

The German Foreign Ministry during the Third Reich: “A criminal organisation”

Sybille Fuchs
3 November 2010

Over a period of five years, a federal historical commission has examined the role played by the German Foreign Ministry (AA) during the period of fascist rule. The commission, established by the former Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer in 2005, has just published its findings, which constitute a devastating indictment of the Ministry’s cooperation with the crimes committed by the Nazis. According to commission member Eckart Conze: “The Ministry contributed, as an institution, to the violent crimes of the Nazis, even including the murder of the Jews. In this sense, one can say that the Foreign Ministry was a criminal organisation.”

The Foreign Ministry had taken active part in the violent political activities of National Socialism since 1933. Following the establishment of the Federal Republic, it became a haven for leading former Nazis. It also played a leading role in the persecution and murder of European Jewry.

The four historians on the commission, Conze, Norbert Frei, Moshe Zimmermann (Israel) and Peter Hayes (US) have laid out the results of their research in a nearly 900-page book entitled *The Ministry and the Past: German Diplomats in the Third Reich and the Federal Republic*, which was published on October 25. The commission’s report thoroughly dispels the legends carefully built up in the postwar period that depicted the Foreign Ministry as a stronghold of resistance to the Nazis. The historians uncover in detailed fashion the way in which many high-ranking members of the diplomatic service who had commenced their careers under the Nazi Reich had been able to make a smooth transition to working under the Federal Republic.

The commission was set up in 2005 by Foreign Minister Fischer, following a dispute over the way in which obituaries were written for deceased workers and diplomats of the Foreign Ministry. Fischer stopped the practice of giving honourable dedications to former NSDAP members in the Ministry’s internal bulletin. He was then accused of depriving established diplomats of their “honourable mention”—a practice dating back to Chancellor Bismarck.

Over a period of five years, the historians assessed and examined a huge amount of sources and archival material—including official documents, personnel documents and the political archives of the Foreign Ministry—and carried out two extensive questionings of contemporary witnesses. In so doing, they were able to confirm many facts that had been previously published. Some older studies of the AA had been produced in a number of editions, but had received relatively little attention due to a lack of interest on the part of the judiciary and the state apparatus as well as the media. In fact, the extent of the continuity of personnel between the Third Reich and the Federal Republic was evident from the already published material.

Franz Nüßlein

The dispute over the obituaries for deceased members of the Foreign Ministry erupted following an obituary in the AA service magazine for the Consul General Franz Nüßlein. The retired translator and specialist Marga Henseler, who knew of Nüßlein’s Nazi past, wrote to Foreign Minister Fischer complaining of omissions and falsifications in the published obituary.

After Henseler received an inadequate answer from Fischer’s Ministry, she contacted then-German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. Fischer subsequently ordered a change to the existing obituary practice, which meant that the death of the person concerned should merely be officially announced.

Some details of Nüßlein’s past were already well known as a result of earlier historical research. In his function as public prosecutor of the Special Courts of Brünn and Prague in occupied Czechoslovakia, Nüßlein had been promoted for his “determined fight against enemies of the Reich”. He carried out the orders given by Nazi leaders Reinhard Heydrich and Martin Bormann and was also involved in the retaliatory measures taken by the Nazis following the assassination attempt on Heydrich.

To revenge the death of Heydrich, the Nazi high command ordered the liquidation of the male populations of the villages of Lidice and Ležáky, while women and children were sent to concentration camps and their houses in the villages razed to the ground. Nüßlein had participated in ordering around 900 death sentences and denied pleas for clemency for 95 percent of those condemned. All of this information was available in the archives in Prague.

After the war, the US occupying power handed Nüßlein over to Czechoslovakia, where in 1948 he was condemned as a war criminal to 20 years in prison. In the event, he served merely 7 years. In 1955, in exchange for German prisoners of war from the Soviet Union, Nüßlein was readmitted to the Federal Republic as a so-called “not amnestied war criminal”.

In Western Germany, he was able to pose as a “late returnee” from the war and entered the diplomatic service. Inside the Foreign Ministry, Nüßlein landed in the legal department, which, as the sources disclosed, was riddled with former Nazis. In his new post, Nüßlein was then able to promote and encourage the careers of his former Nazi comrades.

In her letter, Henseler had denounced the fact that Nüßlein’s role as a war criminal had been covered up in the AA obituary. Henseler had studied the history of the Foreign Ministry for years and was also acquainted with the “Brown Book” published in East Germany in 1965, which lists the SS ranks and Nazi party posts held by 1,800 leading industrialists, politicians and prominent officials of the Federal Republic, including Nüßlein and other representatives of the Foreign Ministry.

