

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sabine Gillmann, Hans Mommsen, eds. *Politische Schriften und Briefe Carl Friedrich Goerdelers*. Munich: K.G. Saur, 2003. 1,295 pp. EUR 48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-598-11631-5.

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Published on H-German (May, 2006)



## Goerdeler's Writings

Carl Friedrich Goerdeler was among the leading politicians in the later years of the Weimar Republic. In 1930 he was elected mayor of Leipzig. He was a member of the DNVP but disapproved of its line of uncompromising obstruction and left the party in 1931. He supported Chancellor Heinrich Brüning's system based on presidential authority, served as Reich Prices Commissioner in Brüning's administration in 1931-32 and his name was among those mentioned as possible successors to Brüning (Goerdeler refused to join Franz von Papen's cabinet). In 1934-35 he served once more as Reich Prices Commissioner, trusting his own powers of reasoning and persuasion, if not the motives of those who appointed him, to influence government policy. He acted from fundamental ethical convictions, which made him appear optimistic, even naive, among cynical politicians. He was guided by these convictions in his initially open opposition to many of Hitler's policies and later in his leading role in the underground conspiracy to bring down the dictatorship. He disagreed with conspirators who believed they must kill the dictator, but he was intensely active in the political preparations for a post-Hitler government and in efforts to win British support for the aims of the German Resistance. On September 8, 1944, the "People's Court" sentenced Goerdeler to death for treason. Goerdeler was hanged on February 2, 1945.

Gillmann's and Mommsen's compilation of writings by Goerdeler includes in its title neither an article nor the word "sämtliche." Indeed, this collection of 1,295 pages is far from complete. The table of contents lists 104 documents in groups ranging from 2 to 14 each. The

documents are organized in chronologic sequence under chapter themes: municipal activities; national politics; efforts to influence policy internally and from abroad; breaking with the National Socialist regime (including "attempts to prevent war" and "critique of the National Socialist regime"); coup d'état preparations and plans for constitutional renewal; writings in prison (including autobiographical materials). The documents reproduced in the two volumes do not include the lengthy "Wirtschafts-fibel," but the major programmatic drafts for governing Germany after the removal of the National Socialist regime are there. Although some of them—"Das Ziel" and "Der Weg"—have been published previously in accessible editions, they have been reproduced here in order to represent the texts of the originals more accurately. Conflicting information is available concerning the inclusion of what Goerdeler wrote during the five months he spent in prison while waiting for his execution. Mommsen says in his introduction that only a part of these texts could be included (p. lxxv); Gillmann does not say in her introduction whether or not all texts from the prison months had been included, but only that in them (an indefinite number of) "lists with financial arrangements and potential contacts for the family had been abridged [*gekürzt*]" (p. lxxviii); ellipses are indicated in ten places (pp. 1190, 1191, 1214, 1226, 1227, 1235, 1236, 1248-1250), four of them are identified as lists of Goerdeler's contacts in Germany and abroad and one of them includes financial arrangements. The reasons for the ellipses remain obscure.

The actual editorial work is that of Gillmann. It represents her doctoral thesis under Mommsen's supervision.

Considering that Gillmann did her work as a doctoral candidate, her accomplishment is impressive.

Gillmann presents the collection as “a reliable edition of Carl Goerdeler’s political writings and letters” in a “reliable scholarly preparation” (*in zuverlässiger wissenschaftlicher Aufbereitung*). A few lines later she narrows this description to a “representative selection of key documents” that reproduces 20 percent of Goerdeler’s surviving writings (pp. lxxii, lxxv). Each document is prefaced by an introductory synopsis. There are minor flaws. What is missing in the phrase “daß wir würdelosen Verhandlungen hätten kapitulieren wollen” (p. 1153)? The citation of a work that was never published (by T. Korenke on p. lxx) is a little worrying. A list of all surviving memoranda, letters and bodies of administrative documents would have been appropriate to a selective edition of this importance. The editor describes 41 of the documents that survived in the possession of Goerdeler’s family (and of which Hans Mommsen had control for decades) as being in *Privatbesitz* and suggests (p. lxxiv) that these documents are still dispersed among Goerdeler’s descendants. In fact, the Goerdeler family agreed at the end of the publication process to place them all in the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz.

It is to be conceded that the preparation of a subject index would have been a significant task. But it is awkward to have to read through 104 synopses to find key terms, such as taxation, syndicalism, colonial issues, border adjustments, milk prices, political parties, administrative measures or references to Goerdeler’s reactions to the persecution of the Jews. Moreover, the synopses contain clues only to some of the documents’ contents. A concise biographic chronology, an indispensable tool for the efficient use of the compilation, is also missing.

The constant themes in Goerdeler’s writings are justice, the rule of law and decency. His topics cover concerns about foreign, domestic, fiscal, economic and social policies, education, municipal administration and relations with the churches. Major memoranda were often addressed to no one in particular but were circulated to persons Goerdeler hoped to influence. Goerdeler attempted especially in the first three years of Hitler’s regime to effect a change of course through constructive criticism. He offered schemes for sound fiscal and economic policies, warned against preparing Germany for an unnecessary war, cautioned against the “excesses” of “German racial policy” and criticized abuse of power and corruption. By 1939 he concluded that only a change of regime by coup d’état would do.

Hans Mommsen introduces Gillmann’s work with a keynote interpretation of Goerdeler’s life and thoughts. He characterizes Goerdeler’s literary production with respect for its intentions, volume and quality, and he expresses admiration for Goerdeler’s principled commitment to justice and the rule of law. He acknowledges that Goerdeler rejected the anti-Jewish Nuremberg Laws of 1935, and that “Goerdeler never embraced racial concepts [*den Rassegedanken*] in the narrower sense and refused to be considered an antisemite.” At the same time he attributes to Goerdeler “dissimilatorischen Antisemitismus” and goes so far as to say that the exceptions Goerdeler “demanded for largely assimilated Jews mirrored views which circulated in the conservative camp and in the Army High Command since 1917 and which finally found their way in 1920 into the 25-Point Program of the NSDAP” (p. lxi). Mommsen reports that in January 1942, Goerdeler wrote with horror and revulsion about the deportation and execution of the Leipzig Jews, but thinks that Goerdeler did not until 1943 understand that the systematic extermination of the Jews was in progress (pp. lx). Mommsen believes that this realization “led to a modification of his original position vis-à-vis the so-called ‘Jewish Question’” (p. lx). Nevertheless, Mommsen says, Goerdeler repeated his “dissimilatory” views in prison in 1944 (p. lxi). Mommsen cites as evidence Goerdeler’s proposal of 1941 in “Das Ziel” and its repetition in 1944 in “Gedanken eines zum Tode Verurteilten über die deutsche Zukunft”: here Goerdeler proposed to treat Jews as German citizens if, before July 1, 1871, they had been citizens in the territories that formed the German Reich in 1871, or if their ancestors had been, and to consider as nationals of a Jewish state yet to be founded those Jews who had not lived within these same borders in 1871, or whose ancestors had not lived there (pp. lx-lxi).

Goerdeler lived in the context of his time. Many post-Auschwitz years had to pass for societies to adjust their thinking and their use of language to the realities of the Holocaust. This process was so thorough in Germany that any expression of reservations or resentment toward another culture became taboo; the doctrines of multiculturalism and of integration have co-existed uneasily. Persons who did not embrace them, and those who had not embraced them before 1945, were denounced as racists, or more specifically as antisemites. But the recent terrorist attacks in New York and London and the riots of October and November 2005 in France have raised doubts about both integration and multiculturalism. They have confronted societies with the contradictions that arise

when the ideals of liberty and equality have not been accepted by large groups within a national community. It is evident that integration may mean assimilation to nations, and to cultural groups living in their midst integration may mean that they were entitled to the rights and privileges of citizens while remaining free to live according to their own cultural traditions and preferences.

Goerdeler sought a solution for what was evidently a problem in his time. He searched for a means to secure the status of all Jews. And he searched for a means to persuade the murderers to accept an alternative to murder. What proposal could he have made with any hope of success at that time that would not later have led Mommsen to charge him with “dissimilationist antisemitism”?

Mommsen remarks that Goerdeler was not a political theoretician (p. 1). No doubt Goerdeler’s theoretical suggestions lacked a sense of realism—which is true of his optimistic expectations for the restoration of Poland and Germany in disregard of Allied war aims and is reflected in his unlimited faith in the power of rational argumentation and in his proposals regarding the “Jewish Question.” But all his actions demonstrate his humanity. On April 1, 1933, he appeared in a Jewish quarter of Leipzig together with his deputy mayor, in full formal dress; he confronted the SA troopers who harassed and attacked Jews and businesses belonging to Jews and used his municipal police to free Jews who had been taken prisoners by SA troopers. He protected those Jewish physicians allowed by law to practice against discrimination by officials in his own municipal administration. In 1936 he forbade the removal of the statue of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy from its place in front of the Leipzig Gewandhaus concert hall, and when it was removed in his absence, he resigned in protest. His new Nazi deputy mayor Rudolf Haake denounced him to the Saxon Gauleiter Martin Mutschmann for not sharing the Party’s view on the Jews; for having resisted from 1933 onward every single re-naming of a street that bore the name of a Jew; and for having obstructed every effort to remove the Mendelssohn-Bartholdy statue. Haake wrote that the matter of the statue was “only the outward occasion of the conflict,” and that “the real cause lay in Dr. Goerdeler’s world-view which was the opposite of National Socialism”; and that “Dr. Goerdeler’s attitude in the Jewish Question had been revealed particularly clearly in the matter of the Mendelssohn-Bartholdy statue.”[1]

On several occasions in 1938 and early 1939, A. P. Young, a British engineer and industrialist, contacted Goerdeler on behalf of the British government’s Chief

Diplomatic Advisor, Sir Robert Vansittart, and later on behalf of Sir Frank Ashton-Gwatkin (a member of Lord Runciman’s mission of 1938 to mediate in the Sudeten Crisis and a counselor in the Foreign Office). Goerdeler urged the British government to refuse to discuss issues of interest with the German government; he demanded that the democracies protest against the barbaric deportation of 10,000 Polish Jews into no-man’s-land between Germany and Poland; he urged the British government to break off diplomatic relations with Germany as soon as the planned persecution of the churches or the new persecution of the Jews began; he declared that Hitler had personally ordered the pogrom of November 1938 and that Hitler was determined to conquer the world and to destroy the Jews, Christianity and capitalism. Goerdeler listed three milestones of great historical importance that Hitler had already passed, and named as the first the November 1938 pogrom.[2] Under the laws then in place in Germany, Goerdeler had put a noose around his neck. Had his interventions been discovered, he would have faced a trial for treason and certain execution.

Mommsen writes about Goerdeler’s views in 1937 that he “largely” exempted Hitler from his criticisms (p. xlvi), but he does not record that quite the opposite was the case in 1938, nor does he mention Goerdeler’s interventions on behalf of the Jews from 1933-1938 except for a passing reference to the April 1, 1933, boycott. It is a misleading introduction to Goerdeler, much along Mommsen’s general line regarding the Resistance’s position upon the persecution of the Jews.[3]

#### Notes

[1]. Acta des Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy-Denkmal betr., Stadtarchiv Leipzig, Cap. 26A Nr. 39; Goerdeler personnel file, Stadtarchiv Leipzig, Kap. 10 G Nr. 685 Bd. 1 and 2.

[2]. A. P. Young, *The “X” Documents*, ed. Sidney Aster (London: André Deutsch, 1974), pp. 59, 139, 161-162, 177.

[3]. See Hans Mommsen, “Die moralische Wiederherstellung der Nation. Der Widerstand gegen Hitler war von einer antisemitischen Grundhaltung getragen,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (July 21, 1999), p. 15; idem, “Der Widerstand gegen Hitler und die nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung,” in idem, *Alternative zu Hitler. Studien zur Geschichte des deutschen Widerstandes* (Munich: Beck, 2000), pp. 384ff. See also Peter Hoffmann, “The German Resistance and the Holocaust,” in *Confront! Resistance in Nazi Germany*, ed. John J. Michalczyk (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 105-126; Peter Hoffmann, “The German

Resistance to Hitler and the Jews: The Case of Carl Goerdeler,” in *The Genocidal Mind: Selected Papers from the 32nd Annual Scholars’ Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches*, ed. Dennis B. Klein, Richard Libowitz, Marcia Sachs Littell and Sharon Steeley (St. Paul, Minn: Paragon House, 2005), pp. 277-290.

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**Citation:** Peter Hoffmann. Review of Gillmann, Sabine; Mommsen, Hans, eds., *Politische Schriften und Briefe Carl Friedrich Goerdeler*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2006.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11784>

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