

“Order and Annihilation” exhibition reveals link between Germany’s police force and the Nazi regime

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In the German postwar period, it was long claimed that only the Gestapo (Nazi secret police) were involved in the mass murder and the extermination policies of the Nazis. An exhibition, “Order and Annihilation—The Police and the Nazi Regime” at the German Historical Museum in Berlin, thoroughly dispenses with this assertion. All sections of the police, including regular uniformed and criminal detection forces, were willing tools of the Nazis.

However, what makes the exhibition particularly impressive is something else: It reveals the continuity of the role of the police, not only from the imperial era to the Hitler dictatorship, but also into the period since 1945. Hardly any police officers were brought before the courts after the war to account for their crimes. The few who were accused appealed to their obligation to obey orders, defended themselves with lies, and were only found guilty of “complicity in murder” in the rare event of an actual conviction. Many Nazi police simply continued their careers in the force, a considerable number of them attaining leadership positions.

The exhibition project was initiated by the former Potsdam chief of police, Detlef Graf von Schwerin, the son of a resistance fighter. It was taken up and funded by the standing committee of the state interior ministers, and prepared by the German Police Academy in Münster in cooperation with a team of historians. Klaus Neidhardt, president of the German Police Academy, declared in his opening welcome to the exhibition that trainee police officers should be confronted with the past in order to “be aware of abuse of power”. He said the police “in a democratic constitutional state” were “the direct opposite of those under the Nazi regime”, and were duty-bound to protect the “liberties and civil rights, the fundamental rights of the individual”.

The hard facts recorded in the exhibition tell a different story. The same ideas as Klaus Neidhardt’s were propagated by Carl Severing, the social democratic interior minister who replaced Defence Minister Gustav Noske—also a Social Democrat—in the Weimar Republic in 1920. But Severing’s reforms failed to alter the fact that the membership of the police force was almost completely absorbed into the fascist state apparatus, when Hitler took power in 1933.

The Social Democratic Party and “The Police—Your friend and helper”

The first two sections of the exhibition show how Noske integrated paramilitary Freikorps units and parts of the Imperial Army along with its equipment into the police force after the First World War, and used it to violently crush the uprisings of the revolutionary workers. When the

reactionary forces subsequently felt themselves strengthened and attempted a coup d’état under the leadership of Generals Kapp and Lüttwitz in March 1920, most of the police units commanded by Noske sympathised with the putschists. It was only due to a general strike and a counterattack from the Red Ruhr Army that it was possible for them to be beaten back.

The police were also used for the bloody repression of labour unrest during Carl Severing’s leadership, for example, in Saxony 1921 and Hamburg in 1923. Only when the revolutionary wave subsided after the failed October uprising of 1923 and the economy stabilised, did Severing begin to restructure and demilitarise the police force by recruiting staff that had not previously served in the army or the Freikorps. He assigned new duties—in particular, traffic control—to the police, transformed the police service into a profession requiring qualifications, and also arranged for women to be recruited.

All of this amounted to an image campaign waged by the SPD in an attempt to portray the police as guarantor of a democratic constitution. Their symbol became the stop sign of the traffic cop; their slogan: “The Police—Your friend and helper”. In the autumn of 1926, a large-scale police exhibition was held at the Berlin Exhibition Grounds, attracting half a million visitors with sports and musical events.

Supplementing some pictures and a ticket to this major event, the 1926 catalogue preface—composed by Albert Grzesinski, Carl Severing’s successor and also a Social Democrat—is projected onto a wall: “This police exhibition aims to demonstrate that the police force in the modern nation state is and wants to be a people’s police service; and that it consciously promotes its organisation, its expansion and its training programme under the motto: Friend, helper and comrade of the population”.

By running such campaigns, the SPD was trying to blind the population as to what was really going on. Just as before, there were many Freikorps members in the ranks of the police, and the new recruits came mainly from the middle classes, who were later to add their support to the Nazi Party. Distrust of the police remained very much alive in the working class following its bloody experiences from 1918 to 1923.

In addition, the SPD feared that revolutionary riots could again flare up and the Communist Party, founded in 1919, might grow stronger. Therefore, a modern armoured counter-insurgency vehicle stood at the entrance to the 1926 police exhibition, next to the traffic policeman’s stop sign and the friendly invitation, “Come closer”. Still worn by a number of officers as a status symbol, the long sword from the imperial era was replaced by a shorter weapon. In 1924, the truncheon was introduced, but the Nazis later scrapped it. At the same time, however, the police were equipped with mobile water cannons and combat vehicles, as well as more efficient technology for forensic investigation and data collection, which

the Nazis were later able to exploit.