At the time, the “Brown Book” was condemned by the government headed by Kiesinger (also a former NSDAP member) as “communist propaganda”, and copies of the book were confiscated at the prestigious annual Frankfurt Book Fair. The latest research by the independent

historians' commission confirms "to a very large degree" the findings published in the East German "Brown Book" (p. 18).

In fact, many details of the active role played by the Ministry in the crimes of National Socialism have been known for some time.

A thesis published by the US historian Christopher Browning in 1978 revealed a great deal about the involvement of German diplomats in Nazi activities. It should be noted, however, that Browning's book first appeared in German translation (1) some 30 years later.

The news magazine *Der Spiegel* had also printed a report in 1971 on a document entitled "Contribution to the history of the formation of the Foreign Ministry of the Federal Republic of Germany", financed by Walter Scheel, the foreign minister at that time, but which was only made accessible to a select circle of readers.

The preface to this text written by the personnel chief of the Ministry, Wilhelm Haas, states: "No other branch of the Reich's administration has conducted such stubborn resistance to the "synchronisation" (Gleichschaltung) carried out by National Socialism as the foreign service."

According to Haas, the diplomats at the Ministry had recognised "in an overwhelming majority and at an early point the dangers of the National Socialist claim to power", were "from the very beginning filled with mistrust in the new regime", and had "instinctively" carried out internal resistance.

This myth has been propagated continuously since the beginning of the 1950s. At a press conference on April 20, 1950, Haas announced that of the 31 senior officials of the agency for foreign affairs—forerunner of the AA—"only 14" were party comrades.

Der Spiegel commented in 1971 as follows: "The Nazis must have really overlooked the resistance work in the AA. Gentlemen from the AA participated—on 20 January 1942—in the Wannsee Conference to discuss "the final clearing of the Jewish question" (final solution) as well as—nine days later—a discussion on the draft of a decree to define the vocabulary for "Jews" in the occupied eastern areas. Together with the head of the Central Reich Security Ministry, Reinhard Heydrich, AA representatives directly regulated the deployment of Himmler's police attachés in German foreign services abroad; they prepared Hitler's wars diplomatically and accompanied special commandos, which "seized" works of art in the occupied areas. They were officially informed about every deportation of Jews, together with all the measures taken by the Nazi leader often described as "the architect of the Holocaust", Adolf Eichmann, and gave their expert advice."

As the Foreign Ministry grew after the war, the proportion of ex-Nazis among the 75 ministry directors and section chiefs rose to 65 percent. Following an angry remark in parliament about this situation by the SPD deputy Fritz Erler, then-German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer responded: "When you consider the situation calmly, then you would be forced to admit it was not possible to proceed in any other way. One cannot develop a Foreign Ministry without people, at least in leading posts, who understand something of the history of former times." To the applause of deputies from the Christian Democratic Union and the Free Democratic Party, Adenauer then declared: "We should now put an end to the sniffing out of Nazis."

It was undoubtedly no accident that a number of revealing AA documents disappeared in the 1950s, given that the personnel department was firmly in the hands of former Nazis. Especially active in this respect was the AA legal department headed by Dr. Nüßlein, which ensured that war criminals being sought by the police did not travel inadvertently to countries where they risked being arrested.

The allied powers were fully informed about appointments to the AA under Chancellor Adenauer and approved them as part of their Cold War strategy. Adenauer's trusted colleague and main representative in the AA, Herbert Blankenhorn, had been employed continually in the Foreign

Ministry since 1929. Blankenhorn had passed on his insider knowledge to the American secret service in 1945 and was subsequently stylised as a man of the resistance, although his role as an active Nazi and aggressive propagandist was well known.

As director of the AA political department, Blankenhorn successfully prevented the re-employment of the alleged "traitor to the Fatherland" Fritz Kolbe. Kolbe had been shocked by the crimes carried out by the National Socialists during the war and since 1943 had supplied information to the Americans under the threat of death and without payment. Kolbe gave information about such vital issues as the retreat by German troops in Ukraine, raw material deliveries via Spain, the German decoding of American secret codes, Jewish deportations, the V rocket weapon programme, Japanese plans in Southeast Asia and the identity and activities of Nazi spies.

Franz Rademacher

Personifying the close relations between the NSDAP, SS and Foreign Ministry was the diplomat Franz Rademacher, whose biography was also well known prior to the publication of this latest historical study.

Rademacher was a former member of the extreme right-wing Ehrhard Brigade, a lawyer and a member of the Nazi Storm Division (SA). He joined Hitler's NSDAP in 1933 and from 1940 onwards headed the Jewish department in the Foreign Ministry. His chief foreign policy task was to rid Europe of Jews.

