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At last someone has fleshed out thoroughly the phenomenon that this reviewer once described as "the selling of the police state."[1] Robert Gellately, Strassler Professor in Holocaust History at the Center for Holocaust Studies, Clark University, has made yet another significant contribution to our understanding of how the Nazi police state actually functioned. By focusing on what the German people knew and when they knew it, he has totally debunked any remains of the popular conception of a police state imposed upon an unsuspecting population, which then found it too late to resist.

Instead Gellately describes a popularly supported dictatorship in which the radical law enforcement techniques and "educational" concentration camps were widely approved, as were most aspects of "population management" based on "racial science," including ultimately the "removal" of the Jews. Though few could have comprehended the full scope of the Nazi horror, any reasonably observant person had to understand that there was inhumanity and murder on an unprecedented scale. That which they did not approve, they at least passively accepted or tried to ignore. Gellately argues that his findings about denunciations and the generally "reactive" nature of the Nazi police state "put into further question at least some of our understandings of the notion of a 'police state' and the usefulness of that concept in helping to explain what Hitler's dictatorship was all about" (p. 191).

Of course, the image of a widely accepted and popularly supported regime is not new, and Gellately relies heavily and openly on such scholars as Ian Kershaw and Detlav Peukert.[2] Even the argument that the development of the police state apparatus was publicized and, therefore, known to the public has been presented by others besides this reviewer.[3] Perhaps now, however, by focusing specifically on coverage in the public media, Gellately will register this awareness more successfully on the consciousness of both scholars and general readers.

With this book closely following Eric Johnson’s study,[4] one gets the impression that American scholars are finally joining their German colleagues in seriously examining the Nazi police state as a phenomenon more complicated and currently pertinent than the understanding previously provided by approaches shaped by the concept of totalitarianism.[5] In so doing, they make the subject more relevant to contemporary societies, including even those that perceive themselves as democratic and, therefore, safe from such threats. They contribute significantly to our understanding of how modern societies can go over the edge into popularly supported police states and even genocide.

While refuting Daniel Goldhagen’s contention that ordinary Germans contributed to the Holocaust enthusiastically, driven by an especially unique “eliminationist anti-Semitism,”[6] both Johnson and Gellately demonstrate that the public contributed to the efficiency of the Nazi police state and ultimately the Holocaust.[7] Motives were sometimes ideologically driven, but often were both more complex and more self-serving than that.

One of the most significant controversies among re-
cent students of the Gestapo is Johnson’s contention that generally others have gone too far in questioning conventional beliefs about the all-seeing efficiency of the Gestapo and in describing its personnel “as more or less ‘normal’ police officers, if overly career-minded and eager.” Johnson believes that this latest “interpretation of the terror is starting to get out of balance,” and needs revision. It “has begun to underestimate the ruthless effectiveness of the Gestapo; indeed the newest perspective is nearly at the point of excusing Gestapo officers for their overwhelming culpability.” “Finally....it under-values the resistance (in the general population) that did take place.”[8]

In neither of his books is Gellately guilty of contributing to such an imbalance when describing either the Gestapo’s efficiency or its personnel. As for the resistance, Gellately treats Johnson’s resisters (Communists, Socialists, “political priests,” etc.) as targeted victims and places them in relation to the popular approval of or indifference towards their fate. He also adds non-compliant foreign workers to the resistant-victim category, a major aspect of wartime Gestapo terror that Johnson mostly omitted. One also gains a better appreciation of how difficult it must have been to resist in a popularly supported police state. Despite Johnson’s criticism of current trends in scholarship focused on the Gestapo, there is not that much difference between his and Gellately’s portrayals.

In tracing the process by which the German people came to support Hitler to the very end, Gellately develops three phases: 1933-1938/39, the war years to 1944, and the final months of collapse. During the first phase, the Nazis carefully pursued support by playing to popular prejudices and fears. Moreover, they did not direct the terror against the German people, but rather at “outsiders” whom the public perceived as threats and social problems. The police state was built on a popular consensus.

