

Gerd R. Ueberschär, Winfried Vogel. *Dienen und Verdienen: Hitlers Geschenke an seine Eliten.* Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1999. 302 S. \$22.70, cloth, ISBN 978-3-10-086002-6.



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An old woman is waving a swastika flag over her frying pan with some thin slices of potato. Asked for the reason for this strange behavior, she says: "So many have grown fat under this flag - maybe so will my potatoes" Political jokes like this one -- for which one could be imprisoned -- were fairly widespread through the cracking Third Reich of 1944-1945.

Historians have long known that the top brass of the Nazis amassed enormous fortunes which were completely out of proportion to their regular income. Many such fortunes were the result of common corruption, generally defined as the use of political power for private benefit. A scientific study of this phenomena is currently under preparation.[1]

The donations which Hitler distributed amongst his military and civilian henchmen, Ueberschär and Vogel contend in their study, were also a form of corruption. They provide ample evidence that Hitler used donations in the broadest sense to buy loyalty. In the monarchic traditions of Europe and Germany until 1918, kings or emperors rewarded outstanding service to the state

through granting titles of nobility. Often, such a "promotion" to a higher level was accompanied by a grant of land or money in order to allow the receiver to meet his increased social obligations. The descendants of Prince Bismarck, for example, still own a vast piece of forest which was donated to the "Iron Chancellor" by his grateful emperor, Wilhelm I.[2]

Hitler consciously reestablished and expanded many patterns and elements of personal rule, and among these was the right to bestow and withdraw honors, grants and rewards on a purely personal basis. In addition, and probably inspired by the mystical role of "blood and soil" in Nazi ideology, he wanted to create a new national socialist nobility basically as a landowning class.[3] His means to do so were continuously expanded. When he took office as Reichspräsident, he inherited a small annual budget of 150,000 Reichsmarks (RM) to be spent on the alleviation of individual hardships. By 1944, however, this budget had grown to 40 million RM, a sum placed completely and exclusively at Hitler's personal disposal.[4]

There were, however, some remarkable differences between the rewarding of persons of merit in monarchical Germany from that of Germany during the Third Reich. In monarchical Germany, such rewards were bestowed with great publicity and imperial ceremony, while Hitler kept his donations as confidential as possible. Another difference is that Hitler did not establish a direct link between any event in which the laureate distinguished himself and the reward. Instead, he often used private occasions like weddings or birthdays to bestow a donation. It is obvious that the donations became larger and were presented more frequently during the crisis years of 1942-1943 when the dictator felt the necessity for closing ranks around his person. These and other features, the authors contend, pushed the award and receipt of these donations into the proximity of corruption (p. 34).

The size and form of the donations varied considerably and did not follow a unified pattern. An old SA streetfighter, for instance, might receive a retirement pension increase of a few hundred RM per year, while other supporters of the Fuhrer might accumulate millions in real estate, valuable art objects or checks of up to 600,000 RM -- all tax free.[5]

The man responsible for the legal and administrative procedures governing these disbursements was Hans-Heinrich Lammers, minister, head of Hitler's chancellery and his closest legal advisor. Lammers did not hesitate to use his position to better his own personal fortune, but he was by no means the greediest member of the Nazi hierarchy. Foreign minister Ribbentrop, for example, secured two donations of 1 million RM just two weeks after his fiftieth birthday.

The book discusses the phenomena of Hitler's donations in all sectors of the German elite, but the most intriguing analyses occur in the chapters examining the gifts bestowed on field marshals and generals during World War II. The military top management of the Third Reich,

many of whom were descended from noble German stock with long established traditions of military and civil service, professed to despise these Nazi start-ups of often humble, sometimes doubtful origin. As opposed to those ragamuffins, they saw themselves as inheritors high ethical standards and the hallowed Prussian culture of humble and modest service to crown and country.

