in spring 1944. Littell’s peripatetic protagonist ends the war in Berlin, imprisoned with none other than fellow SS officer Hermann Fegelein (husband to Eva Braun’s sister, Gretl). In real life, Fegelein was executed for desertion at the end of April 1945, but in the novel, this event is delayed until Aue witnesses the refugee streams from the East and the atrocities meted out to German civilians by the advancing Red Army.

Aue is an obvious composite, a technique that enables Littell to introduce readers to the stages by which the precise machinery of murder was discussed and implemented, technical and moral barriers were overcome, and the “Final Solution” was scaled to all of Europe. Moreover, Littell does so with an extraordinary ability to provide historical citation that is both scrupulously accurate and gripping. He has an eye for telling detail: the “sticky mud, thick and black, that the soldiers called

buna” (p. 79); the conversations about Napoleon Bonaparte at Beresina; the “coarsely cut ... colored paper” Christmas decorations in the German encampments (p. 350); the family snapshots scattered across the ground at Babi Yar; the gossip among Berliners in line to see a movie (“it’s the international Jews ... why couldn’t they save their Jewish brothers here.... They’re punishing us by bombing us”) (p. 468); the graffiti on Parisian walls in spring 1943: “STALINGRAD or ’1918’ ” (p. 499). Is all of this detail nothing more than Holocaust kitsch, a voyeuristic grand tour of German-occupied Europe? I don’t think so, although the troublesome gaze of the spectator is produced again and again to achieve Littell’s thematic effects.

Claude Lanzmann has asserted that the “executioners don’t speak.”[1] Executioners did not speak for Lanzmann’s camera in his documentary, *Shoah* (1985), but Littell invents a language for them, one that is only partially traceable to the archives he has investigated. As Einsatzkommando 4a ratchets up the killing of Ukrainian Jews over the course of August and September 1942, Aue considers the motivations of the shooters. Some “killed with sensual pleasure” (p. 107), but Aue does not regard them as critical: “sadists or psychopaths”—“these sick men are nothing” (p. 18). The “real danger,” Aue concludes, “is me, is you,” “ordinary men” (p. 21). Second, there are those “who regarded the Jews as animals and kill them the way a butcher slaughters a cow” (p. 107). Yet antisemitism is a secondary theme; Aue doesn’t really believe in all the talk about “internationales Finanzjudentum” (p. 108); indeed, Thomas, his fictional mentor in the SS, points out, anticipating Ian Kershaw’s notion of “working towards” the *Führer*, that since antisemitism is “a subject that means a lot to the Führer, it has become one of the best ways to get close to him: if you manage to play a role in the solution to the Jewish question, your career will advance much more quickly than if you concern yourself, say, with Jehovah’s Witnesses or homosexuals” (p. 458).[2] Even Eichmann, as Aue refers to in mentioning his 1961 trial, harbored no “particular hatred of the Jews: he had simply built his career on them” (p. 570). Most people, Aue is convinced, “killed out of duty, overcoming their repugnance” with each successive action (p. 107). At Babi Yar, he elaborates this point: “None of our men could kill a Jewish woman without thinking about his wife, his sister, or his mother” (p. 147). Self-declared “friends of children” did in fact have to overcome moral scruples against killing innocents and did so with difficulty.[3] As a result, Aue continues, “the astonishing brutality with which some men treated the condemned be-

fore executing them, was nothing but a consequence of the monstrous pity they felt and which, incapable of expressing itself otherwise, turned into rage” (p. 147). Perversely, in this view, the actions of the killers revealed “the awful, inalterable solidarity of humanity” (p. 147).

What binds “the man standing above the mass grave” with “the one lying, dead or dying, at the bottom of the pit” is that neither one asked to be there (pp. 17-18). “Like most men, I never asked to become a murderer,” Aue insists (p. 22). He did become a murderer, this we know, and he does declare himself guilty of murder, but he challenges the reader: “[Y]ou should be able to admit to yourselves that you might also have done what I did” (p. 20). For Littell, guilt, phrased like this, is largely the derivative of circumstance.

