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REMARKS ON PREMEDITATION AND BLIND HATRED

Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes*, Hamburg, Hamburger Edition, 2002, 964 pp.

Reviewed by

YAACOV LOZOWICK

Why people hurt each other is an important question. The answer can reflect the person's perspective on his/her relationships with others in the personal domain, political behavior in the public domain, the perception of the state in the international domain and in relations of war and peace. One who believes that tyrants act out of distress (i.e., that "the deprived were deprived") will behave much differently from one who believes, as in Genesis 8:21, that "the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth," or, as is asserted in the *Ethics of the Fathers*, people would eat each other alive were it not for fear of the authorities. The former will search for deprivation and attempt to abate it so that the deprived will cease their depravity; the latter will seek self-defense or, perhaps, counterattack.

The answer to this question is often not based on empirical observations but on the respondent's inner tendencies. Yet since the question is important, empirical inquiry is appropriate and even warranted.

The Germans in the Nazi era were among the most deprived

people in human history, and much of the literature that deals with them seeks to explain this. Michael Wildt's book *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes*, belongs to this category. The book, which focuses on one of the smaller groups among the potential contenders for the title "locomotive of the Third Reich," merits reading by anyone who wishes to understand the Nazis' actions.

Who set the Third Reich on its path of criminal policies? Hitler, above all, of course, along with Himmler and several other high-ranking officials. The commanders and officers of the concentration camps, who were profoundly influenced by their first commander, Theodor Eicke, also contributed to the evolution of the Nazis' criminality. In every domain, there were people who abetted the escalating extremism of the regime. However, Reinhard Heydrich's contribution and that of the system he commanded — the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (the RSHA, the Reich Security Main Office, as it was termed during the war) — was crucial.

The RSHA, established at the beginning of the war, was composed of two existing agencies, the Sipo (Sicherheitspolizei — Security Police) and the SD (Sicherheitsdienst — Security Service). In general, the Sipo was made up of two entities: the Kripo (Kriminalpolizei — criminal police) and the political police, which, in their Nazi incarnation, were called the Gestapo. The Kripo existed long before 1933, but the Nazis transformed it into a countrywide organization, detached it from the Orpo (Ordnungspolizei — Order Police), and incorporated it into the SS constellation. The political police also antedated the Nazi era but became larger and stronger after 1933. The SD, established in the early 1930s, started out as a small organization of secondary importance within the SS but grew vigorously during the Nazi period.

Until the war began, all these distinct organizations operated under a joint commander, Heydrich. Their division of labor was such that Sipo did the practical work — investigations, arrests,

preparations for trials, and banishment of people to concentration camps — while the SD more closely resembled an intelligence agency that operated under the principles of Nazi ideology. On September 27, 1939, all of the organizations were unified in the RSHA (p. 27).

Wildt elects to focus on commanders rather than on units and their actions. The RSHA, he explains, had about 400 members (including one woman) (p. 23) who served at some point as department directors (*referents*) or held higher-ranking posts. A few of them performed such duties for a short time only, or there is no substantial documentation about them. Wildt gathered information about 221 people and focused on a sample of twelve officers who represented several typical paths of advancement. Erwin Schulz, an officer in the political police before the Nazi accession, went on to the Gestapo and from there to the RSHA. Karl Schulz, Paul Werner, and Arthur Nebe were officers in the Kripo; they retained their posts and advanced in the organization that was remolded in line with the Nazi ideology. Martin Sandberger and Erich Ehlinger were young lawyers who climbed the ranks of the SD. Heinz Gräfe and Wilhelm Spengler had been active in national organizations during their university years but were hostile to the Nazis; nevertheless, they joined the SD in 1933. Hans Ehlich and Erwin Weinemann were doctors who forwent medical careers in favor of political activism. Walter Blume and Hans Nockemann were young and ambitious jurists who considered the Gestapo an excellent career path.

The methodology used in the book derives its power from the breadth of its grasp. Its bibliography alone spans more than fifty pages; thus, any researcher would gain by familiarizing himself with its contents. The documentary infrastructure of the book is also stronger in breadth than in innovation. Since the Nazi documentation that had been cached in Soviet archives has come to light — an enterprise in which Wildt himself took part — no further large sources of documentation have been discovered, and one doubts that such discoveries will be uncovered in future.

