

Panel 3: Case Studies of Perpetrators in the Holocaust and other Genocides in Comparative Perspective

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After two decades of intensive research work, NS perpetrator research has reached a certain level of consolidation and saturation. Indeed, the question is raised whether the biographical approach has not now been drained and whether a return to structures does not now belong on the research agenda.

Thus, in a commentary on perpetrator research published in 2006, Hans Mommsen represented the viewpoint that “the medium of the historical biography was of only limited suitability for breaking down the politico-societal structures of the Third Reich”; these structures were characterised rather “by a systematic erosion of the autonomy of the individual in favour of his instrumental availability for the purposes of the regime”. (Mommsen, *Probleme der Täterforschung*, in: *NS-Täter*, 426)

In the following text I would like to provide my reasons for not sharing this view.

It can be assumed that far more than 100,000 persons played an active part in the mass murders of the NS regime. A figure of this magnitude arises from a relatively narrow perpetrator notion which covers those persons who were active in the actual murder apparatus: this includes both the system of concentration camps, the security police and the Security Service, large sections of the order police, certain Armed-SS associations and a major part of the German occupation administration deployed in Eastern Europe.

This is the field in which the focus of perpetrator research has lain up to now. A more broadly comprised perpetrator notion enquiring after, for example, the perpetrators within the Wehrmacht and within the paramilitary organisations under NS, within the elite, within the administrative apparatus or among the general population, will remain outside of this brief commentary.

More usefully, regarding perpetrator in the narrower sense three categories of perpetrators can be differentiated: the mass of “direct perpetrators”, acting directly, most of them in the context of orders: teams, junior leaders as well as low-ranking officers; secondly, the medium and higher functionaries, the actual players who possessed their own scope of action along with, finally, the relatively small group of top NS politicians who set the policy guidelines.

1. The least extensive form of research is that in respect of the “rank and file of the final solution” (Mallmann). In this context the situation as regards sources constitutes an insurmountable obstacle, because essentially it is possible to collect biographical mass data only for a more or less representative section of these perpetrators. At the same time it becomes evident that the majority by far of persons who belonged to the lower ranks of the mentioned organisations were volunteers, who originated preferentially from sections of the population that sympathised with the regime and were recruited according to politico-ideological standpoints.

Thus, Martin Cüppers demonstrated that the members of the Armed-SS brigades, who were under the authority of the Reichsführer SS staff officers and can be regarded as the extreme core troop of the racist war of annihilation, were not only to a high percentage members of the General SS and of the party, but in terms of their social structure resembled the composition of the NSDAP membership rather than the average German population.

In the case of the uniformed police officers, who were deployed within the scope of occupation policy, these were in no way what von Goldhagen describes as “ordinary Germans”; the bulk of the members of the order police battalions active in the East were, rather, long-serving career police officers, alongside them young volunteers attracted by a career in the police, and older, likewise voluntary reservists, of whom “SS suitability” was demanded explicitly of them to an equal extent and who originated mostly from a bourgeois background sympathising with the police and the party.

However, beyond such general statements it is possible, for various reasons, to reconstruct the individual motives of these perpetrators only in individual cases; deducing general and representative statements from this is problematic.

Incidentally, for the same reason, a biographical alignment with the bulk of those soldiers who were caught up in the crimes of the Wehrmacht is barely possible. Such an approach is already met with the problem that – if one disregards individual units – the simple soldiers who acted relevantly are practically no longer identifiable (most recently Pohl, Herrschaft).

2. In recent years, the main interest of perpetrator research has been focused on the second group, the medium and higher functionaries of the murder machinery, therefore those who had a certain degree of latitude and who have left behind far and away more comprehensive traces in contemporary documents, in autobiographical testimonies and in criminal law investigations from the post-war period.

In the process, dealings with the leadership personnel of the Security Police and the Security Service, above all, concentrated initially on the academically trained members of the “war youth generation” (born 1900-1910) who were firmly ideologically (i.e. racially/anti-Semiticly) educated in as early as the twenties and early thirties. These dealings were performed both in the form of individual biographies (for example, about Best, Eichmann, Dannecker, Kaltenbrunner, Globocnik, Göth) as well as within the scope of group studies (by Banach, Birn, Wildt and others).