Gellately “shows that a vast array of material on the police and the camps and various discriminatory campaigns was published in the media of the day” (p. 5). In the 1930s, the development of the concentration camps and the Gestapo, with its extraordinary powers as well as the campaigns to protect German society from degeneration were well reported in the press and held up to praise. All the victims of the regime (political opponents; persons mentally and physically “unworthy of life”; “asocials”; criminals, even of a petty sort; homosexuals; prostitutes; abortionists; vagabonds; the habitually unemployed; Sinti and Roma; pacifists; and of course, the Jews) were successfully converted in the public mind into subhuman enemies and threats to a healthy society, deserving of their fates. The camps were there to re-educate the educable without coddling, and to permanently hold the incorrigible enemies of society, who would have to earn their keep.

The Nazis celebrated the police in week-long annual festivals across the country, and proudly chalked up their many successes in the war on crime, immorality and pornography. Judges also got into the act. They meted out harsh justice and used the death penalty on an unprecedented scale. Far from clothing such practices in secrecy, the regime played them up in the press and lauded the modernity and superiority of the Nazi system over all others (pp. 5-6). Gellately writes:

“The coercion and confinement in the 1930s were neither wholesale nor entirely random, but selective and focused. As the rule of law was eliminated, an element of arbitrariness and unpredictability crept into law and order procedures, and in so far as this happened, citizens let the dictatorship know of their displeasure.... The definition of ‘enemy’ (or social ‘alien’) grew over time, but targets of discrimination, persecution, and confinement, therefore, were not chosen by Hitler and his henchmen merely because of their own idiosyncratic prejudices and dislikes. On balance, the coercive practices, the repression, and persecution won far more support for the dictatorship than they lost.” (pp. 258-59)

The war years realized the revolution. In programs of social engineering and racial policy the most radical tendencies in Nazism found free range. Nationalism overwhelmed any remaining public reservations, while the police defined the rights of citizens. The public witnessed the fate of thousands of alleged criminals and “racially foreign people” in its midst. “People cooperated when it came to enforcing anti-Semitism and the racial measures aimed at foreign workers, and they were certainly not reluctant about informing when it came to ordinary crimes” (p. 261). As a form of citizen involvement in the Third Reich, denunciation was one of the most important contributions to the excesses of the wartime police state. While a few aided victims, the majority either accepted the racist teachings or took them in stride.

In the final months, the regime became more openly brutalistic, with a brutality that knew no limits, as Germans even terrorized “good” Germans. Yet the consensus “broadly held together,” for “many people apparently could not afford to let themselves see the situation, in-
cluding the brutalities, for what they really were, and could do nothing more than be for Hitler or at least for Germany” (p. 264). As they witnessed the horrors of the police state occurring openly on the streets of their cities, they either approved of the treatment of those deemed “public enemies” or they stood by apathetically, with only a few willing to risk their safety with acts of sympathy or expressions of disapproval.

Gellately has thoroughly documented the selling of the police state through an exploration of press and radio coverage. Of course, the Party and the SS-managed media mounted what looks like a well-orchestrated campaign. But even the non-Nazi media was enthusiastic in presenting both the unrestrained police and the concentration camps as desirable forces for allegedly restoring order, peace and security to German society. Unfortunately, Gellately was less able to explain whether this was a managed campaign or merely a “spontaneous” Nazi preaching of its convictions; nor could he fully explain how the Nazis mobilized the non-Nazi media so effectively in the desired direction.