Wildt's book, true to its author's typical thoroughness, is based on all relevant documentary collections. The most important are Record Group R.58 (reconstruction of RSHA documentation) in the German federal archives (the Bundesarchiv), legal documentation gathered at the central bureau in Ludwigsburg (Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen), and the massive collection of personal files in the Berlin Documentation Center, which also belongs to the Bundesarchiv. Wildt's exacting, detailed, and pedantic style of writing makes this a very long book that is difficult to read casually. However, the wealth of information will force many of us to return to the book again and again.

Generation des Unbedingten is divided into four parts, each of similar length: Worldview, The Organization, War, and a lengthy epilogue that deals with the officers' reintegration into German society after the war.

The first part discusses the officers' identities and motives. Its title captures the gist of its thesis: it was the ideology. The officers were neither the dregs of society nor its outcasts, nor even a group of deprived-and-depraved who sizzled with eagerness to avenge the world for its cruelty or estrangement. In fact, most of the RSHA officers belonged to the German social elite and their actions were prompted by their belief in the Nazi worldview and their wish to promote it and attain its goals.

How did they come to this?

Their age was a conspicuous characteristic. Seventy-seven percent of them were born after 1900, and most were born before 1910. Ulrich Herbert has noted the importance of this age factor,¹ and Wildt demonstrates it empirically. Members of this generation did not personally experience the horrors of World War I combat because they were too young. As children in the rear, they were thrilled by the grand events and did not understand their cost. They grew up with a sense of having missed a chance to be put to

1 Ulrich Herbert, *Best. Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft, 1903–1989* (Bonn: Dietz, 1996), pp. 42–51.

the ultimate test, because they had not been invited to take part in it. When the Great War ended and local wars continued to Germany's east, several future RSHA officers joined the semi-regular units of the Freikorps and basked in the climate of violent nationalist chauvinism. Nationalist tension in the West escalated when the fighting in the east waned and peaked in 1923, when France occupied the Rhineland; others of the future RSHA officers took part in resistance actions there. By the time these young men reached maturity, they were accustomed to the dramas of turbulent national life and were unable to cope with the banality of personal life. They did not consider personal life an appropriate setting for self-realization. Their grandchildren and great-grandchildren felt differently, resulting in a gap that is difficult to bridge between the generation studied by Wildt and the generation that reads about them.

The RSHA officers were far more highly educated than the average German. Three-fourths of the officers completed secondary school; two-thirds completed university studies, and one-third held doctoral degrees. This, in spite of the fact that only about one-fourth of the officers' fathers had higher education. Such a group would be an elite in any society, *a fortiori* that of Germany in the 1930s. When Heydrich and his colleagues established the SD in the 1930s, they searched for officers of a very specific type — intelligent and well-educated young men who had emerged from the difficult Weimar years with powerful ambitions for social and professional advancement.

They also looked for people with a strong and proven ideological commitment. Prior membership in the Nazi party was, of course, a good indication; indeed, some of the officers had joined the party, its student organizations, and even the SA early in their careers. However, others had not been members of any Nazi organizations, and a few had even opposed Nazism — although they had done so within the nationalist camp. Wildt devotes a few pages (pp.115–125) to describe an intellectual seminar that Heinz Gräfe ran in Miltenberg in April 1929. A small

group of serious students and a few professors took a two-week break from their daily activities intensively to probe and explore issues such as the essence of the community, the people, the nation, and the nation-state, and their relation toward all types of governance. The description indicates that this was a tremendous intellectual experience for the participants. The level of the discussion was high, serious, and passionate, and no liberal democrats were present. The antisemitism that surfaces in the account was so obvious to everyone present that it was not even a topic for discussion.

The Nazi students' organization castigated the seminar as a waste of time, and there was considerable tension between them and the organizers. Years later, in 1943, when Gräfe's commanders wished to promote him, some still cast aspersions on his loyalty to the party in view of the tension from back then. However, such a bygone blemish was not considered a drawback in the organization that Heydrich had established.