Upon more detailed, comparative analysis of individual careers (particularly impressive in the case of Wildt) it becomes evident, however, that the initially assumed homogeneity of this group of people must be estimated as being considerably lesser. Motives can also be distinguished thoroughly; thus, in a typology, Gerhard Paul differentiates, for example, between perpetrators who were driven primarily “ideologically”, on utilitarian grounds or through criminal motives, and those who are to be approached primarily as recipients of commands (Paul, Einleitung, in: Täter der Shoah).

In contrast, the fact that this leadership personnel originated mostly from a certain peer group, was from a middle-class background and was academically trained appears today to be rather a formal finding, which can be explained primarily by the recruitment practice and the determining career factors of the Security Police and the Security Service and not primarily by a particular, biographically driven disposition of this group of persons with regard to a racist policy of annihilation.

For it appears that older and younger, more poorly trained functionaries from socially weaker classes murdered with the same brutality and intensity once they merely assumed a relevant role within the annihilation apparatus. This finding arises from inquiries which – in the form of control groups, so to speak – analysed biographical information about perpetrators who stood outside the actual Security Police apparatus.

- Thus, Karin Orth provided evidence that the leadership personnel of the concentration camps consisted of a relatively homogenous group of a little more than 300 persons, who though belonging – like the leadership personnel of Security Police and Security Service – mainly to the war youth generation and the middle class, were not distinguished academically and intellectually. The internal cohesion of this group arose primarily from its “professional” socialisation, from camaraderie and the jointly committed crimes, not from ideological abstracts.

- Michael Mallmann investigated the leaders of the sub-units of the task groups deployed in the occupied Soviet Union in 1941, 85 persons, in closer detail: predominant among this core of ideological annihilation warriors with wide remits are members of the younger age groups born 1910-1915, who had entered the Security Police as career changers and who, at the time of the deputation, most of them highly motivated, found themselves on a “fast-track” training course (legal studies and traineeship at Security Police and Security Service (Mallmann, Türöffner).

- Different recruitment patterns again emerge for the officers of the Armed-SS, who had been recruited into the commanding officer ranks but predominantly had joined the Armed SS only once the war had started: they belonged to various peer groups and already had a relatively high, secure social status once the global economic crisis had been overcome. (Cüppers, Wegbereiter, 92ff).

- The commanders and staff officers, for their part, were mostly world war veterans who had qualified for these positions as a result of long careers in the police.

- As the summarising outcome of his study Bogdan Musial describes the approximately 14,000 members of the civic administration of the General Government as “a hard to define mass, consisting as it did of common criminals, slackers, losers, adventurers and soldiers of fortune, haggard civil servants transferred for disciplinary reasons, “eastern expansion” visionaries and fanatical National Socialists”. (Musial, in: Täter der Shoah, 189)

As an overall outcome, therefore, the following can be established:

“No peer group, no social and ethnic background, no confession, no educated stratum proved to be resistant against the terrorist temptation.” (Paul, Einleitung, in: Täter der Shoah, 61)

The apparent heterogeneity of the personnel of the medium and higher leadership level makes a *unilaterally* biographical explanation of their conduct appear little promising and, in turn, steers attention onto the significance of institutional involvements: these persons, variously motivated and contributing various qualifications, were formed into perpetrators during a process within the relevant organisations that for the most part lasted for years.

However, the merit of the mentioned biographical studies consists primarily in the fact that they depict perpetrators not as mere tools of faceless bureaucratic structures, but as acting people aware of their actions who had a great deal of self-initiative. The image of the desk perpetrator, forwarding orders impartially as part of a virtually automated process, that dominates in former research has now been replaced by the idea of a policy of annihilation which was supported by broad consensus and became incrementally radicalised through multiple initiatives at several levels.

However, the fact the perpetrators' self-initiative, the autonomous conduct of the "periphery", led to the same results everywhere in occupied Eastern Europe during the critical phase between summer 1941 and the beginning of 1942 - namely to the starting of a systematic and centrally controlled policy of murder - refers to a dialectic that underlies the entire process: functionaries' "individual" conduct under their own authority was a part of the system. A mutually exclusive comparison of "biography" and "structure" does not do justice to this dynamic system; rather, both approaches will need to be even more strongly combined with each other in the future.

3. I see the biggest potential of the biographical approach with regard to the third group, therefore those apparently well-known perpetrators who belonged to the actual NS leadership circle.

It seems to me that the research performed hitherto has failed by far to make use of the opportunities of a biographical decoding of leadership personnel. This is because the prevailing type of "political biography" is able to materialise the potentials of the biographical method only in a very limited way.

