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Peter Longerich. *Heinrich Himmler: A Life*. Trans. Jeremy Noakes and Leslie Sharpe. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. xviii + 1,031 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-959232-6.

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In a noted 1991 essay, leading Holocaust historian Saul Friedländer used Heinrich Himmler as an example to support his contention that the Holocaust, unlike other historical events, “could well be inaccessible to all attempts at a significant representation and interpretation.” Analyzing Himmler’s notorious Posen speech of October 4, 1943, Friedländer highlights Himmler’s statement that the SS must keep the murder of the Jewish people secret for all time, when he called it “a glorious page in our history and one that has never been written and can never be written.”[1] From this statement Friedländer concludes that Himmler and his accomplices did not really believe the racial theories that supposedly justified their actions. Consequently, the Holocaust did not represent an “inversion of all values,” but rather “an amorality beyond all categories of evil. Human beings are no longer reduced to instruments; they lose their humanity entirely.” Having lost their humanity, the perpetrators are therefore no longer accessible to the empathy that remains the heart of the historian’s method. As Friedländer trenchantly formulates his claim, “no one of sound mind would wish to interpret the events from Hitler’s viewpoint.”[2]

But do historians have to become Adolf Hitler or Heinrich Himmler to understand why these men acted as they did? Concerning Himmler, at least, Peter Longerich handily demonstrates that we can achieve an understanding of the man and his actions that is nuanced and thorough, if necessarily imperfect. Longerich’s magisterial Himmler biography, faithfully and elegantly translated by Jeremy Noakes and Leslie Sharpe from the 2008 German original, may rank as the most important monograph on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust in over a decade. Deftly interweaving Himmler’s psychological

makeup and personal development with the steady radicalization of Nazi policies, Longerich captures the highly personal mark that Himmler left on the institutions he created, most notably, his power base, the SS. The book presents much of the history of the Third Reich from a fresh perspective, offering countless important insights for specialists, while serving as an excellent introduction to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust for those new to the field.

From Longerich’s account several factors emerge that might explain Himmler’s horrific crimes. In the first place, Himmler thought of himself as a soldier for his entire adult life, waging permanent and merciless war against the internal and external enemies of Germany. Born in 1900, he joined the army early in the last year of World War I. He saw himself very much as a failure for having neither seen combat nor achieved officer rank. This “failure” was made all the more bitter by the triumphant return of his brother Gebhard, who emerged from the fighting unscathed, was promoted to lieutenant, and was decorated for valor with the Iron Cross. After the war, Himmler entered the radical nationalist milieu as a student at Munich’s Technical University and engaged in paramilitary activity. Himmler was thus a classic example of the “war youth generation” that Ulrich Herbert and Michael Wildt, among others, have extensively studied. Too young to have experienced the horror of trench warfare, they were perhaps even readier than veterans to glorify the fighting and to embrace the new “front soldier ideal” best articulated by the veteran and memoirist Ernst Jünger: “cool,” “dispassionate,” “objective,” and hardened to human suffering, accepting the deaths of millions as an unremarkable fact of political life.[3]

Himmler folded this new soldierly ideal into his understanding of himself and the ideal SS-man, and built his career on the claim that his SS were the most fearless and committed soldiers in the perpetual struggle against Germany's "enemies." Membership in military and paramilitary formations also met many of Himmler's most important psychological needs, according to a persuasive interpretation that Longerich bases, in part, on extensive discussions with psychoanalysts and other psychotherapists. Longerich concludes that Himmler suffered from an "attachment disorder," which made it difficult for him to maintain enduring and meaningful relationships with others. He disguised his emotional immaturity by a "constant exercise of willpower and self-control," and found in the military setting and "soldierly virtues" a life circumscribed by rules that maintained the necessary control over his emotions (pp. 39-41). However, Longerich finds no other signs of abnormality in Himmler's family background or upbringing, and even his attachment disorder would hardly lead in a straight line to genocide. This book is thus very much not a psychohistory, but rather uses the psychological factor judiciously as only one component of the larger interpretation.