In contrast, the three qualities in which many of the students took pride — conviction, will, and ability to perform (*Glaube, Wille, Tatkraft*) — were considered advantages. Those capable of believing in the group or in the goal, those who had the will to act in pursuit of the goal, and those who could do what was necessary to attain the goal could serve as leaders.

Here, too, Wildt brings the example of a menial-labor project that Heinz Gräfe set up in 1931 (pp. 133–137). About 200 students volunteered to spend a month building and maintaining drainage ditches in eastern Germany in order to be prepared for the conquest of the East. Neither ethics nor humaneness mattered, says Wildt in his summary of the characteristics of the group. The RSHA officers were a self-styled elite, the leaders of the generation. They believed that truth could be demonstrated not by testing facts but by creating them and that success was its own justification. Accordingly, they regarded themselves as men of action. They took pride in their resolve and their fixed purpose, irrespective of circumstances, difficulty, or price.

Such a worldview, according to Wildt, leaves no room for indecision, compromise, or pangs of conscience. None of the RSHA officers had intended in their youth to become mass murderers in adulthood, but the potential for such an outcome was intrinsic to their psychological structure and worldview. Although Wildt does not speak of this at length, it is clear that Heydrich knew the state of mind of his generation and deliberately sought people whom he needed for his revolutionary schemes, and Wildt's book underlines the absence of a top-notch biography of Heydrich.

Be this as it may, the future RSHA officers reciprocated eagerly. In 1933, many of them had not yet begun their careers, completed their studies, or reached the phase of the demanding final examinations. A few were already serving within the police force. For all of them, the Nazi accession was a turning point. Among the police officers, Heydrich selected those who had strong ideological loyalties and organizational prowess. Within a few years, many of them attained much higher-ranking positions than they could have expected. Other professionals were persuaded to exchange the career tracks to which they had looked forward — promising ones in some cases, in the fields of law, medicine, or academia — for a new and somewhat secretive system that offered significant advantages for people who wished to exert influence and verge on the centers of power. At the outset of their new occupational situation, many of them were so eager to be accepted that they worked on a volunteer basis, on the assumption, which turned out to be correct, that if they proved themselves, they would later be given permanent appointments, salaries, and a career.

The second part of the book is devoted to the organization itself. The RSHA, according to Wildt, was a revolutionary entity. It was primarily so in respect to redefining the role of the police in society (pp. 130–210) as a shaping force instead of the usual defensive function — about which much has been written.²

2 Herbert, *Best*, pp. 163–180.

According to the defensive function, it is the duty of a police force to protect civilians. Sometimes the police respond to crimes already committed and strive to catch offenders and ensure their prosecution; at other times they pinpoint a problem and take initiatives to nip the offenders in the bud. The actions of individuals, therefore, are the deciding factor as to whether or not the police will take notice of them.

The Nazi view of the police, as formulated and evolved by Himmler, Heydrich, and their associates, was different. According to their position, the police are the long arms of a regime that is guided by ideology; they act against anyone whom the ideology defines as a rival, even if the target himself does not regard himself as such. Thus, the determining factor in calling the attention of the police to a given individual is not the individual, by means of his or her actions, but the opinion of the regime, as enforced by the police. There is no better example than the Nazi decision to persecute Jews irrespective of their views or intentions.

Wildt states that the RSHA gave this outlook a sweeping interpretation by merging the SD with the Sipo. The SD departments were to monitor and shape German national life in a variety of ways. This could range from monitoring public opinion on all issues to dictating university curricula and influencing private publishers' decisions to publish various titles. The criminal and political police were to coerce, punish, and, of course, distance anyone whose presence was not desirable.

A lengthy chapter in this part of the book presents a very detailed description of the structure of the RSHA and its continual adjustment to the tasks at hand (pp. 283–415). Wildt draws inferences from any opening or closing of a department or division, any reassignment of a unit to a different slot in the system, and various shifts in the use of manpower. The great drawback in this account is the lack of graphic aids; for example, an organizational flow chart. The RSHA was an organization with many branches in perpetual motion; a graphic presentation of the changes that occurred within it would help the readers' orientation.

