

## A Biographical Approach in Holocaust Research

Derk Venema and Alex Jettinghoff

REVIEW OF: *The Participants: The Men of the Wannsee Conference*, ed. by Hans-Christian Jasch and Christoph Kreutzmüller, trans. by Charlotte Kreutzmüller-Hughes and Jane Paulick (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017). 354 pp. \$19.95 (pb). ISBN: 978-1-78533-671-3.

This study concerns the lives and actions of the men who participated in the infamous Wannsee Conference. This is the code name for the meeting on 20 January 1942 of fifteen German high officials in a charming lakeside villa in Berlin, where they discussed, first, the authority over the operations that would result in the elimination of the European Jews; and second, the range of people that would be targeted in these operations. Ironically, this conference's notoriety was deliberately caused by Eichmann, who tried to play down his own role in it at his trial in 1961.

Two general chapters precede the individual biographies. In an introductory chapter, Hans-Christian Jasch sums up the events leading up to this meeting, the position and background of the participants, and the topics probably discussed by them. The following chapter by Mark Roseman provides a short history of Holocaust research and contemplates the contribution that 'Nazi perpetrator studies' (such as this book) can make to existing Holocaust research. Next follows a series of fifteen biographical studies of the individual participants.

For readers interested in these people, the biographies offer excellent introductions. They refer as far as possible to primary sources, are surprisingly detailed, and cite interesting existing literature. The high quality of the contributions is not surprising, since the editors have succeeded in bringing together authors who are experts on their subjects. Some have published earlier book-length biographies of the 'perpetrator' they deal with (Bettina Stangneth on Eichmann, Robert Gerwarth on Heydrich, Markus Heckmann on Klopfer, Jasch on Stuckart, and Heinz-Jürgen Priamus on Meyer); several others have published articles on their subject. What particularly adds to the value of the book is that it sheds more light on some hitherto rather shadowy personalities in this group, such as Lange, Schöngarth, Meyer, and Neumann.

The structure of the study is less satisfying on two counts. Firstly, the sequence of the biographical chapters is curious. The participants seem to be divided into two groups. From the introduction by Jasch we learn that the grouping is meant to be according to their main occupation, 'either within the SS or Nazi ministerial bureaucracy. Within these groups they have been placed in alphabetical order' (p. 13). This approach has the strange result that the first biography (that of Eichmann) concerns



the least important man of the whole group at the time. Eichmann was subordinate to Müller, who was in turn subordinate to Heydrich. The dimension of hierarchy is entirely ignored. Within the first group the most senior official present was Heydrich, who summoned the meeting and apparently dominated it. Moreover, this division into groups serves no clear purpose, although it might have done, if, for example, it had been articulated that Heydrich considered the first group as supporters (SS) and the second as competitors (as Gerwarth suggests, p. 63). This could have raised the question as to whether or not Heydrich had a hard time in getting his competitors where he wanted them. Addressing this question would also have brought to the surface that, as Roseman acknowledges (p. 31), the division between the SS and the rest was a relative one, since several of the ministerial officials (e.g. Klopfer, Stuckart) were honorary SS members.

The second issue concerns the book's contribution to perpetrator scholarship: it lacks a concluding chapter. Elements of a conclusion are included in the introductions by Jasch and Roseman, but conclusions could have been further developed if the editors had rallied their authors – at least partially – around a central research question. This book stops short of breaking new ground. Roseman retraces the turn to the 'perpetrator' approach of the Holocaust to circa 2000, with seminal works by Ulrich Herbert on Werner Best and by Michael Wildt on the Sipo-SD elite, and he lists the interesting interpretations that similar work has produced since then (pp. 31-32). So there is reason to contemplate what new insights might be derived from this collection of biographies and how they develop existing scholarship. Interestingly, Roseman suggests such a research question in his chapter.<sup>1</sup> He points out that in this collection of biographies there is 'a tension that emerges between two opposing insights: on the one hand, shared ideas, energy and habitus made the Wannsee Conference possible; on the other, the protagonists had had to make remarkable intellectual and moral journeys from selves for whom, just a few years earlier, a conference about genocide would have been inconceivable' (p. 34). Here his analysis ends, and one is left wondering whether the individual studies could have shed more light on the circumstances that led these men to make such a radical turn in their thinking and act on this 'mission'.