In a lecture note written for Ernst von Weizsäcker dated December 4, 1941, Rademacher wrote: "The opportunity of this war must be used to finally settle the Jewish question in Europe. The most appropriate solution would be to ensure that all European states introduce the German anti-Jew laws and agree that the Jews, irrespective of their nationality, are subjected to the measures of their country of residence, while the fortunes of the Jews be made available for the final solution."

Rademacher also worked for Adolf Eichmann on the so-called Madagascar plan, which envisaged deporting Jews from Germany to the French colony in the Indian Ocean. In the spring of 1940, the leaders of the Nazi regime regarded this plan as suitable, anticipating that after speedy victories over France and Great Britain, they would win control over the latter's African colonies. The section chief for "Jewish questions" in the Foreign Ministry was personally assigned the task by Hitler of implementing the plans worked out by SS leader Heinrich Himmler. Rademacher then drew up detailed drafts and proposals involving the participation of other European countries.

At the beginning of 1938, shortly before the annexation of Austria by the German Reich, Adolf Eichmann was assigned the job of collecting material for "a foreign policy solution to the Jewish question". Rademacher also took part in this work.

In the autumn of 1941, Rademacher was directly involved in the first large-scale massacre of Jews in Serbia, where on behalf of his Ministry he was given the task of developing a final solution to the Jewish question. A total of 1,300 Jews were shot in Serbia. Rademacher wrote in his travel expenses account that the purpose of his journey was the "liquidation of Jews in Belgrade". The fact that Rademacher made no attempt to disguise the purpose of his trip is a clear indication of the murderous character of the "final solution" pursued by the AA and makes a mockery of later attempts to distort the activities of the Ministry during the war.

At the Wannsee Conference in 1942, Rademacher presented a paper in the context of "the final solution of the Jewish question" designed to minimise the consequences of the mass murder for German foreign policy. In two letters dated March 7 and June 11, 1942, addressed to the under-

secretaries of state Martin Luther, Friedrich Gaus and Ernst Woermann, as well as to Secretary of State Ernst von Weizsäcker, Rademacher provided information on plans for “future measures against half-breeds of the I and II grades” and “the question of the sterilisation of 70,000 half-breeds”.

At the end of the war, Rademacher shed his uniform and was able to escape justice like many other prominent Nazis. In 1947, however, he was arrested by American troops. Together with Ernst von Weizsäcker and other leading members of the AA, Rademacher was tried in the so-called Wilhelmstraße trial but then strangely his name disappeared from the list of the accused. Shortly afterwards, he was “erroneously” released. He was again put on trial in March 1952, accused of aiding in the murder of 1,300 Jews. He was sentenced to three years and five months’ detention, but was then provisionally set free in July of the same year.

With the help of neo-Nazis, he was able to escape under a false name to Syria, where he was arrested in 1963 for “espionage”. He was then released in 1965 due to illness. He was once again tried in Germany in May 1969, but his sentence was suspended with the argument that he had already served his time. Rademacher died a free man in March 1973.

Ernst von Weizsäcker

Ernst von Weizsäcker, the father of Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker, was a naval officer and active in the German Foreign Ministry from 1920 onwards. Not only was Weizsäcker a key figure in the AA under the Nazis, but following the war, together with his son Richard, he played a leading role in the campaign to cover up the crimes of the Ministry and depict it as a hotbed of resistance to Hitler.

Ernst von Weizsäcker was a typical representative of the nationalist-minded bourgeois elite, which had certain reservations about the National Socialists but agreed with them on many major questions. His aristocratic conceit did not prevent him from cooperating closely with the Nazis. Thus in 1933, Weizsäcker noted, regarding the boycott of Jewish businesses: “It is hard for foreign countries to understand this anti-Jewish action because they have not personally experienced this flood of Jews.” Democracy for him was “a cancerous growth” and he was full of praise for Hitler’s speeches.

In May 1936, in his function as an envoy in Switzerland, Weizsäcker wrote a letter to the AA arguing that the author Thomas Mann be deprived of German citizenship. In an open letter to the editor of the *Neuen Zürcher Zeitung*, Mann had declared “that nothing good can come from the present German rulers, not for Germany and not for the world”. Weizsäcker commented that Mann had “responded to the patience shown by the German authorities to his person with derisive remarks” and was guilty of conducting “hostile propaganda against the Reich.”

In mid-1936, Weizsäcker took over as head of the political department of the AA, and in April 1938, he joined the NSDAP. In the same month, he was promoted to the personal staff of Himmler. In 1937, he became under-secretary and in 1938 the state secretary of the AA. This made him the second most important foreign policy diplomat after Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop. In this function, he was involved in elaborating the Munich Agreement, which he later justified as a means to obtain peace.