Established in Munich prior to 1933, a centre for the registration of “gypsies” was later used by the Nazis to compile their deportation lists. The exhibition also features an index card cabinet, which was found in the basement of the police headquarters in Cologne after the war. Visitors can take in their hands some of the 3,458 index cards discovered there. Names are at last given to the countless dead, who were arrested—with the help of local police authorities—and sent to concentration camps or summarily executed as so-called enemies of the people. They were mainly male and female workers, who were registered with details relating to occupation, height, hair and eye colour, age, previous membership in workers’ parties, and of course race, as well as the alleged offence and date of death. In the case of Roma or Sinti people, the word “Gypsy” is stamped in big red letters on the index cards.

In the final stage of the Weimar Republic, it was ultimately the Social Democrats, who—despite the democratic credentials they had reassigned to the police—once again employed the now well-equipped police units against workers’ demonstrations. Such was the case in the “Bloody May” of 1929, when the Berlin SPD chief of police, Karl Frederick Zörgiebel, ordered his officers to shoot down protesters at the May rallies in working class neighbourhoods, killing almost 40 people. Albert Grzesinski, the Prussian interior minister at the time, gave Zörgiebel his full support. The increasingly authoritarian and police state rule of General von Papen, who had discharged the last social-democratic coalition government in Prussia (which included Grzesinski) in 1932, based its power on this preliminary work of the Social Democrats.

While the SPD persisted in appealing to the spirit of the Weimar constitution to the end, more and more police officers and other sections of the state apparatus placed their hopes in the Nazi Party, which promised to clamp down on the working class.

Zörgiebel also had a postwar career with the police. Having spent four months in a concentration camp during the Nazi period and subsequently been placed under surveillance by the Gestapo in his hometown of Mainz, he helped to rebuild the police force after 1945. He became chairman of the SPD in Mainz, and headed the police force in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate from 1947 until he retired in 1949.

When the Nazis came to power, it finally became apparent that the “nice cop”, the “friend and helper”, was primarily interested in participating in raids and mass arrests rather than controlling traffic. A radio report about a raid in Berlin’s Scheunen district on April 5, 1933—a few days after the Nazi seizure of power—can be heard in excellent audio quality at the exhibition. It is unsettling to experience how familiar this old recording sounds to modern ears.

The reporter talks to a police officer involved in the raid, and goes with him to a truck, in which 15 arrested people are sitting. Acting as something of a mouthpiece for the police, he asks an elderly Jewish resident about why he was arrested: “I didn’t have my identity card with me”. The exchange develops as follows. The reporter says in an aggressive tone, “Why not?” – I had it renewed last Friday. “So you got a stamp!” – They only gave me a waiting-number. – “Where is it?” – At home, but I live just over there. – “Where do you come from?” – I’ve lived in this street for 36 years. – “Where were you born?” – In Krakow. – “Aha, so you’re a foreigner! What are you doing here?” – I have a furniture store, etc.

The legend of the clean police force

The main part of the exhibition, “Order and Annihilation,” shows a plethora of documents and photographs concerning the countless crimes

of the police between 1933 and 1945—from conducting raids, arrests and deportations to mass shootings and death squads, both on the so-called home front and behind the front in the occupied areas of eastern and western Europe.

Some of this was already known, but the extent to which the police actually took part in massacres during the war is presented here in detail for the first time. Their brutality went too far even for some of the army leaders, as is shown in a note made in 1940 by the commander-in-chief of the southern border region, General Wilhelm Ulex: “The recent increase in acts of violence on the part of police units is indicative of an utterly incomprehensible lack of human and moral sensibility, such that one can only speak of downright bestiality”.

Even more importantly, and perhaps the greatest merit of the exhibition, is the scrupulous exposition of the cover-up of these crimes after the war. Lieutenant General Adolf von Bomhardt, the second most important officer in the regular police force after the chief of police and head of the Berlin central power, Kurt Daluge, indicated the way things were to develop, when he appeared at the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal in 1946. He claimed that only the Gestapo (Nazi secret police) and the SS (Hitler’s elite force) could be held responsible for the crimes. Police detectives and the security police—known as the regular police after 1936—were said to have merely aided in administrative tasks related to the deportations, and were only “following orders” in cases involving policemen shooting people.

In the following decades, this was to be the guiding principle for the judiciary and the basic defence made by all public officials facing prosecution. On April 10, 1951, the national parliament also made a whitewash of countless Nazi crimes committed by the police and other authorities: the law regulating the legal status of persons covered by Article 131 of the constitution. This so-called “131 law” stipulated that all former civil servants who were not classified as major offenders or otherwise incriminated during the denazification procedures were allowed to continue their careers in the civil service. All the parliamentary parties, including the Communist Party, supported this legislation.