Racist ideology also helps us understand Himmler's behavior, but Longerich persuasively argues that Himmler applied ideology flexibly and selectively in his relentless pursuit of expanded political power. His differences to Hitler's vision are significant. To a large degree, Hitler looked backward, seeking reversal of Germany's defeat in World War I and vengeance on those he blamed for this humiliation, Jews first and foremost. Looking to the future, Hitler envisioned a Germany expanded by colonized territory taken from the Soviet Union, and the ultimate defeat of the "Jewish-Bolshevik" world conspiracy allegedly headquartered in Moscow. For Himmler, the Jews were important players, but not the principal enemies, in a titanic struggle between the "Nordic" peoples and Asia. His goal, already outlined before World War II began, was an entirely new way of organizing Europe politically: the "Greater Germanic Reich," in which "Nordic" peoples, including not only Germans but also the Dutch, Scandinavians, and potentially others, would form the ruling class. Other nations would have to accept "protected" status, while the Slavic peoples, decimated by murder, starvation, and expulsion beyond the Urals, would serve their Germanic masters as helots.

Perhaps more important than all the aforementioned factors to understanding Himmler was his relentless ambition, described as "burning" already in a 1914 school report card (p. 19). His constant efforts to expand his

power had horrific consequences thanks to the anarchic structure of the Nazi regime, in which Hitler's charisma was the ultimate source of legitimacy. Appeals to Hitler (or claims as to what he would want) dissolved legal and bureaucratic norms, which also fell victim to the administrative chaos caused by Hitler's chronic laziness and constant turf battles between competing agencies of the Nazi Party and the state, created ad hoc by Hitler with overlapping competencies. Outbidding each other in their claims to fulfill Hitler's grandiose vision, the players in these power struggles produced a dynamic of "cumulative radicalization," which, according to many historians, generated more extreme policies in an incremental fashion.[4] No politician of the Third Reich better exemplifies this dynamic than Himmler.

Himmler built his career on his claim of supreme loyalty to Hitler, starting with the SS, his chief power base. Made head of the SS in 1929, Himmler took this squadron of a few hundred bodyguards for Nazi leaders and built it into an empire of terror that counted hundreds of thousands of members by the end of World War II. Setting itself apart from the rowdy and fractious SA ("stormtroopers"), Himmler's SS billed itself as Hitler's praetorian guard, an elite formation always at the führer's service and unswervingly loyal to him. "Loyalty" and "obedience" headed Himmler's list of cardinal SS virtues—"My Honor is Loyalty" ran the SS motto, and every SS-man swore an oath of obedience to Hitler unto death. Himmler never tired of proclaiming his loyalty to Hitler in things both grave and trivial: "The Führer is always right, whether the subject is evening dress, bunkers, or the Reich motorways" (p. 305).

If Himmler billed himself as Hitler's most loyal deputy, he hardly took orders passively, but rather restlessly expanded his power, claiming to fulfill Hitler's wishes or securing Hitler's blessing for his countless initiatives. After Hitler took office in January 1933, Himmler expanded his control over the political police from his Bavarian base to one German state after another, and then to the Reich as a whole. Throughout, Longerich notes, he exploited the growing conflict between the SA and the state and party leadership, greatly strengthening his position by murdering the SA leadership on Hitler's orders in June 1934. In 1936, he became chief of German police, gaining control of all police forces in Germany. Himmler then sought, with only partial success, to fuse the SS and police into a new militarized apparatus of repression, the "State Protection Corps."

This new vision of police work is a prime example of

how Himmler used ideology to expand his power, and how his empire building radicalized policy in dangerous directions. Defining the Protection Corps as a fusion of military and bureaucracy, Himmler sought to infuse the police with the martial spirit of permanent war, with the implication that massive violence might be used against internal “enemies.” Since the Gestapo had largely broken the underground communist resistance by 1936, a victory that was easily foreseeable and that might render the Gestapo superfluous, Himmler began the transition in 1935 to the new and fundamentally more radical concept of “biological policing,” a corollary of Nazi racial ideology. Criminal and political threats to Germany were now supposedly rooted in miscreants’ genetic characteristics, and Himmler’s police would strike at allegedly dangerous groups preventively, rather than waiting for individuals to break the law. To ensure the enduring central role of policing in the Nazi state, Himmler’s SS expanded their list of enemies and named the Jews as the “wire pullers” standing beyond most of the other serious threats. Other organs of the party and the state controlled “Jewish policy” until the end of 1938, but Himmler’s Protection Corps, and the new concept of biological policing, seem an obvious anticipation of the SS’s role in the Holocaust, although Longerich does not make this argument.