Many field marshals and generals, however, readily accepted Hitler's donations, thus sacrificing their personal independence and integrity to the Fuehrer. Moreover, some of them often pulled all available strings to lay hands on as much farmland, forest or money as they could. Vogel and Ueberschaer target especially the double standards of this military elite, emphasizing how they permitted themselves to be corrupted by Hitler. The generals obviously were quite aware of the discrediting impact which accepting the Fuehrer's gifts could have on their reputations, for in their post-war memoirs most of them do not address the subject at all. If they do discuss the subject, they attempt to marginalize the gift or claim that they accepted the donation only because it was urged upon them. In fact, Hitler routinely attached special increments to the regular monthly pay of officers promoted to field marshal or colonel general. To these officers Hitler provided 4,000 and 2,000 RM respectively as a special "expense allowance" to accompany their promotions. This sum actually exceeded the monthly pay even of these top ranks, and should be compared to the net pay of 230 RM drawn by a first lieutenant or the average pay of 120 RM earned by Germany's skilled workers at this time (p. 98f). While certainly generous, these awards were funded directly from Hitler's personal budget and, as the recipients were pointedly reminded, could be just as easily withdrawn should the Fuhrer choose.

The completely arbitrary and erratic way in which Hitler decided who would get what and how much was obviously intended to maintain

the character of a personal favor. Ministers and ranking officers like Keitel or Raeder could expect around 250,000 RM on the occasion of their sixtieth or sixty-fifth birthday, and General Hube received 50,000 RM as a wedding gift. Available evidence indicates that none of these officers refused the Fuehrer's presents. Whether Rommel, who never received anything, did so cannot be ascertained from available archival sources. Field Marshal Kluge, who committed suicide because of his involvement in the 20 July 1944 attempt on the Fuehrer's life, sensed the intentions behind Hitler's generosity, but nevertheless accepted 250,000 RM on his sixtieth birthday in 1942.

When Hitler donated money specifically for the acquisition of an estate, many of the recipients of the Fuehrer's beneficence were quick to initiate actions aimed at expanding the initial value of the bequest. Keitel, for example, was able to triple the value of an original donation of 250,000 RM he had received for the acquisition of forest acreage because the authorities underrated the actual value of the property. Colonel General Guderian extensively toured the eastern parts of the Reich and finally settled on an estate with an overall value of 1.24 million RM. The original owners, a noble family from Prussian-Polish stock, had to be turned out so that the Guderians could take their place.

Because most of these donations of property were located in the agricultural regions of eastern Germany or occupied Poland, they were subsequently lost to their owners. Those families lucky enough to acquire land on the soil of what became the Federal Republic of Germany or those who used the donation for the acquisition of a town house or objects d'art still enjoy the heritage of Hitler's gifts. The family of Field Marshal von Leeb, for example, still owns Bavarian forests with an estimated value of 2.2 million DM [6].

This book is soundly based on documentary evidence, and about fifty pages of examples of ac-

tual bequests are included. These facsimiles may not add much to the text, but in Germany writing history of the Nazi period always entails touching sensitivities and politics. Probably because the authors wanted to harden their findings as much as possible against criticism, they were careful enough not to over-interpret their sources and avoided pushing their conclusions beyond the limits of speculation. While the technical procedures and correspondences surrounding the donations are well documented in several archives, the lack of a formalized system explaining the hierarchy of merit and reward or a certain protocol leave the reasons and intentions of many individual donations open to interpretation.

The message of the authors, however, is clear: Hitler tried to buy the loyalty of his civilian and military elite, and most of these people, contrary to their publicly-paraded ethics, were only too ready to make themselves available for such a deal. The great strength of *Dienen und Verdienen* is that through the presentation of evidence drawn from extensive research, the authors shed new light on this important aspect of the relations between Hitler and the functionary class of the Third Reich.

Notes

[1]. See Frank Bajohr, *Korruption im NS-Staat*, Frankfurt am Main, 2000.

[2]. The Sachsenwald in the vicinity of Hamburg.

[3]. In German, "Blut und Boden."

[4]. p.55; RM = Reichsmark, the contemporary German currency

[5]. The capital transfer tax in wartime amounted up to 65%, pp.90 ff

[6]. About 1.16 million dollars.

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