

The German foreign office and its defenders

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It could be anticipated that the report by the Independent Commission of Historians on the history of the Foreign Office would not remain unchallenged.

The commission, composed of historians Eckart Conze (Germany), Norbert Frei (Germany), Peter Hayes (United States) and Moshe Zimmermann (Israel), was convoked in 2005 by then Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (Green Party), to investigate the role of the German Foreign Ministry during the period of Nazi rule, and how it was subsequently treated in the post-war period. At the end of October 2010, they published an impressive book, which appeals not only to professional historians but also to a wider audience. [1]

The book calls some things by their proper name. For example, the Commission says that the claim the Foreign Office under the Nazi regime was a non-political body, a place of opposition, or even a hotbed of resistance, is a “myth.” Such a view of history was cultivated for decades by the post-war Foreign Office of the German Federal Republic (West Germany).

The thesis that the traditional diplomatic elite was displaced by Nazis and SS men is also refuted by the commission. “With few exceptions, German diplomats continued their activities, also in the transition from the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich,” it says in the introduction. “From 30 January 1933, the Foreign Ministry became the Foreign Office of the Third Reich, and also functioned as such until 1945.... The Foreign Office represented, thought and acted on behalf of the regime.” [2]

The commission’s report shows that the Foreign Office, of its own accord, largely supported the crimes of the Nazi regime. This was true not only for the aggressive foreign policy that culminated in the Second World War, but also for the genocide of the Jews. The motives for this were many: “They ranged from a patriotic mentality of duty—‘one does not desert one’s country because it has a bad government’—to hopes for a re-emergence of Germany as a political power on the basis of authoritarianism, to agreement with the premises of Nazi policy; from hostility to democracy to anti-Semitism.” [3]

The diplomats supported Hitler not because they were all convinced Nazis (however, over time most joined the Nazi party and the SS), but because they—like much of the social and economic elites in Germany—shared Hitler’s most important political goals: the suppression of the labour movement, the reorganization of Europe under German domination, the destruction and conquest of the Soviet Union and the elimination of the Jews from the civil service and public life. “In part, there was a far-reaching identity with the [Nazis’] objectives, which helps explain the continued functioning of the top diplomacy.” [4]

This is not only true for the Foreign Office. It is crucial to an understanding of the Nazi regime. Hitler did not violate the Weimar Republic and forcibly subject its elites to his will. The converse was the case. Hitler came to the highest offices of state legally because the industrialists, big landowners, army officers, leading academics and civil service largely shared his aims. That is why they called upon him to become chancellor in January 1933, voted in March for his Enabling Act and adapted to his regime.

The Historical Commission shows in minute detail how this process of

“self-consolidation” (“Selbstgleichschaltung”) took place in the case of the Foreign Office. It is to their credit that in dealing with this, they do not shy away from a dispute with Ernst von Weizsäcker, and engage intensively with this central and controversial figure.

The Weizsäcker family symbolise the “continuity of the elites”, which extends from the Kaiser’s Empire to the Weimar Republic, into the Third Reich and from there into the post-war Federal Republic. Karl Hugo von Weizsäcker served the King of Württemberg from 1906 to 1918 as prime minister. He supported the monarchy and was an opponent of democracy. His son, Ernst von Weizsäcker, made a career as an officer in the Imperial Navy and then in 1920, shortly after the founding of the Weimar Republic, joined the Foreign Office. From 1938 to 1943, as the crimes of the Third Reich reached their peak, he served as secretary of state, the number two behind Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop. As a young lawyer, Karl Hugo’s grandson Richard von Weizsäcker defended his father Ernst at the Nuremberg Wilhelmstrasse trial (named after the location of the Foreign Office), then made a political career in the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and from 1984 to 1994 was president of the Federal Republic of Germany.

The Historical Commission does not depict Ernst von Weizsäcker and other senior diplomats as fanatical Nazis. They served Hitler due to their own beliefs, not because they were zealous Nazis. Weizsäcker noted in 1933, after Hitler took power: “People like us must support the new era. For what would come afterwards if they failed!” [5]

That is precisely what made him and other career diplomats, who possessed international experience, especially valuable for Hitler. They could represent his interests far more credibly than an upstart from the Nazi Party would have been able to do. Thus the content of the Munich Agreement of 1938 originated on Weizsäcker’s desk. He worked out the plan that was to deliver Czechoslovakia to Hitler and pave the way to the East. This plan was then given to the Italian dictator Mussolini, who presented it in Munich as his own compromise proposal. Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier, the leaders of Britain and France, accepted it.