As Germany’s military expansion loomed in 1939, Himmler redefined his role. Building on powers he had gained over policy toward German minorities who lived outside Germany, he planned the “Germanization” of conquered regions, driving out inhabitants who did not display the proper “racial characteristics” and settling their land with ethnic Germans. He also sought for his SS the primary responsibility for policing countries that fell under German occupation. Himmler failed in most of these initiatives and suffered other setbacks that damaged his standing in the regime, Longerich notes.

The invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 gave Himmler the chance to recoup his losses and dramatically expand his power. He sought, with increasing success, to give the SS the task of policing and racially reordering the conquered territories. Shooting squads under his control began the murder of male Jews behind the lines of the advancing German armies. Longerich persuasively argues that Himmler took the crucial initiative to expand these murders to encompass entire Jewish communities, man, woman, and child, in the very realistic expectation that Hitler would approve. In the spring and summer of 1942, Himmler then launched a series of projects to create his longed-for “Greater Germanic Reich.” He expanded re-

cruiting among “Germanic” peoples to the military arm of the SS (Waffen-SS), which he envisioned as the nucleus of the future empire’s ruling class. With Hitler’s permission, he undertook expanded projects of resettlement and “Germanization”; gained control of “anti-partisan” warfare; and set in motion what he and his accomplices called “the Final Solution to the Jewish Question,” their attempt to murder every person of Jewish ancestry in Europe. However, Longerich’s account of the timing and origins of the Final Solution is less than fully persuasive.

In recent years, a near-consensus has emerged that Hitler decided, no later than mid-December 1941, to murder the entire Jewish population of Europe, at a pace significantly faster than the mass murder by shooting that had claimed six hundred thousand lives by year’s end.[5] This policy marked a sea change from the earlier goal of decimating (but hardly exterminating) Europe’s Jews by expelling them to an inhospitable “reservation” where many or even most would perish from starvation and other causes. In 1940, Hitler and the SS considered Madagascar as a possible dumping ground for Europe’s Jews; since December 1940 or January 1941, the plan was to deport the Jews to Soviet territory after Germany defeated the Soviet Union in the war that began in June 1941. In Longerich’s telling, deportation to Soviet territory, *after* the war, remained the policy at least until February 1942. Longerich further argues that until April 1942, the gassing that had already commenced at Auschwitz, Belzec, and Chelmno constituted no more than “a program of mass murder of Jews ‘incapable of work’ limited to a particular region” (p. 563). Toward the end of that month, however, Himmler began a flurry of meetings with his deputy, Reinhard Heydrich, and with Hitler. Only in these meetings (of which no notes survive) did the three men establish a plan to murder all of European Jewry, Longerich maintains. In this account, Himmler eclipses Hitler as the progenitor of the Final Solution: “the final decision to murder the European Jews was just the first of a number of fundamental turning points that Himmler was to engineer during the coming months, and which had the object of securing the central role in the establishment of the Nazi empire for his SS and an [*sic*] unique historical position for himself” (p. 574). Given the paucity of sources, historians will probably never reach conclusive answers to these questions, and a survey of the scholarly literature lies beyond the scope of a book review. Nonetheless, it seems worth noting some potential problems with Longerich’s interpretation.

One difficulty is that Hitler seems strangely absent from Longerich’s account. He is mentioned frequently,

but usually only to briefly note that he had given Himmler an order, rejected a proposal, or granted Himmler permission for some initiative. Hitler's goals, worldview, and the central role of the Jews in his thinking receive almost no discussion. Himmler's racist ideology harmonized with Hitler's views easily enough, but the two men set different emphases and anti-Semitism seems to have been much less important to Himmler, lacking the deep emotional roots that characterized Hitler's passionate hatred. This neglect of Hitler seems problematic because Himmler built his career and the elite status of his SS on the claim of supreme loyalty to Hitler, and always expanded his power either with Hitler's explicit permission or by claiming to fulfill Hitler's wishes. Longerich's interpretation also seems inconsistent with the very active role that Hitler played in all major decisions concerning policy toward the Jews.[6] Hitler may have been a "passive dictator" in most areas of policy, but not in this one.

