

THE GERMAN FOREIGN OFFICE AND THE PAST

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Das Amt und die Vergangenheit, the report of the Independent Historians Commission that Joschka Fischer appointed in 2005 to examine the history of the German Foreign Office and Nazism both before and after 1945, has aroused widespread popular interest and considerable scholarly controversy in Germany since the book appeared in October 2010.¹ The critical reactions have included constructive and well-taken elements, but several also have shown a troubling tendency to mischaracterize the work's contents, source base, and process of composition. Fortunately, academic discourse operates on the principle that the best answer to heat is light. As a result, Hans Mommsen's reckless claim that *Das Amt* had made no use of the published documentary collection *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik* dissipated in the face of the reality that the book cited this compendium tens of times.² One hopes that Richard Evans' recent spurious charge that we were ignorant of such English-language publications as Donald McKale's two books on Curt Prüfer also will evaporate once readers notice that both titles appear in the bibliography to *Das Amt*, contrary to Evans' explicit assertion.³ Similarly, the canard spread by Johannes Hürter (and in softer form by Evans) that the members of the Historians' Commission merely edited the book should disappear as people discern what we thought we had made clear in the appendix entitled "Nachwort und Dank," namely that each chapter emerged through a process of repeated give and take among the drafters named there and the member of the Commission primarily responsible for the relevant time period or topic and then at successive sessions of the Commission.⁴

In view of the extent of misinformation about *Das Amt* that is currently in circulation, we especially welcome this opportunity to present the main findings of our work in English.

1 Eckart Conze, Norbert Frei, Peter Hayes, and Moshe Zimmermann, *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit: Deutsche Diplomaten im Dritten Reich und in der Bundesrepublik* (Munich: Karl Blessing Verlag, 2010); hereafter simply: *Das Amt*.

2 Hans Mommsen, "Das ist schon ein ziemlicher Mäkel," Hans Mommsen im Gespräch mit Christoph Schmitz," *Deutschlandfunk*, 30 November 2010.

3 Compare Richard J. Evans, "The German Foreign Office and the Nazi Past,"

Neue Politische Literatur 56 (2011), 173, to *Das Amt*, 845. Why Evans insists that Prüfer should have figured prominently in our text is puzzling. Though he doctored his wartime diaries after 1945, neither the original nor the false version was published until >>

>> McKale exposed them in 1988, and neither played a part in postwar myth-making about the Foreign Office. Had we made much of Prüfer's machinations, critics would have pointed out rightly that they were as irrelevant as he was, since he did not return to the German diplomatic service. This is not the only example of Evans' carelessness; his reference to "Werner" Blankenhorn stands out (180; the man's first name was Herbert), as does his puzzling reproach that we "failed to deal with the preparation of an illegal and criminal war of aggression" (174). This is not just descriptively untrue, but the assertion that this aspect of the Foreign Office's history should have bulked larger in our account also overlooks the fact that, among all ten senior diplomats tried after the war, only the two Foreign Ministers, Ribbentrop and Neurath, ultimately were convicted of this charge.

4 Johannes Hürter, "Das Auswärtige Amt, die NS-Diktatur und der Holocaust," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 59 (2011): 167, footnote 3; Evans, *NPL*, 169; Conze et al., *Das Amt*, 720. Both Hürter and Evans could and should have known better, since one of the Commission members and one of the drafters described the composition process quite clearly in "Die Debatte um 'Das Amt': Ein Interview mit Eckart Conze und Annette Weinke," which appeared shortly after the interview took place on 21 February 2011; see <http://www.zeitgeschichte-online.de/site/40209039/Default.asp>; last accessed on 13 April 2011.

I.

After Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany on 30 January 1933, most German diplomats behaved just as they had been trained to do, as part of the machinery of their state. A few—the Ambassador in Washington and the Vice Consul in New York, notably—quickly realized that the Third Reich was not the state to which they had sworn allegiance and resigned. But, almost no one else in the German diplomatic corps followed suit. Instead, both individually and collectively the German Foreign Office adjusted rapidly to the new political priorities, most strikingly by reviving in March the recently dissolved *Deutschland-Referat* or German Desk to handle issues involving the interrelationship of domestic and foreign policy and by appointing Emil Schumburg, a career diplomat since 1926, to lead the Desk's external defense of the nation's new policies of discrimination and persecution. The process by which the Foreign Office came to act as a constituent part of an increasingly barbaric and criminal state began so spontaneously and automatically in the early days of the Nazi regime that one may speak justifiably of a *Selbstgleichschaltung*, a self-coordination with the so-called National Awakening.

As with other German elites, such as big business leaders and military commanders, cooperation with the New Order in Germany stemmed in the prewar years from a “partial identity of goals.”⁵ Virtually all of Germany's diplomats shared with Hitler and the Nazis a desire to restore the nation's power, throw off the restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles, and reacquire the lands lost in 1918. Drawn overwhelmingly from Germany's upper classes, indeed from the aristocracy, the upper echelon of the Foreign Office also shared the prevailing antisemitism, which led many leading diplomats, including Ernst von Weizsäcker, to justify Nazi anti-Jewish policies from their inception as an understandable reaction to a supposed “inundation” of German society and culture by Jews (“Judenüberschwemmung”) during the 1920s.⁶ After war began in 1939, Germany's enemies multiplied, and the Foreign Office's representations and traditional tasks abroad declined correspondingly. A new incentive to cooperate with the Nazi leadership thus arose, namely the need to preserve the institution and the careers and influence of its members by demonstrating indispensability to the regime in other capacities and ways. As a result, a continuous blurring of the lines between Party organizations and the Foreign Office took place throughout the Nazi era. The trend gathered force less because of the insertion of numerous National Socialists into leading bureaucratic positions than because of the

