H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Gellately. *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. xvii + 359 pp.p. $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-280291-0; $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820560-9.

Reviewed by Antoine Capet (Université de Rouen)
Published on H-Diplo (January, 2002)

What did they know? What did they do?

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Did they know? If so, how much did they know?-How far did they approve or disapprove? Who are "they"? "Ordinary Germans"–but then, how does one define an "ordinary German"? These are the main questions which historians of the Nazi period in Germany (1933-1945) have been addressing since the discovery of the death camps, with, it must be said, little success at the time of the Cold War, when it was impolitic to weaken the West German ally by insisting on the Nazi past. In extreme cases rabid pre-war and wartime anti-Germans like the British diplomat Vansittart became pro-German in the late 1940s and 1950s because, they explained, the Red peril was even worse. The revival of public interest seems to have come from the Germans themselves, with the so-called Historikerstreit and the controversy surrounding the recent (1995) Hamburg exhibition on the Wehrmacht Crimes.[1]

This in itself encapsulates Gellately's [2] theme: if war crimes are attributable to SS fanatics, then the "ordinary" German (i.e. the non-Nazi soldier of the Wehrmacht) is exonerated. If it can be demonstrated that a number of war crimes are attributable to the Wehrmacht, as opposed to the SS, then the old line of separation between enthusiastic Nazi fanatics in the SS "Einsatzgruppen" and unsophisticated conscripts with no apparent racial or political motivation becomes dangerously blurred for those who have always maintained that "they" did not know, or at least did not approve. A fortiori, when one is reminded, as in Gellaty's book, that many overt brutalities took place, not in the heat of battle or in the distant Eastern Territories after 1941, but already in the heart of Germany between 1933 and 1939 [3], it becomes so difficult to defend the thesis that "they" knew nothing and never participated in anything reprehensible that one wonders how that convenient consensus among the general public [4] in Western countries was able to hold for so long.

With the enormous debate launched among that general public by Goldhagen [5], the problem is no longer to explode the myth that "they did not know." Few people must be left with any illusions on that account. But then another question immediately arises: if they did know, why did they remain passive? Put otherwise, does passivity in front of murderous behavior not amount to tacit approval, in itself an indirect form of active support? Gellately follows Goldhagen so far; where he departs from his analysis is on the ultimate motives which drove most ordinary Germans to so enthusiastically support Hitler between 1933 and 1945. Gellately does not believe in antisemitism as the mainspring of support for Hitler and Nazism, which is of course central to Goldhagen's thesis [6]:

"Daniel Goldhagen's study, for all of its problems, brought a number of important issues up for debate and called out for investigation. However, I am inclined to the view that monocausal explanations of the kind he employs do not hold up to scrutiny and that social agreement with or merely popular toleration of Hitler and the dictatorship was attained for many reasons, some of the most important of which had little or nothing to do with the persecution of the Jews" (p. 4).

Instead, Gellately insists on the law-and-order aspect of Nazi seduction: the population was not interested in a policy of "racial cleansing" as such, but in one of "social cleansing", after the perceived laxity of the Weimar Republic. If one adds the eradication of unemployment and the restoration of German international prestige and European status after the humiliation of Versailles, there is little wonder that Hitlerism proved popular, and there is no need to seek racialist explanations for his success among the Germans.

Indeed the central argument of the book is that, in the initial stages, Hitler played down the antisemitic element in his ideology. Persecution against the Jews followed a cautiously incremental course, while the authorities were

striving to persuade indifferent German citizens that "social cleansing" necessarily implied the elimination of all "impure" elements in German society, primarily its Jewish component. Thus, according to Gellately, antisemitic policies were not part of the foundations of the regime in the literal sense: they were a gradual addition–not brutally forced on the population, but the object of an unrelenting "demonstration" that they were inevitable.

The book reminds us that the demonstration of the link between the sapping of the social order and the presence and conduct of the Jews was no easy task:

"Since the legal emancipation of Germany's Jews in 1871, they had become increasingly well integrated as law-abiding citizens who adopted middle-class values of hard work, clean living, and solid family values. In the German context in which such behaviour was lauded, their way of life made it initially more difficult for the antisemitic Nazis to go after them" (p. 7).

And indeed,

"Antisemitism had not been a top priority issue for the Nazis in the last elections of the Weimar Republic…Only 6 of the 124 Nazi posters from these elections pointed to the Jews as the main enemy" (p. 24).

For Gellately, it cannot therefore be argued that the German electorate was eagerly waiting for Hitler to promulgate tough antisemitic legislation–thus effectively ruining the Goldhagen thesis–but this does not in any way absolve it from all responsibility. When the Government introduced its notorious "Law for the Restoration of a Professional Civil service" in April 1933, which it claimed was aimed at 'the elimination of Jewish and Marxist elements' among all public servants (p. 25) and which continued to play on the ambiguity between social and racial issues, the mechanism of denunciation and informing, so well documented in the book, was set in train, with increasingly tragic consequences since after losing their jobs the denounced Jews gradually lost their citizenship and property rights, then their freedom and eventually their lives. Gellately exffectively describes the ratchet process in which the population gradually consented, notably in the chapter entitled "Injustice and the Jews" (pp. 121-150). His case study of the surviving Gestapo files in Lower Franconia, 1933-1945 (Table 1, p. 134) shows that fully 59 percent of the 210 Jews arrested had been reported by the population, and therefore, he writes, "The conclusion is inescapable–without the active collaboration of the general population it would have been next to impossible for the Gestapo to enforce these kinds of racial policies. This social involvement was very pronounced, even in lower Franconia, an area not known for its support of either Nazism or antisemitism up to 1933" (p. 135).