Longerich also does not mention Himmler's order of October 23, 1941, banning Jewish emigration from all territories under German control. This step has long been seen as evidence of a shift away from the earlier plan to expel the Jews eastward after the war: having now resolved to murder every Jew in Europe, the Nazi leadership wanted to stop the victims from escaping their grasp. Longerich does discuss the emigration stop in his excellent 2010 overview of Nazi Jewish policy, and maintains that this step merely reflected a desire to keep would-be emigrants in Europe so that they could be deported to Russia according to the original plan.[7] Two objections can be raised against this interpretation. First, if Longerich is right, why did Himmler not move to stop emigration in January 1941, when expulsion to the East first became the regime's policy, or for that matter, in the context of the Madagascar plan the summer before? Second, expulsion to the East necessarily implied that some Jews would survive there, perhaps even in substantial numbers, which may explain why the regime did not object to emigration as long as expulsion, rather than extermination, was the policy.

Longerich also seems to understate the role that death camps had come to play in the Nazi leadership's thinking by the end of 1941. While Chelmno seems to have begun as a local initiative in the Warthegau region, and Belzec was initially constructed with a limited capacity, Sobibor was selected as a death camp site that fall, and construction began there by the end of March 1942. Murder by poison gas was also envisioned for Auschwitz, Riga, Mogilev, and possibly Lvov (Lemberg).[8] For Mogilev, the SS ordered a gigantic thirty-two-chamber cremato-

rium; it was never fully completed, but those parts that had been constructed were later diverted to Auschwitz. Thus, by year's end, one death camp (Chelmno) had begun its bloody work, construction of a second (Belzec) was nearly finished, and planning for as many as five others was underway.[9] Moreover, while the killing capacity of Belzec seems "limited" in hindsight, the killers did not necessarily know this at the time. Since Belzec was the first facility for killing in stationary chambers using engine exhaust (as opposed to the gas vans used at Chelmno), the SS might have wanted to make a trial run with it before using it as a model for other camps to be constructed later. In any case, the number of camps envisioned and the massive size of the crematorium ordered for Mogilev seem more consistent with a Europe-wide murder program than with the cluster of regionally confined massacres that Longerich sees as the policy until late April 1942.

Finally, Longerich offers a problematic interpretation of the Wannsee Conference, which other historians have seen as Himmler's way of initiating the varied bureaucracies of the government and party into Hitler's decision.[10] Heydrich chaired the meeting, held in a Berlin suburb on January 20, 1942. No verbatim record of the discussion survives, so historians rely chiefly on the summary protocol that Adolf Eichmann later sent to some thirty recipients. Given the document's wide distribution and the regime's preference to not commit details of the killing to paper, the protocol's vagueness on some points is hardly surprising. Nonetheless, Heydrich made clear that every Jew in Europe would be murdered. In the minutes, he described the method as deportation to the East, where a large number would be worked to death on giant construction projects, while surviving workers (and, implicitly, all those deemed unfit for labor) would be killed by means not specified in the protocol.

Heydrich had thus announced a radical change in policy, from expulsion to extermination. Yet Longerich contends that the regime's policy remained essentially the same as it had been at the beginning of 1941: expulsion to conquered Soviet territory after the war. But Eichmann's minutes, despite their vague and euphemistic language, indicate that a rapid expansion of the killing was imminent. This is apparent in the remarks of Josef Bühler, who represented Hans Frank, the ruling satrap of the General Government, which consisted chiefly of those Polish territories not annexed to Germany, and was home to two and a half million Jews by Frank's calculation. Bühler requested that the Jews of the General Government be murdered first, ahead of those in Germany. "Jews should