Littell persistently plays with the notion that the Jews were somehow like the Germans, strengthening the argument for the basic interchangeability of victim and perpetrator. Aue himself is circumcised and has visions, which might be delusional or insightful, in which he sees Hitler draped with “a large blue-and-white striped rabbi’s shawl” (p. 455). Various discussions up and down the Nazi hierarchy confront Aue with the opinion that “all our great ideas come from the Jews ... the notion of the Chosen People, the concept of the purity of blood.... They are our only real competitors, in fact” (p. 455). Aue even imagines his sister, Una, explaining the murder of the Jews as the attempt to get rid of the Germans’ own Jewish characteristics, which are also the most German: “[W]e’ve never understood that these qualities that we attribute to the Jews, calling them baseness, spinelessness, avarice, greed, thirst for domination, and facile malice are fundamentally German qualities” (p. 874). Again and again, Littell breaks down the distance between the killers and the killed, between “them” and us, between My Lai and my home, between “We Are All German Jews”—circa 1968—and, perhaps, “We Are All Germans”—circa 2008. It is worth noting that what terrified Littell as an American kid growing up in the post-Vietnam era, as he revealed in interviews, was the possibility that he could be drafted and transformed into an American perpetrator.[4] In the 1990s, Littell’s NGO work in Bosnia, Chechnya, and Rwanda confirmed to him how quickly ordinary individuals became cruel killers.

Littell also challenges Aue’s insistence that the killers recognized the humanity of their victims. Aue himself acknowledges “the yawning gap, the absolute contradiction between the ease with which one can kill and the huge difficulty there must be in dying. For us, it was an-

other dirty day’s work; for them, the end of everything” (pp. 82-83). The “tanned skin and careless youth” (p. 92) of the Wehrmacht soldiers who loitered around the SS killing sites in “bathing suits” (p. 96) or photographed the actions to send home or trade the snapshots as souvenirs indicate the unself-conscious arrogance of German power, although by the time the Sixth Army gets to Stalingrad in winter 1942, the “bullies” are doomed to confront the “anxiety, fear, and doubt” that their unrestrained violence had until then protected them against (p. 390). Even so, Littell reiterates that violence is situational, rather than ideological. Discussions among the highly educated SS officers outline justifications for murder, the new *völkisch* morality, and the racial essence of political struggle in the modern world, but ideology, World War I, and the deliberate self-making of what Michael Wildt has aptly termed “the Generation of the Unbound” play a subordinate role in Littell’s consideration of motive.[5] Littell seems to favor one of Aue’s hypotheses regarding the murder of the Jews. All the killing “doesn’t serve any real purpose”; “it can have only one meaning: an irrevocable sacrifice, which binds us once and for all, prevents us from ever turning back... [T]here’s no way back. It’s the *Endsiege* or death” (p. 142). Certainly once the murders had taken place, the idea that “the bridges have been burned behind us,” as Goebbels and other ranking Nazis repeatedly and publicly put it in 1943, justified the continuation of murder lest the survivors avenge themselves or the killers be called to account.[6] However, the lack of German history in this reconstruction of German crime is striking. The mocking graffiti in Paris—“1918”—hints indirectly at the defensive war many German perpetrators believed they were fighting and in which they willingly mobilized themselves, but the historical connections are not explored. For Littell, history is a kind of euphemism for a much more structurally bound tragedy in which all humans can be caught.

Aue’s historical itinerary is also unclear. Born of a French mother and a German father, and having studied at the *École libre des sciences politiques* in Paris, Aue is French enough to keep readers from coding him as completely German. Tellingly, Aue quotes the French collaborator Brasillach, who infamously declared “‘We have slept with Germany, and the memory will remain sweet to us’” (p. 510). The French connection is an important part of Aue’s autobiography to keep in mind when considering the positive, in part uncritical French response to the text. Yet, the reasons why this connoisseur of French literature (Stendhal, Gustave Flaubert) and mu-

