

Editorial

Research on national socialist perpetrators is a field of historical investigation concerned with those responsible for and those enacting the orders, the bureaucratic masterminds and the perpetrators on the ground of national socialist crimes. This research has been developing since the 1990s and has produced numerous individual and collective studies. The renewed inquiries into the individuals behind these crimes and those who carried them out began with Christopher Browning's work published in German in 1993 under the title "Ganz normale Männer" ("Ordinary Men"), in which he depicted the members of a reserve police battalion involved in the extermination of Jews in Poland. Browning's differentiating approach to individual, situational, and anthropological motivations for participating in the holocaust still ranks as a piece of groundbreaking research. The question of the perpetrators' motivations was asked even more vociferously in Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's book of 1996 "Hitlers willige Vollstrecker" ("Hitler's Willing Executioners"). The book, which was effectively marketed, proved problematic in terms of both method and content. Although it was also partly based on the same body of sources used in Browning's analysis, it reached entirely different conclusions. Ulrich Herbert's biography of Werner Best, which traces the life of a leading SS and Gestapo official of the first hour, proved to be theoretically stimulating. Based on Herbert's generation classifications, Michael Wildt presented a collective biography of members of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt, whose motivation he sought to capture as a "generation of the absolute". In the process of development, these contributions to research introduced important frames of analysis.

However, the extended research carried out since the 1990s into the perpetrators and their helpers at different hierarchical levels was not without forerunners. Moreover, it built on an already existing interest, strengthened it and summarized the concepts. An pronounced preference for biographical information and analyses had already developed in the years immediately after the war. These books frequently satisfied the sometimes voyeuristic focus on national socialist horror figures, such as Heinrich Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich, or employed exculpatory narratives to exonerate the German people. At the same time, however, academic studies were presented about personalities at the centre of interest, above all, Adolph Hitler. In the 1960s, interest extended to include other, lesser known national socialist individuals. The Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem and the Auschwitz Trial in Frankfurt added to the expanding scientific horizon, too. Apart from this, a structural historical approach became established and increasingly dominated the analysis of NS rule and genocide. Although the perpetrators did not vanish behind the crimes, the emphasis on structures and the sequence of events partially marginalized the interest in individual

biographies. Nevertheless, individual and group biographies continued to be written, some of which are still relevant today.

Meanwhile, research on perpetrators has grown to enormous proportions, and there are now a great many biographies on individuals or groups. The increasing use of the biographical approach is illustrated, for instance by the integration of the life stories and careers of responsible NS individuals as a natural part, so to speak, of organizational and regional history case studies, thus contributing to the explanation of decisions and sequences of events. Consequently, the research on perpetrators has had resounding effects beyond the confines of its actual research field, the biographies.

At the same time, it is evident that the investigation of individuals and collectives during National Socialism is fraught with far-reaching problems. From a methodological point of view, the situation of source material presents a particular challenge. There is often a lack of ego-documents, in other words, contemporary notes and written accounts or later reflections. Thus, in many cases, it is impossible to assess motives and ideological convictions. And this means that especially questions about the specific reasons behind the actions and about ideological causal factors remain unanswered. But if these often central facets of life-story investigations cannot be determined, this raises questions about the historical relevance of biographical avenues and their explanatory potential for broader NS research. After all, the individual case approach alone is not sufficient. The enduring objective is to gain a better understanding of the prerequisites, the reality and, as stronger interest has recently shown, the after-effects of the national socialist regime.

Similar to NS research on the whole, perpetrator research is increasingly extending more consistently beyond the epochal year of 1945 and is illuminating continuities and breaks in the life stories of the responsible NS individuals. Occasionally, the biographical questions and avenues open up far-reaching analysis results that lead to historical explanations for societal and organizational structures. The recently published commission report on the Foreign Office can be seen as such a 'histoire totale' of the biographical approach. In a stricter sense, it integrates biographical, perpetrator-centered questions into a more organizational and structural historical analysis framework and, in this way, provides extensive insights into the functional and societal elites of national socialist and post-national socialist times.

However, the concept of the perpetrator can still only be used as an auxiliary construct in historical investigations and those of other disciplines. Here, in contrast to judicial proceedings, it does not contain such clearly defined characteristics as in the legal context. Also, as a rule, neither in the judicial nor in the ethical sense does the question of guilt play a role. After all, perpetrator is a fluid term and, as a result it is essentially an arbitrary category. But by being differentiated from victims and onlookers, it does make methodical comparisons and highly aggregated analyses possible. However, it should not be overlooked that,

in individual cases, the boundaries between perpetrators, accomplices, onlookers, victims, and opponents can be fluid. In addition, these categories often represent only one, yet an important part of an individual's life story.

The present issue shows and exemplifies different approaches to perpetrator research as well as their possibilities and limitations. In terms of method and content, Bettina Birn exposes the problems involved in the examination of perpetrators based on the example of the postwar statements made by an SS general during various court proceedings. Jan Erik Schulte presents an example of individual power participation in National Socialism and successful integration into postwar society based on the case of a middle rank SS official. Claudia Bade traces the career of a Wehrmacht judge during National Socialism and later on in the Federal Republic of Germany and points out the belated political and lacking judicial examination of actions performed by members of the Wehrmacht's judicial system. In an experimental method based on two photo albums, Karsten Wilke investigates the transfer of violence and experience from the Third Reich to the Federal Republic of Germany through the images of members of the Waffen-SS. In biographical studies, questions surrounding a national socialist world view are usually presented with an individual focus and are consequently treated as extracts. Now, for the first time, the notes from a lecture held in 1939 by the philosopher Aurel Kolnai on the "Pivotal Principles of NS Ideology" have been edited and commented by Wolfgang Bialas, providing a macro-level contemporary interpretation of the national socialist world view.

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