I would like to use the example of Heinrich Himmler in order to illustrate more clearly that this is not a question of simple personalisation, but of a combination of structural and biographical history.

Himmler's path to becoming the architect of the Holocaust eludes any one-dimensional, purely biographical explanation. Every attempt to trace back the mass crimes of the Reich Leader to a psychic disposition, to a defect in early childhood for example, to a father/son conflict or similar, finds no backing in the source material that is available. Himmler can be explained by Himmler only in a very limited manner.

However, his biography comprises a series of personality traits which solve, at least partially, the puzzle of the first phase of his subsequent party career: his emotional inhibition on the one hand, his highly developed desire for self-control and self-conquest on the other, added to this the deeply felt stigma of having been trained as an officer candidate in 1918 but never having experienced deployment at the front,

may explain his self-styling as a “soldierly man” and his turning to the paramilitary milieu in Munich during the post-war period; also the fact that he continued to devote himself to the NS movement as a “lone Landsknecht” after the NS putsch had failed and initially served the movement as a minor functionary in the provinces.

Himmler’s further career within the NSDAP can, however, be understood only in the context of the general history of the NS movement. For example, his appointment as Reichsführer SS in 1929 and the subsequent steep career path was not least the result of a series of coincidences or, respectively, developments over which Himmler had only very limited influence. Yet the manner in which he filled the office of Reichsführer SS over the next 16 years discloses itself only through the biographical approach.

Himmler’s career within the history of National Socialism in no way ran laterally, but in a series of clearly delineated stages during which he set thoroughly varying priorities. In the process it became evident that Himmler’s strength lay in developing new concepts again and again, with which he generated the impression that the various, actually extremely heterogeneous components of his power apparatus formed one closed bloc, capable of solving central political issues under NS.

The following phases can be distinguished: expansion of the SS from a small bodyguard organisation into a self-styled elite second paramilitary organisation under National Socialism (1929-1932); gradual unification of civic police forces into one Reich-wide Secret Police force (1933-1934); takeover of the general police force and merger with the SS to become a state protection corps (1935-1938); focus on war, racial selection and colonisation (1938-1940); preparations for the creation of a “Greater Germania” Lebensraum empire (1941/42); concentration on the “colonisation” of the region still under the rule of Germany (1943-1945).

The manner in which Himmler gained control over this constantly changing power complex, in which he had the individual parts of his empire expand in various directions during these phases but at the same time took care to ensure that a certain internal cohesion was present within it, lead to conclusions concerning an extremely self-willed, integrative leadership style which, without examination of his biography, would not be comprehensible at all.

In addition, a Himmler biography throws up surprising temporal coincidences and topical interrelations between the various political spheres under his responsibility which have not been regarded as such during research so far. For example, in Himmler’s view, anti-Semitic politics always fell into context with other issues, indeed were clearly subordinate to these other issues until 1941. When, in 1941, Himmler took the initiative unambiguously and expanded the terrorist (“police”) mass murders in the Soviet Union to comprehensive genocide against Jews, he did this primarily with regard to his far wider Lebensraum plans: for him, the Holocaust was the first step to radical racial “rearrangement of the East”.

Likewise, the expansion of the Holocaust to the whole of Europe, in which he played a crucial role in the first months of 1942, falls within a narrow context alongside decisions which he took in other areas in the ensuing months, namely in particular in colonisation policy, anti-partisan combat, the expansion of the Armed-SS and the construction of a dedicated SS armour factory along with the rollout of the

concentration camps. Viewed together, all these decisions amounted to the realisation of the vision of a “Greater Germania” empire spanning the whole of Europe, which he began while the war was still continuing and in which he and his SS were to play a crucial role.

Thus, in its *particular* composition and in the *specific* combination of the described objectives, the SS was actually Himmler’s work. If Himmler had failed as Reichsführer SS early on, the development of the SS would have taken another direction, and only his particular accumulation of competences ensured that the NS state, from 1941 onwards, had such a terrifying effective instrument for conducting a Europe-wide policy of annihilation at its disposal.

Himmler was no political functionary who acted within preset scopes of action, but he was a leading politician under the system who sometimes created such structures himself – and this in a manner which would remain entirely incomprehensible without his biography.

Biographies of leading representatives of the regime cannot, in themselves, explain National Socialism; its history is more than the sum of careers of the men at the top. Yet biographies of the leading perpetrators can explain why the monstrous, destructive dynamic behind the NS movement developed in the historically familiar, and not in an alternative direction.

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