Still, Wildt does not fail to see the forest for the trees; occasionally, he surmounts the masses of detail and reminds us of the essence. The most significant finding in this chapter is that the RSHA managed to adhere to its tasks without falling captive to internal organizational logic. Whenever a task was completed, the departments that had dealt with it were dismantled; when new tasks came up, special units were established, or others were expanded in order to carry them out.

Since this is a group biography, it is also important to note that the officers themselves, those who ran the organization, not only moved around within the administration but also left the headquarters of the RSHA to serve in the field, later to return without difficulty. These were not nondescript clerks who drew up guidelines that others were to perform; they were officials accustomed to action in whatever post they held — at headquarters in Berlin, in the killing fields, or in establishing an office in an occupied city.

The third part of the book describes what the RSHA actually did. It is entitled “War”, so as to emphasize the centrality of war to the essence of the organization. It is not solely a chronological relationship — although this is conspicuous since the RSHA was established several weeks after the war began and ceased to function several days before it ended. The relationship is mainly one of substance. For the RSHA officers, the war was a self-evident and fully justified phase in Germany’s struggle for its place in the world. While the Wehrmacht was still attempting to wage a military campaign for the occupation of territories and the advancement of national interests — albeit in extremely violent ways — the SS was giving thought to more radical goals. From the very beginning of the war, it did not hesitate to murder thousands of Jews and Poles and to attempt summarily to expel entire populations in order to create new demographic realities.

Bruno Streckenbach (pp. 483–484) provides a case in point — one of many in the book. Before the war Streckenbach was a Gestapo commander in Hamburg who engaged in arbitrary

arrests, torture, and, evidently, murder of prisoners. In early 1940, as Sipo and SD commander (*BdS — Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei und SD*) in the *Generalgouvernement*, he commanded, among other things, a “pacification action” (*AB-Aktion — Allgemeine Befriedigung*) in which several thousand local inhabitants, men and women, were shot simply for belonging to elite groups in Polish society. This willingness to make the transition from torture and murder of individuals to mass murder as soon as it became ideologically appropriate and technically possible was a basic characteristic of the RSHA officers.

This disposition reached its climax in the summer of 1941, when many of the protagonists left their offices, took command of *Einsatzgruppen* units, and then returned to their offices and their routine work. Others were sent in their wake to command Sipo and SD units in the occupied provinces in the East, where they commanded mass-murder *Aktionen*.

Their main function was to round up civilians in places of concentration and kill them from several meters away. At this phase of the book, Wildt completes the answer to the question posed above: the people whom he investigated, who rank among the greatest criminals in human history, acted with full prior intent. They used judgment and chose to be where they were and to do what they did in their desire to shape a new world order and play an important role within it. They were motivated neither by deprivation or frustration, nor by despair or blind vindictiveness. They committed premeditated murder, pure and simple.

Or did they? When Gitta Sereny interviewed Franz Stangl about his function as commander of Treblinka, she tried to understand what he felt about the hundreds of thousands of Jews who were murdered there. He felt nothing. For him, they were so much baggage. When she insisted, she finally got him to admit that he had felt contempt for their willingness to be led to their death.³

3 Gitta Sereny, *Into that Darkness. From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), pp. 169, 201, 233.

Those who believe that depravities are committed in response to deprivation tacitly assume that perpetrators are aware of their actions but cannot control themselves. Had they not been deprived, they would not have troubled a soul. Wildt refutes this argument with respect to this important group of men by showing that they considered the price worth paying — or even necessary to pay — for the attainment of their self-defined goals. Those who believe that crimes are cries of distress also presume a relationship of some kind between the criminal and his victim; by means of the extreme act, the criminal wishes to send the victim, the victim's family, or the victim's society a message. Wildt disproves this by demonstrating that the Nazis did not take their victims into account, let alone regard them as partners in discourse.