He describes SS- and police-staged visits of reporters and others to the camps and the release of selective statistics. Of course, both journalists and the public fully expected such manipulation and knew Nazi censorship would not allow the media to present negative reports. Yet the media’s enthusiasm went beyond what censorship demanded to a point of seemingly genuine approval and support. One is reminded that even in free societies, the media rarely likes to go in the face of strong public opinion or truly powerful groups. Rather it may tend to reinforce public prejudices as much, if not more, than it shapes new attitudes. The Nazis set the stage by adroitly appealing to the psychological needs of the public. Undoubtedly the journalists who were not purged felt those same needs; if not, they understood the necessity of complying with such strong public sentiment. To go against it was dangerous to a career, regardless of the danger of challenging the Nazi regime.

Gellately documents how the SS and police fed the media what it wanted the public to see and believe. We hear the public “sales pitches” of key leaders like Hitler, Himmler, Heydrich, Werner Best and Kurt Daluege. What rarely appears is an inside picture of which offices and personalities managed this manipulation and how much calculation went into such management.

When I questioned them in the 1970s, both Werner Best, the Gestapo’s prime “salesman of the police state,” and Günther d’Alquen, the editor of the SS’ Schwartzze Ko-rps, both denied there was any “PR campaign” and contended that Himmler ardently avoided publicity. Clearly they obfuscated, ridiculing any comparison of their “simple, overt reporting” and “didactic scholarly articles” with current PR campaigns and more sophisticated “media science.” Himmler may have been personally publicity shy, but he fully understood the manipulation of public opinion from his days in the Party Propaganda Office. Best left a paper trail of directives for staging the publication of articles in professional journals and their redistribution to suitable targets. The SS Security Service (SD) closely monitored public opinion and its responses to the relevant news. The SD established both overt and covert liaisons in Goebbels’ ministry at an early time. Finally Lutz Hachmeister’s biography of Franz Six has shown the route traveled by many of the former “SD media monitors” into the public media of post-war Germany.[9]

Perhaps explorations of this theme using the records of the appropriate branches of the Reich Security Headquarters, the Order Police Headquarters, the Inspectorate of the Concentration Camps, Himmler’s Press Post, and Goebbels’ ministry would make excellent doctoral dissertation topics. Both Hitler and Himmler had well-developed manipulative abilities, but they did not personally direct this media manipulation. Who did what as well as how Himmler and/or Goebbels recruited and used them would make a good story, especially given the vacillating competition-cooperation between Himmler and Goebbels.

On the theme of Hitler’s involvement, Gellately clearly supports those current trends towards re-emphasizing the centrality of Hitler in the development and selling of the Nazi police state. Neither this reviewer nor others focusing on Himmler’s contributions would minimize Hitler’s significance as the inspiration for practically every evil of the Third Reich.[10] Yet I feel that Gellately’s emphasis has generally underplayed the more subtle evolutions of many such evils. The complex interactions among the pathologically driven dreamer, his paladin and architect—Himmler—and the innumerable middle and lower level functionaries in the evolution of the Holocaust and other programs of ethnic cleansing have become ever more clear in the numerous, recent case studies of the Nazi occupied east.[11] On the persecution and destruction of the Sinti and Roma for instance, Gellately had to acknowledge “that the inspiration came from elsewhere” (p. 106). The same also seems true of the persecution of homosexuals.[12] I continue to argue that even the SS-police state, as it actually emerged under Himmler, was created largely on Himmler’s initiative.
and accepted by Hitler in 1935/36 because it more closely fit the Fuehrer’s fondest dreams than any other option available. [13] Both the inspiration and the final contract for the police state had to come from Hitler, but Himmler had to create a working model, sell it to the public along with many of the Nazi and conservative collaborationist leaders, and make a competitive bid in order to get that contract. But that is not Gellately’s main focus.

Throughout Gellately contrasts the realities of the police state terror and what the German people actually knew, against what they wanted to believe. Undoubtedly he has learned the hard way from presentations, even to scholarly audiences, that such a message is easily misinterpreted. So he works to convince the reader that the popular perception was not close to the truth, even during the more “normative” years of the mid-1930s. Every chapter makes this point, focusing on the evolution of each aspect of the police-state terror and on each category of its victims. This requires that the book cover much well-worn ground, but here integrated with an analysis of the degree to which this was accepted by the German public. The result is undoubtedly “a more balanced interpretation.” For the specialist, there is also the added benefit of clear summaries of the current literature.