The law provided the legitimacy for a smooth transformation of the Nazi police into the police force of the West German democracy. Just how smoothly this was achieved is reflected in an exhibition showcase containing the service uniform of the Bavarian policeman, Kaspar Ebner, who worked in the Bavarian police force from the late imperial period to the 1950s. When he resumed his employment with the police in Ansbach at the end of the war, he still wore the same uniform he had received as a master of the gendarmerie in Ingolstadt in 1936—as is clearly evidenced from the large-format photographs on a nearby board. Only certain badges and insignia were removed.

The murderers are still among us

Only a few members of the police battalions that committed massacres in the occupied territories were ever indicted. An exception to this was the 1967 Wuppertal trial of members of the Cologne police Battalion 309. On June 27, 1941, the battalion was operating in the eastern Polish city of Bialystok, where it carried out brutal raids in Jewish neighbourhoods, eventually shutting at least 800 Jews in the great synagogue, setting it on fire and leaving the people to be burned alive. Some inside tried to escape by climbing up to the windows. “But they had no chance because they were immediately shot down”, testified Karl S. from Saalhausen in a hearing in September 1960. Three of the twelve defendants were eventually sentenced to a term in prison in 1968. However, the Federal Court later repealed the sentence owing to a procedural error.

Only a few of the police who were able to continue their careers after the war can be mentioned here.

- Adolf von Bomhard, born 1891 in Augsburg, member of the Freikorps after the First World War, head of command quarters in the main department of the regular police force from 1936, commander of the regular police force in Kiev in 1942. After the war, he was the mayor of Prien on Chiemsee from 1960 to 1966, and died as an honorary citizen of Prien in 1976 without ever having been brought to court.

- Georg Heuser, head of the Gestapo in Minsk, where he was deeply involved in the murder of the Jewish population, returned to the civil service in 1954 due to the 131 law provision, and was head of the criminal investigation department of the state of Rhineland-Palatinate until 1958. In the course of the investigation of some of his staff in Minsk, he came to the attention of the judiciary in 1959, and became one of the few ever to be convicted in 1963: but only for “complicity in (the) murder” of 11,000 people. He served only 6 of his 15-year prison sentence.

- Reacting to a similar East-West German campaign, the West German judiciary launched an investigation in 1958 into the former lieutenant general of the Waffen SS and police force, Heinz Reinefarth, on account of crimes committed during the suppression of the Warsaw uprising in 1944. But procedures were suspended after a few weeks. At the time, Reinefarth had just been elected mayor of Westerland on Sylt. The investigation was not resumed until 1961. Units of the “Reinefarth combat group” had killed more than 15,000 civilians in Warsaw in the first days of August 1944 alone. On display in the exhibition is the transcript of a telephone conversation between Heinz Reinefarth and his commander, Nicholas von Vormann, on August 5, 1944. It reads: “What should I do with the civilians? I have more prisoners than I have ammunition”. Reinefarth was mayor on the island of Sylt until 1964.

- Bernd Wehner, former head of the homicide department in the Third Reich’s criminal investigation office, and senior director of the Dusseldorf police from 1954. In 1949, he became well known from a 30-part series in *Spiegel* magazine, where he received a platform to argue that the Nazi regime’s criminal detection department was a non-political organisation. He subsequently helped numerous former Nazi colleagues to attain new posts in the West German police force. Historian Andreas Mix writes in his catalogue essay for the exhibition that the senior level of the federal criminal detection agency comprised 47 civil servants in 1959, and only two of these were innocent of any Nazi crime.

Likewise, few criminal prosecutions were conducted against former Nazi officers in the former Stalinist German Democratic Republic (GDR), although police personnel were replaced there after 1945. Following an extradition request from the West German investigative authorities, Josef Blösche was brought into custody. Known in Warsaw as the “horror of the ghettos”, Blösche was nevertheless able to settle in the GDR unmolested under his true name after the war. He was finally arrested in 1967, sentenced for crimes against humanity by the GDR judiciary in 1969, and executed three months later.

The “Order and Annihilation” exhibition, which was extended due to the great public interest it aroused, is well worth seeing and disturbingly topical. The call for the strong state is again growing loud in the midst of today’s catastrophic economic crisis and mounting social tensions. With the words of representatives of the Weimar SPD about community friendly policing still ringing in his ears, the visitor leaves the exhibition involuntarily thinking of how the social democratic Berlin interior minister recently attempted to install Udo Hansen as the new chief of police, and was only temporarily stopped owing to a procedural error. Hansen, the former federal border guard and notorious hard liner in matters concerning refugees, would presumably respond to labour unrest in much the same way as did Karl Friedrich Zörgiebel in 1929.

The exhibition will run until August 28, 2011 at the Pei building of the German Historical Museum.



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