At that time, Weizsäcker, like Chamberlain and Daladier, apparently held the illusion that Hitler could be appeased by the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia. At Nuremberg, he defended himself with the argument that he wanted to stop the war in 1938. The reason for this was not his rejection of Hitler’s foreign policy, but Weizsäcker’s pessimism about the German chances of victory in a war. But his attitude did not prevent him from joining the Nazi party and the SS in the same year, and accept his promotion to secretary of state. When, nevertheless, Hitler still went to war, he remained at his post.

In 1949 in Nuremberg, Ernst Weizsäcker was sentenced to five years in prison for crimes against humanity, however, he was released a year later because of an amnesty. The US military court found him guilty of participating in the crimes of the Nazis, and in particular in the murder of the European Jews. Many German historians and politicians, including his son Richard, still deny the historical and moral justification of this ruling today.

Ernst von Weizsäcker and his defence team pulled out all the stops to

avoid a guilty verdict. They activated an extensive network of former Foreign Office employees, who were interested in a lenient sentence for their own personal reasons. The Wilhelmstrasse trial, with Weizsäcker as the main accused, was to become pivotal for the creation of the myth of the alleged attitude of resistance in the Foreign Office. The report of the Historical Commission details how this myth was created, which later made possible a return to office and a brilliant career in the Federal Republic for many diplomats of the Third Reich. However, Hitler's real enemies—such as the diplomat Fritz Kolbe, who refused to enter the Nazi Party and risked his life providing the United States with information from 1943—were stigmatized as traitors and were not reinstated.

That it came to a conviction of Weizsäcker at all was mainly due to the deputy chief prosecutor Robert Kempner, a German Jew who had fled the Nazis to the US. Against him, Weizsäcker's defence showed few scruples, not even hesitating to discredit him openly with anti-Semitic stereotypes. [6]

The Historical Commission also demolishes the legend that the Foreign Office did not participate in the crimes of the Second World War, which, as the commission establishes, was from the beginning “a war of conquest and extermination determined by a racist ideology”. “The Foreign Office did not stand apart from the rapid erosion of civilized standards and the development towards a murderous war of conquest and destruction”, the commission concludes. “Regarding the mass deaths of over three million Soviet prisoners of war, regarding the methods of warfare and the criminal character of German occupation policy especially in the East, Wilhelmstrasse was ... extremely well informed. Separate departments in the Foreign Office were concerned with the organization of modern slavery and with art theft. German diplomats were ... assisting the occupation, confidantes, and—time and again—accomplices”. [7]

The same applied to the systematic extermination of European Jews. At the beginning of Nazi rule, while the Foreign Office had “developed terminology that sought to limit Germany's loss of reputation as result of its Jewish policies”, it later became involved “more and more in the planning, preparation and implementation of measures against the Jewish population of Europe”. “The more territories fell into the sphere of the Third Reich, the more radical Jewish policy became, the more the Foreign Office became involved with the planning and policy of the ‘Final Solution’.” [8]

Hans Mommsen speaks out

“The Foreign Office and the past” found a largely positive response in political circles and the media when the book was presented to the public in late October 2010. Then on November 16, the octogenarian historian Hans Mommsen spoke out in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* with a critical review. [9]

In this first article, Mommsen described the book as a “masterpiece” and acknowledged that the authors were “quite outstanding historians” with “highly qualified staff.” Two weeks later—and after other critical voices had begun to be raised—he sounded a completely different tone. In an interview with *Deutschlandfunk* radio, Mommsen insulted the authors in a foul manner. [10] He described them as “gentlemen publishers, who moreover did not necessarily do the work themselves”, accusing them of “massive failures” and recommending that they take an introductory history seminar, that is, a beginners' course. He criticized the fact the assignment was awarded to the commission by a ministry, claiming this was the “government-directed science of history”, placing the commission's independence in question.