In both the chapter on the Jews and that on foreign workers, Gellately re-develops one of his main theses. Through a statistical analysis of Gestapo case files, which deal with suspected violations of laws designed to socially isolate these people inside Germany, he demonstrates that a majority of its investigations of offenders were probably instigated through denunciations from the non-Nazi public. An even higher percentage of such denunciations initiated cases against citizens for listening to foreign radio broadcasts. The proverbial all-seeing eyes of the Gestapo through its spies, party block leaders, and supporting enforcement agencies played insignificant roles in unearth such offenders. Gellately concludes that the Gestapo was primarily reactive in such cases. Most of its energy went into investigating denunciations rather than actively identifying offenders and initiating its own investigations.

This produces an interesting contrast with Johnson. Unfortunately Johnson’s book did not become available in time for Gellately to address his arguments. Although both agree on the importance of denunciation in supporting the Gestapo’s work, Johnson argues that conclusions, such as Gellately’s, about the reactive nature of Gestapo work ignore the more proactive aspects of that work and even place “the onus of guilt on ordinary Germans for the perpetration of Nazi crimes.” [14] Instead, according to Johnson, the Gestapo was proactive and efficient in the pursuit of specifically targeted groups like the Communists, Socialists, other political opposition, and then the Jews, and indeed devoted most of its energy to these groups.

An understanding of Gellately’s latest study comes through the realization that his first book was inspired by the work of Reinhard Mann on the Duesseldorf Gestapo. [15] Gellately cited Mann’s more comprehensive analysis of Gestapo case files that show a somewhat more proactive Gestapo and a somewhat less involved public in cases not involving racial issues. Mann nevertheless revealed the importance of public support for Gestapo work. Mann’s omission of cases involving racial issues provoked Gellately’s focus on such Gestapo cases. His first study analyzed cases involving Jews in the Wuerzburg Gestapo files. His current study adds foreign workers in the Duesseldorf, Wuerzburg and Speyer Gestapo case files. He also compares these with studies of public support in Gestapo cases against illegal listening to foreign radio. He sought insight into the importance of such support to Gestapo penetration of the truly private realm of German life, the home.

None of the recent scholars in question, especially not Gellately, have minimized Gestapo “efficiency” in handling the Jews. It is only in respect to the cases where the Gestapo was investigating violations of the laws designed to isolate the Jews and foreign workers, cases usually involving other Germans, and cases of illegal listening to foreign radio broadcasts that Gellately concludes the Gestapo was primarily reactive in such cases. Most of its energy went into investigating denunciations rather than actively identifying offenders and initiating its own investigations.

It is Gestapo efficiency in handling covert political opposition and enemy espionage, rather than racially related cases and “petty” oppression, that constitutes a more complicated problem of analysis. What neither Gellately nor Johnson have included in their considerations of Gestapo efficiency is the problem made so recently obvious by September 11. The major obstacle to modern
proactive crime fighting is not a lack of efficiency in collecting information, but rather in information overload. Clearly with the Gestapo spending so much of its time diligently investigating denunciations, which according to the data were frequently erroneous or exaggerated, its resources for active investigation were strained. Moreover, since so much energy went into pursuing "petty" offenses such as fraternizing with "racial enemies" or illegal radio listening, driven by unrealistic ideological delusions about achieving a harmonious Volksgemeinschaft, "Gestapo efficiency" was a relative term.

The Nazis’ ability to eliminate the Communists and subsequently all other effective political opposition resulted primarily from the unlimited freedom of the SA, SS and police to round up all the political leadership, who had fought them at all levels of society and were already well-known to the police and the Nazis. After the first months of "wild" police-state terror, the ability of the Gestapo to ferret out underground opposition relied entirely on traditional, mundane police work, which had to compete for resources with denunciation-driven "petty crime fighting." This cost has to be factored into any consideration of the efficiency of such a relatively small force of investigators.