In the third section of his book Wildt draws a comparison among three officers who engaged in mass murder in the East (pp. 561–601). Martin Sandberger was commander of the Sipo (KdS) in Estonia; he carried out all the missions with which he was tasked. Admittedly, he preferred to have Estonian forces commit the murders, but when they wished to protect one Jewish woman who had long since left the Jewish community, married an Estonian, and was known as an anti-Communist, Sandberger still had her put to death because she was Jewish. Erich Ehlinger, BdS in Kiev, also went beyond the call of duty. In one documented case, for instance, he opened fire into a group of Jewish prisoners who had angered him. The most interesting of the three is Erwin Schulz, who commanded Einsatzkommando V during its first two months of action. In August 1941, when he received the explicit order to kill all the Jews, including women and children and not only men (as had been the practice until that time), he went to Berlin and argued that the order would bestialize the SS men. It was not the Jews' fate that concerned him; after all, he had personally murdered masses of Jews and continued his career in the RSHA with no qualms until the end of the war. What bothered him was the possibility of harm to the murderers and the system.

The fourth part of the book describes the officers' social reintegration into postwar Germany. They had been in the RSHA because they were well educated, talented, ambitious, and committed. After the war, and after the turmoil that accompanied the period of trials and denazification, most of them returned to civilian society and quickly took up powerful managerial positions — as one would expect of people with strong credentials. Wildt does not provide a single example of a RSHA officer whose conscience troubled him. After all, pangs of conscience require a degree of identification with the victim, and here there was none.

Wildt did encounter self-pity among a few former officers — Martin Sandberger and Erwin Schulz, for instance — who served prison terms. The case of Erwin Schulz is also interesting because of the forgiveness of his surroundings, which was evidently far-reaching. One of those who acted to arrange a pardon for Schulz in the early 1950s (he was released from prison in 1954) was Alfred Faust, a Social Democratic politician who, when imprisoned by the Nazis in the 1930s, had been supervised by Schulz, who had been a police officer at the time. Faust remembered that Schulz had behaved professionally and considered this sufficient reason to pardon him, even though during the war “he had been transferred to Poland precisely when the slaughters of the Jews (*Judenmetzeleien*) were taking place there” (pp. 780–781). Schulz, unlike Faust, had murdered thousands of Jews, but both men agreed that this counted for little. Moreover, the position of the Holocaust survivors with regard to the murderer's pardon was totally excluded from the discourse, as in the case of Stangl.

Indifference? Numbing of senses? The story of Dr. Hans Rössner substantiates the phenomenon in hair-raising fashion (pp. 797–813). Rössner, as commander of Department III C 3 of the RSHA, engaged in regulating German culture and steering it in directions that corresponded to the Nazis' wishes. Rössner never served in the East; although he had been involved in the crimes in the sense of knowledge, consent, and work in the service of a criminal entity, he himself had not shed anyone's blood. In the

summer of 1948, he was released from a detention camp and returned to civilian life. He worked as an editor and, in 1958, attained a high-ranking position within the respected Piper publishing house. In this capacity, he edited the books of Hannah Arendt until she died in 1972. As a fellow intellectual, Rössner appreciated Arendt's stature; many of his letters to her are aflush with an admiration that verges on the obsequious. In one letter in the early 1960s, he lauded Arendt for a television interview that she had given and said that he and many of the viewers could only be pleased that she exists (p. 805).

What can one learn from such a surreal utterance? That a Jew had to be a genius for Rössner to imagine that he or she had something to say? And that, even then, in order to relate to a Jew (a Jewish woman, in this case), he had to draw a mental distinction between her and her people, since, after all, their voices no longer existed for him? Rössner's repudiation of the fact of Arendt's Jewishness was clearly reflected in the only disagreement that surfaced between the two of them. In 1958, they collaborated in publishing the biography of Rachel Varnhagen. Rössner objected to the title of the book, which noted Varnhagen's Jewishness (Varnhagen had lived 200 years previously!), and Arendt defended the title adamantly until the owner of the publishing house, Klaus Piper himself, accepted her view (pp. 802–804).

This shows us two things: not only did the murderers act with premeditation — deprivation had nothing to do with it — but the victims were selected irrespective of anything they had done and, for this reason, had no influence over their fate. This is the essence of Nazi antisemitism, which, instead of taking umbrage at the Jews for their behavior, murdered them simply because they existed.

Translated from the Hebrew by Naftali Greenwood