Existing literature suggests several dynamic circumstances affecting the individual attitudes and actions of the group we are considering here. For instance, there was the agenda-setting of the Nazi leadership. As Ian Kershaw has established, the highest echelon of the Nazi regime, particularly Hitler, had consistently pressed for the disappearance of the Jews from the Reich or even Europe.<sup>2</sup> The terminology changed

1 See also: Mark Roseman 'Beyond Conviction? Perpetrators, Ideas and Action in The Holocaust in Historiographical Perspective', in *Conflict, Catastrophe and Continuity: Essays on Modern German History*, ed. by F. Biess et al (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), pp. 83-103.

2 Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans and the Final Solution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 89-116.

over time from 'removal' to 'annihilation' at the point of the outbreak of war with the United States. This turn in terminology occurred publicly in a Reichstag speech on 30 January 1939, an occasion Hitler referred to regularly in later years. A second dynamic was the development of the war in the East. According to Wildt, one of the major transformative events was the start of Operation Barbarossa, which opened mind-boggling opportunities for the liquidation of 'Jewish Bolshevism'.<sup>3</sup> Also, there was a semblance of a line of command, transferring authority concerning this issue to institutions like the SS organizations. Göring, as the second man in the Reich, was the one who (on 31 July 1941) appeared to give a written instruction (mentioned in the Wannsee Protokoll) to Heydrich to prepare all measures necessary for the 'final solution of the Jewish question'; but the draft of the order came from within the RSHA (the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*), of which Heydrich was Chief.

Roseman states that 'social forces' and 'recognisable societal interests' surely cannot explain participation of intelligent people in 'horrifically irrational policies', so it must have some mysterious, individual mental origin (p. 23). But this *reductio ad absurdum* is not valid: psychological group dynamics explain what makes people participate in behaviour they would have abhorred earlier. Participants develop all kinds of conscious and non-conscious rationalizing and justifying mechanisms to cope with the cognitive dissonance resulting from the contradiction between their previous habits and beliefs, and their current behaviour. These mechanisms are familiar: people start believing in ideological legitimations, and convince themselves that the victims are guilty, or dangerous, or subhuman. The result is a 'changed view of the victims, changed attitude toward that suffering, and changed self-concept'.<sup>4</sup>

So, in their own terms, perpetrators act rationally. Calling the actions of Nazis or other perpetrators 'irrational' does not serve any purpose other than mystification and a false sense of a secure distance between 'us' and 'them', as if they were not 'ordinary men' after all. 'Rational' is a relative term, derived from the Latin *ratio*, meaning exactly that: 'calculated relation'. An action is rational when it serves the purpose the actor intends it to serve. What is meant when writers speak of 'irrational' Nazi actions or policies or ideology, is not that they did not serve the purposes the Nazis wanted them to serve, but that they are abhorrent to outsiders. Far from meaning a carefully deliberated choice between many possible ideologies from a completely neutral standpoint, 'rationalism' in this context pertains to the way in which the

3 Michael Wildt, 'Generational Experience and Genocide' in *Biography between Structure and Agency*, ed. by Volker R. Berghahn and Simone Lässig (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), pp. 143-161.

4 Ervin Staub, *The Psychology of Good and Evil. Why Children, Adults, and Groups Help and Harm Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 328. See also Israel W. Charny, *The Genocide Contagion: How We Commit and Confront Holocaust and Genocide* (Lanham, NH: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), reviewed in the first issue of this journal.

participants experienced the gradual dynamic process of actions, ideas and rationalizations developing into ever more radical forms.

The participants' 'remarkable intellectual and moral journeys' are, in the light of the psychological rationalizing mechanisms, not that remarkable. But they are frightening, especially in combination with the insight that most people from most walks of life, in specific circumstances, are capable of making such a journey. This collection of biographies is an excellent starting point for further research, moving beyond *petite histoire* and moral voyeurism to entangle the patterns and pathways of the organization of the Holocaust and the rationalizing mechanisms that facilitated it. A focussed investigation of the interaction of attitudes and experiences of the members of this group, and the circumstances they had to deal with, might have suggested the beginning of an answer to Roseman's question. Even though the historical sources are unlikely to be sufficient to explore this question in the case of every perpetrator, it seems probable that they are for some. Not to have tried seems a missed opportunity in an otherwise impressive collection of biographies.

**Derk Venema** is an associated researcher at the Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society (CEGESOMA), Brussels, Belgium.  
Email: [derkvenema76@gmail.com](mailto:derkvenema76@gmail.com)

**Alex Jettinghoff** is an affiliated researcher at the Law Faculty of the Radboud University Nijmegen, Netherlands.  
Email: [ajettinghoff@gmail.com](mailto:ajettinghoff@gmail.com).