The Ideology of SS Bureaucrats

The major question driving Michael Thad Allen’s *The Business of Genocide* is what motivated mid-level SS bureaucrats in their pursuits of industry, slave labor, and murder. Allen rejects Hannah Arendt’s theory of the banality of evil, as well as the explanation that SS bureaucrats were simply cogs in a machine that operated beyond their control. Instead, he argues that mid-level SS managers in the WVHA (*Wirtschaftsverwaltungshauptamt*, or Business Administration Main Office) were driven primarily by a “plexus of ideologies.” In doing so, he challenges the supposition of many studies, that Nazi bureaucrats were repulsed by their actions. Rather, he argues they were committed to the leadership principle of “productivism,” modernization, racial supremacy, and the goal of creating an SS “New Order” throughout Europe. SS ideals shaped the bureaucracy and provided it with enough ideological consistency. Allen believes that rather than factional disputes, far more cooperation within the SS leadership was possible than other historians have portrayed.

Allen’s study focuses on activities of the WVHA, which was formed out of a desire by Himmler to introduce modern, managerial practices to the financial administration and economic enterprises of the SS. Himmler’s interests in the economy reflected his goal to bring the SS worldview into private industry and to create a new economic order founded on productivism and German racial supremacy. The earliest companies acquired included a publishing company, Nordland Verlag; a photographic studio, FF Bauer; the Allach Porcelain Manufacture, which made “kitschy statuettes” (p. 34); and the Anton Loibl GmbH, which claimed to conduct “high-tech research and development but produced bicycle lights” (p. 35). The choice of these early enterprises (as well as those acquired during the war years) hardly suggests that the SS was seeking to create an empire, but that Himmler was trying to provide a cultural service to promote a German national community. For example, the SS established the German Earth and Stone Works (*Deutsche Erde- und Steinwerke*, DES), to contribute to Hitler’s favorite architectural projects.

As the financial activities of the SS expanded in 1937-1938, Himmler made Oswald Pohl responsible for modernizing the economic administration. Pohl’s efforts would lead to the formal establishment of the WVHA in 1942. Pohl was dedicated to Himmler’s New Order, and he tried to recruit men who shared these views. Therefore, the ideological commitment of the SS managers was of foremost importance to their appointments. If they were also talented, modern managers, they were highly effective. But this was apparently rare, and with one exception all of the SS commercial enterprises were poorly managed.

Against the backdrop of how the WVHA emerged and functioned, Allen examines the careers of several
men in the commercial and engineering sectors of the SS economic administration. He convincingly illustrates that the SS mid-level managers were driven by a "plexus of ideologies." They were neither cogs in a machine, nor trapped in a bureaucratic "iron cage," nor banal technocrats. Allen finds that the commercial pursuits of the SS were far less successful than the construction engineers. He explains the differences in outcome may be due to the engineers' ability to combine technical knowledge with ideological commitment. This becomes obvious when we compare Allen's study of DESt, TexLed (Textil- und Lederverwertung GmbH, Textile and Leather Utilization Ltd), and Hans Kammler's SS construction corps.

Allen demonstrates that the SS was interested in modernization and technology, but according to his analysis they did not pursue technology rationally (this makes them no less modern in Allen's definition). The SS managers of the commercial operations showed an affinity for "sweet machines," the newest technology. This is what motivated Arthur Ahrens, the first manager of DESt, to adopt the dry brick making process offered by Spengler Maschinenbau, a process that depended upon adequate clay supplies and skilled laborers that were unsuited for DESt. The company was so poorly managed that an investigation led to Ahrens' replacement by Erduin Schondorff, the first "outsider" whom Pohl recruited. Appointing an outsider with technical expertise proves to Allen that Pohl and Himmler were committed to modernizing the economic administration of the SS enterprises. Schondorff was attracted to the SS because it encouraged technological innovations; he was less interested in other aspects of SS ideology. Schondorff introduced modern, managerial practices such as statistical surveillance of labor and imposed an impersonal hierarchy at the operations. However, DESt continued to blunder forward because Schondorff was never able to integrate effectively the use of modern machines with the exploitation of unskilled concentration camp laborers. The failure of DESt stands in sharp contrast to the success of TexLed.