Both authors agree that the Nazi police state relied heavily on popular support for its success and efficiency. At one point Gellately makes the argument that much of the efficiency of the Gestapo grew from the time it "wasted" pursuing so many false leads from self-serving denouncers. "The evidence suggests that...the police thrived not only on what happened to victims before the courts, but as much and even more on the stories and myths that spread about what happened or could happen to anyone who had a brush with the police. So we should not too readily conclude that the Gestapo was somehow 'inefficient' because it did not always get judicial convictions” (p. 201).

Although he has clearly demonstrated the role of public support in Gestapo efficiency (a reality obscured by totalitarianism theory and yet something any student of modern policing should have assumed before the new wave of scholarship revealed it), Gellately may not be able to paint a truly "balanced picture” in this regard. Certainly others than Johnson question the degree and tone of approval that he describes. There may simply never be a way to determine what percentage of the general population participated in overt support, such as denunciations and public demonstrations against targeted groups. Neither Nazi nor Socialist monitoring of public opinion was scientific. Gellately certainly has not disregarded more passive approval and indifference in the overall formula. Perhaps the current emphasis on denunciation, as important as it has been to a better understanding, may now be "unbalancing" the picture. More likely, we should be asking some new questions about that denunciation. Nevertheless, like the significant minority of rabid anti-Semites among Holocaust perpetrators who played a key role in the larger body of collective behavior, a significant minority who either supported or sought to manipulate the police state from below were essential to its "efficiency.”[16]

Johnson rightly argues that the terror functioned variably for different groups at different times. It was omnipresent and constant for targeted groups like Jews, Communists, Jehovah’s Witnesses; partial and intermittent for others such as clergymen, other religious groups and malcontents; almost nonexistent for the largest portion of the population.

On this last count, there is another conflict between Gellately and Johnson over the persecution of illegal radio listening. Gellately argues, “During the war, the people, the police, and the Party cooperated and produced a system of coercion from which it was increasingly difficult to hide” (p. 203). One draws the conclusion that any reasonable German lived in fear of being caught listening to the BBC. Yet they did so, and some were caught, primarily because of denunciations. In contrast, Johnson’s statistical analysis of interviews with Germans who lived through these years presents convincing evidence that “good Germans” hardly feared the Gestapo, and especially listened to foreign broadcasts with little concern for the consequences.

In this case Gellately failed to balance his picture, although he would probably not argue with Johnson’s conclusion concerning the relative nonexistence of Gestapo terror directed against “good Germans,” except perhaps in the last desperate months. Johnson’s evidence for the relatively lower level of Gestapo attention focused on non-targeted enemies and misfits is missing from Gellately’s statistical presentations and is lost in his narratives of persecutions. Both authors could do a better job of comparing the percentage of cases against "ordinary Germans" versus the size of the overall population, the percentage of cases against members of Nazi organizations versus their total numbers, and the percentage of cases developed against different types of targeted groups and their respective total numbers. This would be a good test of Johnson’s "balanced picture" of the Gestapo
There are points for synthesis between these two studies. For instance, Gellately concludes, “Far from spending their every waking moment worrying about the Gestapo and being torn by anxieties over the surveillance and terror system, many people came to terms with it” (p. 199). They sought advantages over others through denunciations and manipulated the system “from below.” Johnson argues that his survey suggests “that most of the ordinary German population supported the Nazi regime, did not perceive the Gestapo as all-powerful or even as terribly threatening to them personally, and enjoyed considerable room to express frustration and disapproval arising out of minor disagreements with the Nazi state and its leadership.”[17]

The serious differences between Gellately and Johnson are not so much Gestapo effectiveness or popular support, but rather the relative significance of denunciation, the exact scope of Gestapo reactivity versus proactivity, and the extent to which the Gestapo was perceived by the general public as threatening to them. Here we are still some way away from a truly “balanced picture.”