Mommsen had already formulated the core of his substantive criticisms

in his first article in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*. In this, he complained about “the tendency of the authors, which surfaces everywhere, to identify the plans for the deportation of Jewish citizens, or the creation of ‘Jewish reservations’ with the later practice of mass destruction”. That was certainly true in the end result, he said, “but before the Wannsee Conference, was not the specific orientation of the actions of the Nazis”.

Mommsen's argument amounts to the claim that the murderous dimension of the Nazi persecution of the Jews was not predictable because it had only assumed a concrete form at the Wannsee Conference in January 1942. Thus he does not want to consider the support provided by the Foreign Office to justify the Nuremberg racial laws, to prepare the deportation plans to Madagascar and Poland and to implement other anti-Semitic measures as sharing responsibility for the subsequent mass destruction.

He accuses the Historical Commission of not understanding the practical implementation of the Holocaust as the “result of a gradual process.” Therefore, they lost “sight of a self-evolution of the ‘ultimate goal’ in the shadows of official secrecy”. “Time and again”, it was “assumed that the ‘Final Aim’ and its attainment existed a priori in people's minds”.

Here, Mommsen uses a simple and cheap trick. He accuses the Historical Commission of adopting a position that they do not take themselves, and then polemicalises against it. Nowhere does the commission say that the “ultimate goal”—the mass shootings, the gas chambers, Auschwitz—“existed a priori in people's minds”. Such a presentation would be unhistorical, indeed. But it points to how the Nazi regime moved step by step towards the “ultimate goal” and how the Foreign Office was actively engaged on each of these steps.

Mommsen ignores the objective logic of events. Although he is considered to be an exponent of a conception of history that places objective social structures and not subjective intentions at the heart of his research, he is not concerned with the objective meaning of political programmes and their social roots. His language, borrowed from evolutionary biology in which the Final Solution “evolves”, turns the key players into mere cogs in a historical process that is ultimately inexplicable; meaning they cannot be held responsible for the consequences of their actions, insofar as they had not anticipated or planned these. He does not go as far as to label them “victims”, but says they are fatefully “entangled” in the historical process.

In fact, the consequences of Hitler's coming to power could be seen long in advance. Nazism was an expression of the most reactionary tendencies of German imperialism. While Hitler found support among desperate sections of the petty bourgeoisie and the lumpen proletariat, which he mobilised against the organised labour movement, he followed the same goals in foreign policy that Germany had already pursued unsuccessfully in the First World War. Observant contemporaries who understood this were already clear in 1933 that Hitler taking power would inevitably lead to war. Already in the spring of 1932, Leon Trotsky, one of the most perceptive political observers of his time, published an article entitled “Hitler's victory means war against the USSR”. [11]

That the Nazis' anti-Semitism would not shrink from murder and manslaughter was no longer a secret, at the latest since the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 9, 1938. In 1938, Ernst von Weizsäcker himself told the Swiss ambassador in Paris, the Jews had to leave Germany, “or they would meet their complete destruction in the short or long term.” And on January 30, 1939 in the Reichstag (parliament), Hitler threatened openly that if “international finance Jewry” once again plunged the peoples into a world war, the result would be “the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe”. Both are quoted by the Historical Commission. [12]

Mommsen's counterposing of the “plans for the deportation of Jewish citizens” and “the later practice of mass destruction” cannot be justified historically. The deportation plans, in which the Foreign Office was extremely active, were the immediate precursor of mass destruction. They

were part of a scheme for massive resettlement and depopulation, an “ethnic land clearance project”, as Hitler called it. No one had forced Weizsäcker and the other officials at the Foreign Office to endorse, approve and accept this “ethnic land clearance project”. They could have come out of what Mommsen calls the “shadows of official secrecy” and openly opposed the plan, however, they did not. In light of this balance sheet, Mommsen’s attempts to acquit the Foreign Office of any complicity and responsibility take on an extremely cynical character.

In doing this, Mommsen not only shields the perpetrators in the Foreign Office but also prevents lessons being learned from history. Political ideologies and programmes have objective consequences, regardless of the subjective intentions involved. To understand and anticipate these consequences is the object of the study of history. At a time when a senior Social Democratic Party (SPD) politician and director of the Bundesbank like Thilo Sarrazin is spreading racist theories, and receives public recognition for this, such an understanding of historical relationships is of the utmost importance.