TexLed's success can be explained by several factors, including the simple fact that textile manufacturing is a labor intensive job which proved perfectly suited to the use of concentration camp laborers. Yet sound management also contributed to TexLed's ability to meet supply demands and run at a profit. TexLed was managed by Fritz Lechler and Felix Krug, who fully identified with the SS plexus of ideologies, and they possessed modern, technological management skills. Like Ahrens, they purchased the most modern sewing machines that could increase output, but did not require skilled laborers. Therefore, their operations fully exploited concentration camp labor through modern managerial techniques, controlled labor costs, and profit-oriented operations. At both German commercial operations, forced laborers were exploited and treated cruelly (a topic that is discussed only briefly), but TexLed demonstrated to Allen that "ideological extremism" and business sense could be integrated coherently (p. 70). TexLed and DESt are just two of the case studies of SS commercial operations examined by Allen. In all of his examples, it appears that TexLed's success was mere happen chance despite Pohl's efforts. He was rarely able to recruit competent modern managers, who were fully dedicated to SS ideology.

Hans Kammler, who led the SS construction corps, appears to be the exception. He embodied the ideal, modern SS bureaucrat, was dedicated to the SS cause, and held a degree in engineering. The SS construction corps earned great notoriety for building underground manufacturing sites, as well as the concentration camps. Indeed, Allen maintains, "Only Hans Kammler and his SS Building Inspectors were capable of providing essential service to the war economy by forging a mutual sense of purpose with competent industrial managers and by providing the knowledge and skills to bend the complex world of production to the Third Reich's needs" (p. 165). In 1941-1942, Kammler introduced a hierarchy in the Construction Corps that encouraged creativity, accountability, and interchangeability. He recruited young engineers, largely from the air force, who possessed the "old Staffel spirit" (p. 159). Kammler was an interventionist manager, who showed great skill at exploiting and moving forced laborers from one construction site to another. This is particularly evident in the construction of underground factories. Kammler's construction corps achieved their goal efficiently and promptly because they were willing to exploit their laborers to the point of working them to death. Ideology gave Kamm- ler's engineers common identity which improved their output while treating the slave laborers under their command brutally.

In Allen's discussion of the concentration camps, we realize that not all the SS branches were committed to modernization. One branch of the WVHA was never fully modernized: the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps (IKL) which provided the labor for SS projects and private enterprises. The concentration camp system began in the Third Reich with the primary goal of policing inmates. Only when labor shortages began to develop
in Germany by 1936-1937, was the use of concentration camp inmates as laborers conceived. While the commercial operations of the WVHA needed productive workers, the IKL, administered by the Death’s Head Units, placed a “primacy on policing” and encouraged brutal treatment of inmates. The WVHA consistently struggled with the IKL over which of these goals was more important, but they never morally questioned the abuse of slave laborers. Pohl’s first attempt to impose modern management on the IKL came with the creation of a new Office I/5 whose “sole duty was to smooth out the IKL’s labor allocations to the German Commercial Operations” (p. 117). Wilhelm Burboeck was appointed leader and given the title of Deputy for the Labor Action (Beauftragter fuer den Arbeitseinsatz). Burboeck and his men never acquired the cooperation of the IKL. In fact, Office I/5 was essentially taken over by the IKL. In early 1942, as the demand for labor increased, Pohl made another institutional attempt to gain the IKL’s cooperation in productive ideology and appointed Gerhard Maurer to lead Office Group D2-Labor Action. The most lasting change that Burboeck and Maurer made was to introduce and then improve upon the statistical surveillance of the concentration camp populations. Burboeck created a category for inmates “unfit to labor;” Maurer provided a more detailed description of this category including numerical codes and standardized forms, and compelled the IKL to cooperate. Unfortunately, as Allen points out, these statistics facilitated the IKL’s identification of concentration camp inmates, who were then killed because they were deemed “unfit to work” (Operation 14 f 13).

Allen’s study not only challenges scholars to rethink the motivations of SS bureaucrats, but also boldly challenges conventional interpretations about the problem of modernity and the issue of polycracy in the Third Reich. On the subject of modernity, Allen warns us not “to conflate ‘modernity’ with ‘rationality’ and ‘pure’ technocratic instrumentalism, or insist that modernization necessarily leads to a democratic polity, or the full-flowering of the Enlightenment” (p. 272). He is quite right, yet, his own definition of what is “modern” appears inconsistent. For example, when Allen assesses the administrative practices of Burboeck, he describes his efforts as a “sham” and a conscious pretense at modern management” (p. 123). Allen implies that because Burboeck’s aspirations did not lead to expected outcomes, his innovations were somehow less modern. Yet, it was Burboeck’s statistical surveillance which Maurer improved upon that leads Allen to describe the latter as a “capable, inspiring, and interventionist [i.e. modern] manager” (p. 185). One suspects that the difference between the two men has less to do with modernization theories than the fact that Maurer was more competent, a workaholic, and had the advantage of studying Burboeck’s “system,” which had no precedence. Would Maurer have been so successful if he did not have Burboeck’s failed efforts as an example? If modern simply means “a new culture of technology and science,” then were not Burboeck and Maurer equally modern, applying the science of business management to their tasks, but that the former was just less competent than the latter? In short, the criteria of what makes an SS bureaucrat modern is problematic, apparently relative, and open to debate.