Both author’s descriptions of how Gestapo personnel thoroughly investigated denunciations, dismissed many (even in cases involving Jews), and exercised judgment in determining when not to punish or “just” to admonish also requires more attention given Johnson’s overreaction to the recent, less simplistic depictions of Gestapo officers. It might also help explain the purported lack of “public fear” of the Gestapo, despite so much of Gellately’s evidence demonstrating that there should have been an atmosphere of fear. Johnson’s descriptions of the self-starting zeal and zealousness of the Gestapo officers specifically assigned to persecute targeted victims, especially Jews, is undeniably accurate. Gellately does not minimize any of this, but his focus is on police interaction with the general public rather than on the policemen themselves. Clearly Johnson’s criticism of other scholars’ analyses of Gestapo personnel is not directed at Gellately.

Our best hope of a truly balanced analysis would lie in a collaboration among scholars in this field involving a coordination and comparison of all statistical analyses. The questions asked by Gellately of the Gestapo case files in Duesseldorf, Wuerzburg and Speyer versus those by Johnson in Krefeld need coordination and expansion. Similarly the registry cards of Gestapo Osnabrueck and Wuerzburg, held by the former Berlin Document Center, should be added to such analysis, as should others that might still have escaped scholarly focus. By the same token, the ongoing statistical analyses of Gestapo (better still Sipo and SD) personnel and their activities needs coordination and expansion, to better address Johnson’s complaints and reveal this truly complex group of perpetrators.

As for the subject of this review, perhaps Gellately’s most important contribution lies in his conclusion concerning the source of the “social desensitization” and “moral brutalization” of German society. It “may be sought in studying the representation of the concentration camps and their prisoners in the media of the day. What is at issue is no longer whether or not Germans knew about the camps, but rather what kind of knowledge they had and how it was conveyed” (p. 263).

Gellately’s style provides a comfortable read and his arguments are presented clearly and forcefully. He never presumes anything that would leave a general reader in the dark. One wishes that Oxford would undertake a publicity and sales campaign for its police-state and genocide-related publications that is more comparable to those of competitors like Knopf and Basic Books. The general reading public badly needs exposure to this solid scholarship.

Notes
[3]. For instance, Eugen Kogan, Der SS Staat. Das System der deutschen Konzentrations-Lager (Munich: Karl Alber, 1946) regarding the creation of Dachau; Peukert, Inside Nazi Germany, p. 197; and Johannes Tuchel, Konzentrationslager. Organisationsgeschichte und Funktion der “Inspektion der Konzentrationslager” (Boppard: Harald Holdt Verlag, 1991), e.g., pp. 54f., 124, and 186f.
[5]. Gellately’s earlier work and that of the many German scholars delving deeply into every aspect of the Gestapo has found summary recently in two volumes edited by Gerhard Paul and Klaus-Michael Mallmann, *Die Gestapo: Mythos und Realität* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995), and *Die Gestapo im Zwischen Weltkrieg: "Heimfront" und besetztes Europa* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2000).


[8]. All quotes are from Johnson, p. 19.


[10]. Although a sophisticated intentionalist about Hitler’s role, Richard Breitmann, in *The Architect of Genocide: Himmler and the Final Solution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991) and several subsequent essays, fully developed the image of Himmler as intuitively fleshing out and even encouraging Hitler’s dreams without needing any specific instructions.


[13]. With some revisions in detail, I still make the same argument about the complex and vacillating role of Hitler in the earliest developments of Himmler’s police state system, 1933-1935, as I made in *The Foundations of the Nazi Police State*.

[14]. Johnson, *Nazi Terror*, p. 483, on which he specifically lists Gellately among those who stress the importance of civilian denunciations in creating this alleged distortion.


[16]. Browning, *Nazi Policy*, pp. 166-69 and 175, for that theme.


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