Mommsen continually comes back to the same point. In his interview with Deutschlandfunk he expressed “dismay” that the Historical Commission had not been more “nuanced” in its treatment of the “totalitarian conditions” under which the Foreign Office was involved in the enforcement of the Holocaust. In a further contribution to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* he said that the commission had exposed the role of the Foreign Office, “in the form of a ‘strategy of exposure’ without regard to the particular chronological context”. He complains about the hysteria that is meted out to those who call for a “more nuanced assessment of the role of the Foreign Office”. [13] Mommsen is particularly indignant that Commissioner Eckart Conze describes the Foreign Office as a “criminal organization”—as if a body that serves a criminal regime was not itself criminal.

Instead of examining the question why countless diplomats, judges, officers and other government officials largely had no trouble serving a criminal regime, Mommsen develops new justifications and rationalizations for their actions. In doing so, he does not shy from making false accusations. He claimed on Deutschlandfunk: “The overall impression is created that the Foreign Office was the decisive or major driving force in the enforcement of the Holocaust.” This was “just not right.” The key drivers were to be found in the apparatus of Himmler and Heydrich, he claims.

In reality, the claim that the Foreign Office was the driving force in the enforcement of the Holocaust cannot be found in the commission report, nor can it be interpreted into the report even with great effort. On the basis of many concrete examples, however, the report does show that there was no dividing line between the Foreign Office, on the one hand, and the apparatus of Himmler and Heydrich on the other. The transition between the state bureaucracy and Nazi institutions was blurred. The myth of the neutral position of the Foreign Office and other government institutions, which Mommsen fiercely defends, simply cannot be upheld.

Gregor Schöllgen and Daniel Koerfer weigh in

Following Mommsen, other historians have weighed in with critical contributions.

Gregor Schöllgen, a specialist in German foreign policy, published an indignant, but meagre article in the cultural section of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. He accuses the commission of not adequately addressing the extensive, publicly available edition of the “Documents on German Foreign Policy” (ADAP) from 1918 to 1945, and the “Documents on the foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany” (AAPD), edited by

himself. This creates the false impression that the “Foreign Office had consistently denied its history for decades, or worse still, had consciously misled the public”, he claims. [14]

Despite his offended tone, Schöllgen has little of substance to throw against the book produced by the Historical Commission, except that he too rejects the “legend” that the “Foreign Service as a whole had been a criminal organization.” He even expressly confirms that the Foreign Office played an active role in the persecution and extermination of European Jewry.

In the pages of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the Historical Commission answered Schöllgen’s accusations that it had not properly used the sources. They write that the commission had consulted the documents edited by the Foreign Office, “but had compared the edited edition with the original archival documents, and had then cited these originals or other proof. There were good reasons for doing so. For example, the published Edition [ADAP/AADP] records the consent given by the Foreign Office to the deportation of 6,000 Jews from France to Auschwitz in March 1942. However, the fact that Secretary of State Ernst von Weizsäcker initialled this document, drafted by the ‘Jewish Affairs’ expert Franz Rademacher ... does not appear in the Edition. Not even in a footnote.” [15]

The historian Daniel Koerfer attacked the report of the commission with special vehemence. A long conversation he held with Frank Schirrmacher, an editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, culminates in the accusation that it is a “book of revenge”. [16]

Koerfer, who is an honorary professor at the Free University in Berlin, teaching contemporary history, is highly biased. His grandfather, Gerhart Feine, worked under Weizsäcker at the Foreign Office, including in occupied Serbia. In his last tour of duty in Budapest, he opposed the deportation of Hungarian Jews; for this reason he was regarded as “untainted” after the war. Koerfer’s godfather Helmut Becker defended Ernst von Weizsäcker at Nuremberg. At that time, as Koerfer formulated it himself, “he mobilised the entire comprehensive network of the two families in Germany to defend Weizsäcker”.