For those who study the Third Reich, Allen raises another important issue: is polycratic rule unique to National Socialism (p. 177)? This is an interesting question, although not entirely relevant and difficult to prove. The more pertinent question seems to be whether or not the concept of polycracy has lost its usefulness. Allen’s discussion of this concept would have been more convincing had he offered a more in-depth explanation of the term. Instead, he reduces polycracy to mean nothing more than a simple “divvying up [of] tasks” common to all bureaucracies (p. 99). This is, however, far from the original meaning outlined by Peter Huettenberger, Martin Broszat, and others. Polycratic interpretations are based on the belief that the Nazis relied heavily on personal rule, an idea embodied in the leadership principle. Subsequently, studying power struggles (that is the patronage networks), rivalries and feuds is of paramount importance. Polycratic interpretations do not deny that cooperation was possible, indeed, it was imperative. Where Allen differs from the more standard works is a matter of emphasis. Allen acknowledges that polycratic infighting occurred, but he prefers to emphasize the points of cooperation, not conflict. Allen writes, “When [polycracy] degenerates into a focus on mere ‘power struggles,’ we are instead led to believe that Nazis pursued naked, internecine strife as if for its own sake” (p. 276). Worse yet, Germany’s genocidal policies are then explained in terms of a “‘self-acting’ bureaucrat machine,” as Hans Mommsen would have it (p. 278). Allen’s concerns about the amoral or immoral direction in which polycratic interpretations can lead are valid, and a reminder that historians should not avoid making moral judgments. Ironically, even Allen points out that infighting facilitated “a new method of murder.” How? When Burboeck and Maurer could not obtain the cooperation of the IKL to limit its brutality in order to improve productivity, they adapted and modernized their bookkeeping procedures.
by creating, and then more clearly defining, the category "unfit to labor." Unintentionally, Burboeck and Maurer facilitated the IKL’s identification of concentration camp inmates who were killed when they could no longer toil. Allen correctly asserts that Burboeck and Maurer were morally responsible even if unintentionally so. They approved of the racial policies that legitimized the brutality; they simply wanted a guaranteed supply of slave laborers. Therefore, even though Allen’s criticism of polycratic interpretations is not wholly convincing, his emphasis on cooperation reminds us that ideology was important.

It is usually unfair to point out topics omitted from historical monographs, but these seem relevant to Allen’s study. He is weak in exploring the nexus between the SS and the private business sector. He tells us that one of Himmler’s goals was to become a role model for private enterprises corrupted by the disintegrating influences of capital. Yet, not once is Himmler’s Circle of Friends (Freundeskreis Himmler) discussed, even though Oswald Pohl was a member. While scholars tend to dismiss this elite voluntary association as unimportant, given Allen’s thesis that ideology, especially the goal of cultural reconstruction, drove the SS-WVHA, he should have provided his expert opinion on this subject and examined the relationship between the SS bureaucrats and private businessmen more fully. Moreover, Allen suggests on several occasions that private enterprises took the initiative to acquire concentration camp labor from the SS. However, the only concrete examples he cites were Porsche, Farben, and Steyr-Daimler-Puch, while his footnote citations are fairly limited on the subject of private enterprises in the Third Reich. Again, given Himmler’s cultural agenda, Allen might have explored in more depth how private industry utilized concentration camp labor. If private industry sought out the SS-WVHA, does this prove that Himmler or the SS bureaucrats were succeeding in creating their New Order? Finally, with respect to the SS bureaucrats, Allen makes reference to a prosopographical study (p. 218) and an analysis of “collective biographies” (p. 159) of the WVHA; these obviously informed his narrative. Yet, it would have been useful to incorporate these findings more systematically even if only in an appendix. These omissions do not undermine the effectiveness of Allen’s thesis, but might have strengthened it.

Allen’s monograph is a significant contribution to the study of the SS. He has utilized numerous archival sources including contemporary evidence and trial records. He puts a more human face on SS bureaucrats in the WVHA, and he proves that they were driven by ideology; they were not mindless, amoral technocrats. Allen fully accomplishes his major goal while reminding scholars that modernization can be irrational and adopted by any type of political system. He also raises questions about the use of polycratic interpretations of the Third Reich that scholars will find interesting.


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