sic (Jean-Philippe Rameau, François Couperin) is drawn to Germany, where he attends Hitler rallies and joins the NSDAP in 1932, are left unexplained, save for the fact that his German father abandoned the family in the early 1920s. Despite a narrative that stretches over a thousand pages, readers are left wanting to know more about Max Aue's motivations. And it is not really about *Vaterlosigkeit*. What Littell does give the reader in explanation is his incestuous relationship with Una, his twin sister. This taboo love constituted a radical freedom, expressing a "thirst for life," a disposition which the philhellenic Littell admires (p. 883): "Our private lives ... belonged to us alone," reports Max about his adolescent, physical love, "a space vaster than the world, limited only by the possibilities of our united minds" (p. 403). In this interior space, Aue recognizes his "passion for the absolute, for the overcoming of all limits," "ever since I was a child"; and "now this passion had led me to the edge of the mass graves of the Ukraine" (p. 96). Here the connection is made. Aue is sickened by the killings; he vomits up his food and has frightening visions of his "shit pouring out liquid and thick, a continuous flow that quickly filled the toilet bowl and kept rising" (p. 96), yet he walks out to the killing fields again and again, and he does so precisely in order to recreate the moment of shock, "that sensation of rupture, an infinite disturbance of my whole being" (pp. 178-179). The desire for experience, the demand for knowledge about all the things that tell us what it is to be human, despite the physical impairments they produce, propels Aue forward. *The Kindly Ones* thus reverses Klaus Theweleit's circuitry, despite Theweleit's critical embrace of Littell's novel: disembodiment and boundlessness is the result, not the premise of violence; and the desire for rupture in order to blow the mind is what animates Aue's action, not defensive maneuvers to ward off "women, floods, bodies." [7] Indeed, Aue is untroubled by his awareness that he wishes to be a woman.

Littell's novel moves across such a great space in order to demonstrate to readers that, as Aue explains, "there is no such thing as inhumanity. There is only humanity and more humanity" (p. 589). In the novel, scene after scene is composed in way to document the rupture of boundaries that Littell suggests constitutes human tragedy and invites the avenging furies, euphemistically known as the "kindly ones." (In the end, though, the furies do no more than torment the middle management of genocide; after the war, Aue quietly sells lace in France, although, he states, even in Germany "I could have resumed my name, my doctorate, claimed my veteran's and disability benefits" – "no one would have no-

ticed" [p. 11].) By creating such tight homologues between incest or homosexuality and mass murder, and by pushing the sexualization of killing from Max's sodomizing of Una under the guillotine's blade in a torture museum to the masturbatory pleasures of the perpetrators in the dream sequences at the end of the novel, Littell threatens not so much to expand our understanding of the crimes or the criminals than restore the worn figure of the Nazi as homosexual. As a result, a contradiction arises between the genesis of the observer and the lessons he derives from his observation. *The Kindly Ones* comes perilously close to aestheticizing the gaze of the murderer, even as it aims to force a more comprehensive consideration of the potential guilt of those who have not murdered. Littell pushes Aue from site to site in order to unsettle readers' consciences and to disrupt the distance they have gained by historicizing the Holocaust. In the end, then, *The Kindly Ones* cannot be simply rejected as scandal against representation or as the kitsch of voyeurism. Its perpetrators do speak.

Notes

[1]. "Littell hat die Sprache der Henker erfunden," interview of Claude Lanzmann, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Feuilleton, November 28, 2007.

[2]. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris* (New York: WW Norton, 1998), 527.

[3]. See, for example, letters from Fritz Jacob to Rudolf Quener, May 5 and June 21, 1942, cited and discussed in Frank Bajohr, "'... dann bitte keine Gefühlsduseleien': Die Hamburger und die Deportationen," in *Die Deportationen der Hamburger Juden 1941-1945*, ed. Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg (Hamburg: Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg, 2002), 20-21.

[4]. Assaf Uni, "The Executioner's Song," in *Ha'aretz*, www.haaretz.com, October 6, 2008, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/988410.html>.

[5]. Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten: Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2002).

[6]. Joseph Goebbels, "Die zwangsläufigen Schlüsse," *Das Reich*, November 14, 1943.

[7]. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, vol. 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). See also Theweleit's "Der jüdische Zwilling," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 24,

2008; his “Der belgische Hitler-Sohn und der deutsche Überleib,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 25, 2008; and his “postface” to Littell, *Le sec et l’humide: Une brève incursion en territoire fasciste* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).

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

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

Citation: Peter Fritzsche. Review of Littell, Jonathan, *The Kindly Ones*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24135>



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