Weizsäcker also played a role in the deportation of Jews—a fact that is confirmed by the latest historical commission report. The AA had to give its agreement to deportations from occupied or allied states—and usually did so. Weizsäcker raised “no objection”, when in 1942 Adolf Eichmann sought to transport 6,000 Jews from Paris to Auschwitz. Weizsäcker also approved a decree to deport 90,000 Jews from Belgium, Holland and France.

After the war, Weizsäcker sought to cover up his role by arguing that he

had no idea that the “final solution” and “work deployments in the east” involved mass state murder. Bearing in mind that a leading AA representative, Under-Secretary of State Martin Luther, took part in the Wannsee Conference, such claims are highly improbable. Luther had undoubtedly informed him of the plan announced by Heydrich to deport 11 million Jews to Eastern European camps and kill them. Many relevant answers to inquiries regarding deportations bear his signature.

At the Wilhelmstraße trial held in Nuremberg, Ernst von Weizsäcker was sentenced to seven years in prison for crimes against humanity—including the persecution of the Jews. He was defended by—among others—his son Richard von Weizsäcker, later Federal President from 1984 to 1994, who sought to maintain the legend of the alleged resistance conducted by his father. According to Richard von Weizsäcker, his father had only occupied his post in order to prevent the outbreak of war.

In court, Ernst von Weizsäcker defended his role in the deportations of Jews, arguing that the Jews in question had already been interned and were in danger. Therefore, he had drawn the conclusion they would be better off following deportation eastwards than staying in the same place. At the time, no one made any real association with the name Auschwitz. The judges at the trial, however, expressed their doubts about his presentation of events.

In his latest interview with the *FAZ* newspaper on October 25, Richard von Weizsäcker repeats his efforts to cover up for the crimes of his father. Regarding a statement made by his father in 1938 that the Jews would have to leave Germany, “otherwise they would sooner or later face complete destruction”, Richard von Weizsäcker answered that the comment was meant as a warning, and not a threat.

Richard von Weizsäcker also defended the role played by his father in the Munich Agreement of 1938, which sealed the fate of Czechoslovakia and opened the path eastwards for Hitler’s troops: “At the time it was clear that Hitler would not back down from going to war. For his part, my father absolutely wanted to maintain the peace given all the changes in the European situation. He supported this aim personally and conspiratorially with others. In secret cooperation with the British Ambassador Henderson, the Swiss League of Nations Commissioner Burckhardt and the Italian Ambassador Attolico, he succeeded in drawing up the Munich Agreement. This was in the first place a peaceful solution bearing the signature of Hitler. Later in the war, Hitler described his signature to this document, which secured peace for some time at least, as his biggest foreign policy mistake.”

On the issue of personal guilt, Weizsäcker quoted the concluding remarks of his father at the Wilhelmstraße trial: “My goal was peace, peace for my homeland. I served it first with success, then unsuccessfully. The danger of being misunderstood from both sides is unavoidable. Success and being understood are not the decisive criteria for action. If I faced the same decision today, I would have to take the same road.”

According to his son Richard, the seven-year prison sentence given to his father—later shortened to five years—was “historically and morally wrong”. His latest comments make clear that the historical distortions continue until this day.

While Weizsäcker insists that the report by the historical commission is not a “book about my father”, it does deal a decisive blow to the legend the Foreign Ministry attempted to build up about his role. The historians’ report describes in detail how the political elite in the Foreign Office carried out a process “of self synchronisation immediately after Hitler’s seizure of power”. Even if they had certain reservations about the Nazis, most leading diplomats agreed with their main political goals—the policy of expansion and great power politics, contempt for the Weimar democracy and anti-Semitism.

They regarded the “victory of the “national movement” over the “republic” as a “basic condition for the revival of Germany” and the re-

establishment of the German Reich as a Great Power, the authors write. “Their rejection of Weimar democracy made them vulnerable to the promises of an authoritarian totalitarian state, which increasingly proceeded against the politics of Versailles” (pp. 65, 39).

Ernst von Weizsäcker was “the epitome” and “the paradigmatic figure for the moral failure of the German upper class under National Socialism”, noted co-author Eckart Conze in presenting the report in Berlin. Just two months after Hitler took power, Weizsäcker wrote on March 30, 1933: “Our people *must* support the new era. Who knows what will come should they fail!”

Notes:

1) Christopher R. Browning: *The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office. A Study of Referat D III of Abteilung Deutschland 1940-43*. Holmes & Meier, New York/London 1978.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact