

## The Narcissistic Nazi

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REVIEW OF: Alex J. Kay, *The Making of an SS Killer: The Life of Colonel Alfred Filbert, 1905–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). 258 pp. ISBN 978-1-316-60142-6.

What leads people, and in particular frontline killers, to actively participate in genocide? To this day, this remains one of the most pressing questions for scholars in the field, especially in light of the relentlessness of genocidal violence in many parts of the world.

With *The Making of an SS Killer*, Alex J. Kay joins the debate about what motivates people to participate in genocide and presents us with a concisely and coherently written, lucid, well-researched, and detailed biographical study of a Holocaust perpetrator: the zealous and ideologically steadfast frontline perpetrator *Obersturmbannführer* (lieutenant colonel) Alfred Filbert (1905 – 1990), who was the chief of *Einsatzkommando 9 (Einsatzgruppe B)* and was in that capacity personally responsible for the murder of up to 22,000 Jewish men, women, and children in Belarus between June and October 1941.<sup>1</sup>

Filbert, despite his comparative importance within the SS and SD, remains an elusive figure even among experts in the field, so Kay's work comes as an important and immensely insightful addition, especially in light of the astonishing dearth of biographies of lower- and mid-level rank SS frontline perpetrators who led killing commandos on the ground in the former Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup>

Kay shows clearly that simple categorisations and mono-causal explanations for why someone engages in the perpetration of genocide are neither possible nor helpful.<sup>3</sup> Filbert, like many other perpetrators,

1 Alex J. Kay, *The Making of an SS Killer: The Life of Colonel Alfred Filbert, 1905 – 1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 72–74.

2 Kay, pp. 1–2.

3 Other important works dealing with why someone becomes a perpetrator, whether they are 'ordinary men' or ideologically convinced men, include Christopher Dillon, *Dachau & the SS: A Schooling in Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Bastian Hein, *Elite für Volk und Führer? Die Allgemeine SS und ihre Mitglieder 1925 – 1945* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2012); Bernd Wegner, *Hitlers politische Soldaten: Die Waffen SS 1933–1945*, 9th edn (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010); Harald Welzer, *Täter: Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden*, 3rd edn (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Verlag, 2005); *Karrieren der Gewalt: Nationalsozialistische Täterbiographien*, ed. by Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Gerhard Paul (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft,



was motivated by a range of impulses, working together in complex ways: careerism, greed, ambition, antisemitism, nationalism, and (cultural) narcissism.<sup>4</sup> Kay has written a convincing portrait of Filbert, whose life is explored over ten chapters. Starting with childhood, upbringing, and youth, Kay then skillfully traces ‘the making’ (a term that is very well used in the book’s title) of Filbert shortly before and under the Nazi regime, as well as his postwar life.

Two issues are especially remarkable about Filbert’s vita, setting him apart from men with similar life paths: one is the fact that his brother, Otto Filbert, came to experience the wrath of the regime by being incarcerated in 1939. He was denounced after he had bemoaned the unsuccessful attempt on Hitler’s life by Georg Elser. Jailed in Dessau for four years before being transferred to Buchenwald, he died probably around November 1944 while being mobilised with the notorious Waffen SS *Dirlewanger* Unit. Filbert’s support of the regime even after the incarceration of his brother never wavered and he seems to have remained personally untouched by his sibling’s fate. Rather, Filbert used Otto’s story as evidence of his own suffering, thereby enlisting a victim mentality and expressing regret about his seemingly threatened career prospects.<sup>5</sup>

The second peculiarity of Filbert’s life is that after the war, he starred in the West German feature film *Wundkanal* (1984), which addressed the continuity of Nazi perpetrator biographies. The film was directed and produced by Thomas Harlan, the son of Veit Harlan, who was the director of *Jud Süß*. In the film, Filbert played – fittingly, enthusiastically, and proudly – a war criminal in the role of ‘Dr. S.’<sup>6</sup> At one point in the film, Filbert instructed a man how to best execute someone by shooting them in the neck. This, of course, was an eerie re-enactment of gruesome expertise that Filbert had garnered, in very real terms, during the mass killings in Belarus.

Alfred Filbert was born in 1905 and as such belonged to the so-called ‘dispassionate generation’, as well as to the ‘war youth generation’, feeling, like many others, humiliated by the 1918

2005); *Die SS: Elite unter dem Totenkopf - 30 Lebensläufe*, ed. by Ronald Smelser and Enrico Syring (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2000); Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

4 See Kay, p. 122.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 86–7.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 110–111.

German defeat.<sup>7</sup> Kay cites this, along with Filbert's experience of the Rhineland occupation and his training at German universities between 1927 and 1933 in an increasingly nationalistic and antisemitic environment, as being conducive to Filbert's career path leading him into the Nazi state security apparatus.<sup>8</sup> Kay notes, however, that the strongest impetus to join the SS *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD) in the first place was a conscious career choice, foregoing other options, and this was a result of Filbert's ambition and ideological zeal.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout all chapters, Kay splendidly traces the complicated system of patronage and personal connections that were crucial in the making or breaking of a career under the Nazi regime. During his university years, Filbert made the acquaintance of Heinz Jost, who would have a profound impact on Filbert's life. He went on to be a crucial contact, as he became Filbert's immediate boss as Chief of Counterintelligence within the SD and the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (RSHA). Filbert's career stagnation was also implicitly tied to Jost, since he had fallen into disrepute with Heydrich by 1940–41 and it was only after Heydrich's death that Filbert's career was fully reanimated.<sup>10</sup> Wartime connections, too, protected Filbert from prosecution for his crimes until the late 1950s.<sup>11</sup>

From 1935 until the end of the war, Filbert's career was anchored in various organs of the Nazi security apparatus (SD Main Office, SD Counterintelligence Office, *Kripo*), and it was a fairly successful one, despite Filbert's own assertions of having been sidelined by the regime as a result of his brother's incarceration.<sup>12</sup> From 1939 until 1941, Filbert was Jost's deputy in the SD Overseas (p. 28–29). In the spring and summer 1941, Filbert, along with all other commando and group chiefs of the *Einsatzgruppen*, was appraised of the planned and subsequent implementation of the genocide of the Jews that was to take place during the Barbarossa campaign on Soviet territory. In June 1941, Filbert accepted the command of *Einsatzkommando* (EK) 9.<sup>13</sup> Striving to

7 See Kay, pp. 18–9.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 81–2.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 39–41.

distinguish himself, Filbert, as the first EK 9 commander, was the first to also kill Jewish women and children.<sup>14</sup>

Chapters 4 and 5 of Kay's book are the longest and detail Filbert's work as the chief of *Einsatzkommando* 9 over four months in 1941. The chapters impressively highlight Filbert's murderousness, as well as his ideological, careerist, and antisemitic zeal, even though it does at times appear as though those chapters are comprised mostly of an enumeration of massacres and acts of atrocity without shedding further light on Filbert's biographical development. Yet, this is perhaps exactly the point: Filbert was seemingly so engrossed in the fulfillment of his gruesome tasks that killing, perhaps indeed, became a means of self-identification for him.