be removed from the territory of the General Government as quickly as possible,” so reads the protocol, “because here in particular the Jew represented a significant threat as a carrier of epidemics and also, through systematic black market activities, was continually bringing the economic structure of the country into disorder.” He added that most of the Jews were “incapable of work,” and pointed out that transporting the Jews to their deaths would pose little difficulty. Bühler promised full cooperation with the SS, and reiterated his request that “the Jewish question in this area be solved as soon as possible.”[11] Bühler was not talking about killings in a post-war future rendered indeterminate by Germany’s military reversals the preceding month. Deportations from Western Europe to ghettos had already begun and six hundred thousand Jews had been murdered in the Soviet Union. Bühler and Frank expected Europe’s Jews to be killed in the near future, and wanted to murder the Polish Jews as soon as possible. The minutes also show that the participants had learned of the new method of mass murder in gas chambers: “In conclusion, the various possible solutions were discussed, Gauleiter Dr Meyer and state secretary Dr Bühler both advocating carrying out certain preparatory measures connected with the final solution themselves at once, although the population must not be alarmed in the process.” Longerich observes that “by ‘preparatory measures’ they can have been referring only to the establishment of extermination camps along the lines of Belzec,” which was located in Bühler’s territory, the General Government (p. 556).

While Longerich may have overstated Himmler’s role in the Final Solution (and understated Hitler’s), he has nonetheless provided compelling evidence that Himmler’s part in this tragedy was indispensable. Therefore, the foregoing criticisms seem of only modest importance, especially when measured against the book’s ambitious scope and wealth of insight. Longerich has written what will likely remain the definitive Himmler biography for many years to come. In so doing, he has illuminated the structures and dynamics of the Nazi political system in fresh ways and demonstrated anew the rich intellectual rewards of biographical research.

Notes

[1]. J. Noakes and G. Pridham, eds., *Nazism 1919-1945: A Documentary Reader*, vol. 3, *Foreign Policy, War and Racial Extermination* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995), 1199.

[2]. Saul Friedländer, “The ‘Final Solution’: On the Unease in Historical Interpretation,” in *Lessons and Lega-*

cies: The Meaning of the Holocaust in a Changing World, ed. Peter Hayes (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 27, 32, 35.

[3]. See, e.g., Michael Wildt, *An Uncompromising Generation: The Nazi Leadership of the Reich Security Main Office*, trans. Tom Lampert (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009); Ulrich Herbert, *Best: Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft, 1903-1989* (Bonn: J. H. W. Dietz, 1996); and Ernst Jünger, *In Stahlgewittern* (1920; repr., Stuttgart: E. Klett, 1961).

[4]. See, e.g., Ian Kershaw, *Hitler*, vol 1, *1889-1936: Hubris* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 527-591; Hans Mommsen, “The Realization of the Unthinkable: The ‘Final Solution of the Jewish Question’ in the Third Reich,” in *From Weimar to Auschwitz: Essays in German History*, ed. Hans Mommsen, trans. Philip O’Connor (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 224-253; and the overview in Peter Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1-4.

[5]. Christopher R. Browning, the historian who has studied this question most thoroughly, dates the decision to before the end of October, in Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942*, with contributions by Jürgen Matthäus (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2004), 370-373; Ian Kershaw argues for late November or early December in Kershaw, *Fateful Choices: Ten Decisions That Changed the World, 1940-1941* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 464; Christian Gerlach locates the decision in early December, in Gerlach, “The Wannsee Conference, the Fate of the German Jews, and Hitler’s Decision in Principle to Exterminate All European Jews,” *Journal of Modern History* 70 (1998): 759-812, esp. 760; and Saul Friedländer has the decision coming no later than shortly after Hitler’s declaration of war against the United States, in Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1933-1945*, vol. 2, *Years of Extermination* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 286-288.

[6]. In Browning’s judgment, “from September 1939 to October 1941 [Hitler] was an active and continuing participant in the decision-making process. Indeed, not a single significant change in Nazi Jewish policy occurred without his intervention and approval.” In Browning, *Origins of the Final Solution*, 425.

[7]. Peter Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and Murder of the Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 285.

- [8]. Browning, *Origins of the Final Solution*, 366; and Longerich, *Holocaust*, 280-282. completed in January 1942. Browning, *Origins of the Final Solution*, 419-420.
- [9]. According to Browning, in Belzec, the gas chambers, railway siding, and barbed wire had all been erected by the end of December, and the rest of the camp was [10]. See, eg., *ibid.*, 410-415.
- [11]. Noakes and Pridham, *Nazism 1919-1945*, 3:1134.

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