The book also examines attitudes towards the enemies within, notably the Communists interned in Dachau (near Munich) from as early as March 1933. The concentration camps were not a secret; on the contrary they were widely publicized in the press, in the first instance as a deterrent against social deviation and as a reassurance that the public would now be protected against "asocials" (in Nazi parlance, political opponents and "degenerates" as well as genuine law-breakers)–as had demonstrably not been the case during the Weimar Republic. The German phrase used, "Schutzhaft" (literally "protection-custody"), implied no persecution; once again, it was ostensibly meant only to meet the law-and-order aspirations of the citizenry, and Gellately has excellent quotations and photographs (Photos 9-10-11-12) from contemporary newspapers which show that the camps were front-page news from the start of the regime.

The theory of tacit consent is also applied to the policy of euthanasia, to the elimination of the Sinti and Roma, to the persecution of homosexuals, to the brutal exploitation of foreign laborers, and to the general idea that the police should be allowed to deal with "deviants" without too much regard for legal procedures. "On balance," he concludes, "the coercive practices, the repression, and persecution won far more support for the dictatorship than they lost" (p. 259). In view of the murderous climate of atrocities which characterized the final months of the regime, the main question that remains to be fully explored, Gellately suggests, is: "Why did Germans carry on and for the most part support Hitler to the end," given that "we cannot explain the urge to continue with reference to a single motive, not even racism, as the killers did not hesitate when the victims were German, Italian, or French"? (p. 264). Though the book gives us a comprehensive synthesis of the elements which may some day enable us to answer that question, Gellately seems to conclude that for the time being, in the present state of historical knowledge, it is an impossible task.

It goes without saying that no one can write the "definitive" book on such a complex subject, and that we cannot therefore reproach Gellately for not giving us ready-made interpretations of the Nazi phenomenon–in fact most academic historians will support his non-reductionist approach and salute his thorough exploration of all the possible factors which have somehow enabled a highly civilized European country to fall back into bestial barbarity. Newcomers to the subject will also

greatly benefit from the final "Note on the Sources", especially the section on "Secondary Sources, Reference Works", which provides a superb annotated reading list, with a good balance between books in English and German.[7] For all these good reasons, the book should be in all University Libraries.

Notes

[1]. H-Diplo subscribers who can read French will find very useful indications on "the history of the historiography of Nazi violence" in the theme issue on 'La violence nazie' of *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 47-2 (2000).

[2]. One can read Gellately's review in English of *Versäumte Fragen: Deutsche Historiker im Schatten des Nationalsozialismus.* Hrsg. von Rüdiger Hohls, unter Mitarb. von Torsten Bathmann. Stuttgart; München: Dt. Verl.-Anst., 2000. 528 pp. on http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensio/symposiu/versfrag/gellately.htm

[3]. Also studied by Eric A. Johnson in *Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews, and Ordinary Germans* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), xx, 636 pp., a monograph on Cologne, Krefeld and Bergheim which Gellately was not able to exploit since it appeared too late for his own book (cf. p.341).

[4]. Scholars were of course far more outspoken. Suffice it here to quote from A.J.P. Taylor's 1964 Foreword ("Second Thoughts") to the paperback reissue of his *The Origins of the Second World War* (first published 1961): "He [Hitler] would have counted for nothing without the support and cooperation of the German people. It seems to be believed nowadays that Hitler did everything himself, even driving the trains and filling the gas chambers unaided. This was not so. Hitler was a sounding-board for the German nation. Thousands, many hundred thousands, Germans carried out his evil orders without qualm or question" (*The Origins of the Second World War.* London : Penguin Books, 1964, p.26).

[5]. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996), x, 622 pp.

[6]. Gellately reminds his reader (p. 4) that Goldhagen speaks of "the preexisting, demonological, racially based, eliminationist antisemitism of the German people, which Hitler essentially unleashed". (Quotation from *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, p. 443).

[7]. Again, subscribers who can read French will be also be interested in Pierre Aycoberry's recent *La societe allemande sous le IIIe Reich.* Paris: Seuil, 1998, 434 pp. Moreover, it seems that Tim Mason's stimulating collection of essays, *Nazism, Fascism and the Working Class* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 361 pp., has been omitted from "Secondary Sources, Reference Works" though it is quoted in the text and referenced in the (end) notes: unfortunately, the absence of a recapitulative alphabetical bibliography makes it difficult to find the details of a book quickly.

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Citation: Antoine Capet. Review of Gellately, Robert, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi.* H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. January, 2002.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5867

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