He was a hands-on commander and reacted with indignation to SS members who were not up to the task of killing. This wartime behaviour contrasted with Filbert's postwar self-exonerating claim to have suffered a 'nervous breakdown' as a result of the participation in the mass shootings.<sup>15</sup> After all, admitting to such an impairment would have been problematic in the working environment of the SS which was fuelled by aspirations of hyper-militarised notions of masculinity.<sup>16</sup> Filbert was reassigned to the *Kripo* in 1943 after a temporary two-year suspension. Postwar, Filbert lived unperturbed until his arrest in February 1959. As a result of his EK 9 command post, Filbert was charged by a West German court with the murder of 15,000 Jews, found guilty, and sentenced to life in prison in 1962.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout the book, Kay successfully carves out Filbert's behavioural profile and attitude during all phases of his life and career. A 'red thread' of self-pity coupled with eschewing responsibility and lacking in empathy and remorse is well documented: his conduct in front of the court, including citing 'binding orders to kill all Jews' as a defence strategy,<sup>18</sup> which has been refuted by historians, perfectly mirrored Filbert's self-indulgent impulses to paint himself as the victim (as he had done during the war). This form of self-victimization later resurfaced once again during the production of *Wundkanal*.<sup>19</sup> It is especially laudable

14 See Kay, pp. 57-8.

15 Ibid., p. 76.

16 Frank Werner, "Hart müssen wir hier draußen sein": Soldatische Männlichkeit im Vernichtungskrieg 1941-1944, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 34(2008), 5-20.

17 See Kay, pp. 97-103.

18 Ibid., pp. 100-1.

19 Ibid., p. 119.

that, towards the end of the book, Kay engages explicitly with Filbert's narcissistic tendencies, which have been well-evidenced implicitly throughout the book. The concluding comment on narcissism, however, is a little brief, and could be developed further in future research, linking it up, for instance, with Felix Römer's important observations about narcissism in the context of National Socialism: namely, that narcissism is not primarily discussed as a psychological disorder and diagnosis, but rather as a mentality that is shaped by history and culture. Narcissism, in that regard, was a cultural and social tendency that was deeply entrenched in Nazism and shaped interactions amongst Nazis.<sup>20</sup>

At times, Kay's work could have benefitted from offering a little more contextualisation of the institutional structures, environment, and practices Filbert was part of (such as the RSHA and *Einsatzgruppe B*).<sup>21</sup> Additionally, mentalities that informed the socialisation and behaviour of Nazis, specifically those in the SS, could have been discussed a little further. A lack of personal documents, which Kay mentions was true for Filbert, is not something that prevents a biography from being written. Robert Gerwarth and Catherine Epstein,<sup>22</sup> for instance, both show that comprehensive biographies can be written in the absence of a wealth of personal papers. A recourse to other types of documentation, such as legal documents, official correspondence, personnel files, and interviews becomes necessary, and Kay does so with success. In some instances, however, he could have benefitted perhaps from elaborating in greater depth on the types of 'ego documents'<sup>23</sup> that are mentioned at the beginning of the book. Moreover, it could have been useful to comment on the methodological advantages and challenges of biography-writing, especially when focussing on perpetrators.<sup>24</sup>

20 Felix Römer, *Die narzisstische Volksgemeinschaft: Theodor Habichts Kampf 1914–1944* (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 2017).

21 Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten: Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes*, 2nd edn (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition HIS Verlag, 2008); Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition HIS Verlag, 1998).

22 Robert Gerwarth, *Hitler's Hangman: The Life of Heydrich* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Catherine Epstein, *Model Nazi: Arthur Greiser and the Occupation of Western Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

23 Kay, p. 5.

24 Mark Roseman, 'Lebensfälle: Biographische Annäherungen an NS-Täter', in *Der Holocaust: Ergebnisse und neue Fragen der Forschung*, ed. by Frank Bajohr and Andrea Löw (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2015), pp. 186–209; Gerhard Paul and Klaus-Michael Mallmann, 'Sozialisation, Milieu und Gewalt: Fortschritte und Probleme der neueren Täterforschung', in *Karrieren der Gewalt: Nationalsozialistische Täterbiographien*, ed. by Gerhard Paul and Klaus-Michael Mallmann (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005), pp. 1–32.

Kay's work is a carefully researched and lucidly written book and presents an intriguing biographical account of a Nazi perpetrator, furthering our understanding of mid-level functionaries within the genocidal Nazi security apparatus.

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