Koerfer is indignant about the fact that the authors consider this critically. “Shouldn’t he have done this as a defence counsel?” he asks. “Relinquish the links his client has with the Foreign Office? I do not see the great conspiracy theory, the desire to long-term legend building, to which the authors of the book have become attached. It was about life and death, not the post-war period. If it had become known that in 1941/42 Weizsäcker knew about the task force [Einsatzgruppen] reports, that he knew that behind the front, mass murder was being carried out on a grand scale, he would probably have been executed.”

Koerfer’s admission that Weizsäcker would have been sentenced to death if the Nuremberg judges had known the full extent of his involvement makes further comment superfluous.

Political background

The fierce controversy that has erupted 65 years after the fall of the Third Reich about “The Foreign Office and its past” has not only historical but also current foundations. Ever since German reunification 20 years ago, German foreign policy has become increasingly self-assured and aggressive.

Since the 1990s, several German companies and banks, which in the 1980s still fiercely resisted opening up their archives, commissioned historical research on the role of their company in the Third Reich. They have now been joined by the Foreign Ministry and, more recently, the Federal Ministry of Finance.

An important motive thereby has been to utilise an open debate on such historical matters to guard against those seeking legal redress or sanctions. The task of the Historical Commission was also seen in this way in the Foreign Ministry, as made clear by Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD), foreign minister from 2005 to 2009, when presenting the historians' report in Berlin. "Hardly anyone knows better than those in the Foreign Ministry that the dark shadows of the past are catching up with us all over the world," he said. "But also, no one knows better what we can win if we face up to this past, without taboos, without myths, confident, courageous, humbly and without pride."

Steinmeier's predecessor, Joschka Fischer (Green Party), commissioned the study shortly before leaving office, after clashing with "old boys" from the Foreign Office over an obituary in the Foreign Ministry house journal honouring the former Nazi party member Franz Nüsslein. Nüsslein, who was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment in 1948 in Czechoslovakia because of his role in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, ended his professional career as the German Consul General in Barcelona, a post he held from 1962 to 1974. The same Joschka Fischer pushed through a fundamental change in German foreign policy, and against considerable public opposition, enabled Germany to participate in the war against Yugoslavia, where German soldiers had committed terrible crimes in World War II.

Steinmeier and Fischer believe that German foreign policy can gain more clout if there is a more open approach to dealing with the past. In doing so, they not only meet resistance from the "old boys' network", who fear that their "honour" is being impugned; the extent of the criticism that has been levelled against the report of the Historical Commission also shows that there are those who do not believe in the efficacy of such an approach, and who think it would be better if the past were kept under wraps as long as possible.

But regardless of the intrigues and conflicts that accompany the appearance of "The Foreign Office and the Past," it is an instructive book, which is well worth reading.

Notes:

1. Eckart Conze, Norbert Frei, Peter Hayes, Moshe Zimmermann, "Das Amt und die Vergangenheit: Deutsche Diplomaten im Dritten Reich und in der Bundesrepublik", ("The Foreign Office and the Past: German Diplomats in the Third Reich and the Federal Republic"), Blessing Verlag

2. Ibid., p. 13

3. Ibid., p. 13

4. Ibid., p. 13

5. Ibid., p. 69

6. Ibid., p. 429

7. Ibid., p. 167

8. Ibid., p. 168, 170

9. "Das ganze Ausmaß der Verstrickung", ("The full extent of involvement"), Frankfurter Rundschau, 16 November 2010

10. "Das ist schon ein ziemlicher Makel", ("This is really quite a blemish"), Deutschlandfunk, 30 November 2010

11. Leon Trotsky, "Schriften über Deutschland", ("Writings on Germany"), Frankfurt am Main: 1971, p. 308 ff

12. "The Foreign Office and The Past", p. 173

13. "Vergebene Chancen", ("Missed Opportunities"), Süddeutsche Zeitung, 27 December 2010

14. "Akten ohne Ende", ("Files without end"), Süddeutsche Zeitung, 7 December 2010

15. "Unser Buch hat einen Nerv getroffen", ("Our book has touched a nerve"), Süddeutsche Zeitung, 10 December 2010

16. "Macht 'Das Amt' es sich zu einfach?", ("Is 'The Foreign Office' making it too easy?"), Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 29 November 2010



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