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Published on H-German (September, 2023)

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Do we not already know everything there is to be known about the Gestapo? Have we not learned from Michael Wildt who led the organization and how they ended up in Nazi Germany's infamous political police? Has Linda von Keyserlingk not shown us how the Gestapo prosecuted the big names among the national-conservative resistance? We do know much of this information, but there is more to be researched.

J. Ryan Stackhouse has discovered and made excellent use of the files of the Düsseldorf Gestapo center (Gestapoleitstelle). The Düsseldorf holdings, the largest of their kind to have survived, form a sufficiently wide basis to allow generalized statements about the Gestapo. While the Gestapo did prosecute the big names—first the Communists, then the Social Democrats, and lastly the national conservatives—what about the tens of thousands of others, those without a big name? Surely they could not all have been arrested and sent to concentration camps. Stackhouse tells the stories of many anonymized individuals, usually referred to by their given names, who were investigated by the secret police. Why were some arrested, sent to concentration camps, or tried in court, while others were severely reprimanded, warned against any future criticism of the Nazi state, and sent home?

Meticulously going through his sources (the language barrier seems to have been no obstacle here), Stackhouse comes up with surprising new findings. While the Gestapo initially saw its role in suppressing Communism, with Social Democrats and trade unionists as a secondary target, once these political enemies were more or less eliminated, the political police looked for new goals. In about 1937, it began to survey public spaces: bars where drunks might loudly express their anti-Nazi convictions, workplaces where employees made risqué remarks, or even family reunions where opinion might be divided between pro- and anti-Nazis. Thousands of reports came in from “concerned” neighbors or party members who felt a sense of obligation. Contrary to popular lore, the Gestapo had not infiltrated all walks of life with secret informers; informers were only used to investigate entire networks. Rather, German society largely informed on itself. So many unsolicited denunciations came in that the Gestapo’s primary job was to separate the chaff from the wheat. Was a particular allegation motivated by jealousy, rivalry, or other “ulterior motives”?

Right into the early war months, the Gestapo investigated thoroughly; evidence had to be collected that could secure a conviction in an open court. During this period the Gestapo did not torture routinely. Only if networks were to be un-
covered did the secret police resort to physical violence, but then with limitless brutality.

More often than not, however, the evidence was insufficient or the accused was an “upright,” “anständig” (one of Heinrich Himmler’s favorite terms) German, and they would be invited in, warned against repeated offenses, and then sent home. The Gestapo practiced what Stackhouse calls “selective enforcing”; that is, it followed up only on cases of some relevance. It brought cases to court only if there was a high probability of obtaining a conviction, and it dropped the greater number of accusations.

The largest watershed came after Stalingrad, in 1943. The Gestapo began to see its role primarily in suppressing unrest among prisoners of war and foreign forced laborers. Not unlike the Wehrmacht “Valkyrie” plans, this was motivated by a fear of internal unrest while so many German men were fighting at the front. (Sadly, the author never comments on that parallelism—perhaps a topic for someone else to investigate. Stackhouse does quote Adolf Hitler as saying that he would send in an SS Panzer Division should these unruly elements cause a problem—an SS division, not a Wehrmacht one!)

The Gestapo liberated resources by handing responsibility for grumblers and “defeatists” down to the party. By the end of 1943, it was the NSDAP officials who investigated, took witnesses’ statements, and eventually decided whether to reprimand an “offender” or pass the case to the Gestapo. By this time, the Gestapo was no longer selective: only if chances of actually obtaining a conviction seemed slim did the secret police drop cases; otherwise, it no longer mattered whether or not the culprit had a good standing in the eyes of the party. The harshest of sentences were handed down, and the executioner had his hands full.

Stackhouse’s sources cover the period right down to the very end of the war: the Gestapo set up patrols to catch deserters while simultaneously preventing farmers who had been evacuated from the left bank of the Rhine from returning to look after their livestock. By then, there was no question about bringing matters to court: Himmler decreed that the Gestapo would take matters into its own hands. For a while, executions of German citizens had to be authorized by the Reich main Security Office, but when communications within the dwindling Reich began to falter, that authority was also delegated to local Gestapo chiefs. Interestingly enough, the book claims that these chiefs preferred, to the very end, to bring matters to some sort of judicial body; were they afraid of assuming responsibility for the mass killings?

This is a well-written book, based on solid sources that the author interprets convincingly. Obviously, some of this story has been told before but never with such vividness, due to Stackhouse’s access to the original sources, and never has it been substantiated with such detailed evidence. Stackhouse has come up with a new perspective of an old topic, by focusing on the tens of thousands of cases that were never brought to trial and never resulted in executions. As Stackhouse’s book shows, we do not yet know everything about the Gestapo nor about the Third Reich, and it is still worth devoting research to this topic.
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