5 See Manfred Messerschmidt, *Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat* (Hamburg: Decker, 1969).

6 *Das Amt*, 30 (Source: Leonidas Hill (ed.), *Die Weizsäcker-Papiere*, v. 2 (Berlin: Propyläen, 1974), 70-71).

massive flow of senior civil servants into the NSDAP and the SS and the Nazification of the training and the promotion standards for the next generation of officials. Until 1943, Hitler blocked Ribbentrop's attempts to purge the diplomatic personnel that the Nazi regime had inherited from the Weimar, in fact, largely from the Wilhelmine era. But in 1937-38, with the lifting of the ban on new party memberships imposed in mid-1933, and again in 1940, these diplomats and their would-be successors joined the Nazi Party in waves, and by then the preparatory courses for future diplomats had come to include tours of the concentration camp at Dachau and a reception hosted by the Führer at Berchtesgaden.⁷

Both before and after 1939, dissent over the tactical wisdom of government policy occasionally arose within the Foreign Office. Thus, Foreign Office personnel sometimes delayed the denaturalization of prominent Germans who had gone into exile lest the move harm the Reich's image. Similarly, State Secretary Weizsäcker and several associates tried in 1938-39 to impede the regime's march toward war for fear that Germany could not win. And in 1941-43, many diplomats pointed out the politically counterproductive nature of German harshness toward the populace in the occupied East, maltreatment of the Eastern Workers brought to Germany, and round ups of laborers in Western Europe.

Regarding the persecution of the Jews, however, Weizsäcker and nearly all of his colleagues were implacable or indifferent, which amounted to the same thing. In 1938-39, Weizsäcker rejected any amelioration of antisemitic policy because that would make Germany appear weak and susceptible to outside pressure, and he blocked several proposals to increase the flow of Jewish emigrants. He took this hard line even though he already had told the Swiss envoy in Paris that Jews had to leave Germany "otherwise they are going surely sooner or later toward their complete annihilation" ("sonst gingen sie eben über kurz oder lang ihrer vollständigen Vernichtung entgegen").⁸ In the months leading up to Hitler's infamous address to the Reichstag on 30 January 1939, veteran diplomats attended and reported with satisfaction on the international conference at Evian that revealed how trapped Europe's Jews were and then downplayed the prospect of international objections at the meeting following the November Pogrom that intensified the despoliation of Germany's Jews. The implicitly murderous Madagascar Plan, though not the invention of the German Foreign Office, found its most vigorous proponent in Franz Rademacher, who took over the Desk for Jewish Affairs in the

⁷ *Das Amt*, 63-68, 96-100, 112-23, 128-32, 140-43, 155, and 159.

⁸ *Das Amt*, 173 (Source: Oscar Gauye, Gabriel Imboden, and Daniel Bourgeois, eds., *Diplomatische Dokumente der Schweiz*, v. 12: 1937-1938 (Bern: Benteli, 1994), Doc. 449, 15 November 1938, 1031.

German Section at the end of March 1940. Sent to Serbia in October 1941 in response to the efforts of Felix Benzler, the long-time diplomat who was serving as Plenipotentiary of the Foreign Office to the Commander in Chief there, to rid himself of 8,000 Jews, Rademacher felt no inhibition upon his return to Berlin about entering the reason for his trip on his expense report as “Liquidation of Jews in Belgrade” (“Liquidation von Juden in Belgrad”).⁹

Rademacher’s candor attests to the widespread awareness within the Foreign Office that the *Vernichtung* Weizsäcker had predicted was unfolding. Diplomats assigned as Liaison Men to the High Commands of each Army fighting on the eastern front filed periodic, sometimes graphic reports; in addition, the reports of the *Einsatzgruppen*, complete with tabulations of the killed, circulated among the Deputy Ministers and the Department Heads (*Abteilungsleiter*).¹⁰ When the deportation trains started to roll out of Germany, the Foreign Office merely asked the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) to consult it in advance so it would have time to prepare misleading responses to inquiries from “malevolent foreign countries” (“des böswilligen Auslands”).¹¹ When similar transports began to depart from the occupied countries, diplomats occasionally warned about adverse effects on local public opinion, but the tepid and feckless nature of most of these interventions is exemplified by Weizsäcker’s decision merely to alter the wording of a memo on transports from France to say that the Foreign Office had “no objection” (“kein Einspruch”) rather than “no reservations” (“keine Bedenken”).¹² Long before many of the personnel of the News and Press Department, the Cultural Policy Department, and the Radio Policy Department convened at Krummhübel in April 1944 with representatives of the German missions to twelve European countries and heard detailed numerical summaries of the “executive measures” for “the physical removal of East European Jewry” (“Exekutiv-Maßnahmen” zur “physische[n] Beseitigung des Ostjudentums”), the leading personnel of the Foreign Office and its missions in Europe not only were fully informed about the Holocaust, but also had assumed central responsibility for “anti-Jewish propaganda abroad,” that is, in effect, for spreading justifications for mass murder.¹³

In short, the Foreign Office *during* the Third Reich was the Foreign Office *of* the Third Reich. “Working toward the Führer” was as typical here as it was in most institutions in Nazi Germany. *Das Amt* intentionally avoids echoing the tendency in earlier scholarship to write of the “role” of the Foreign Office between 1933 and 1945 because

9 *Das Amt*, 254.

10 *Das Amt*, 186-88, 208-14.

11 *Das Amt*, 181.

12 *Das Amt*, 229, 397 (Source: *Akten zur Deutschen Auswärtigen Politik*, Series E, v. II, Nr. 56, AA (Rademacher) an Reichssicherheitshauptamt, 20.3.1942). See also Werner von Barga’s stance regarding deportations from Belgium; *Das Amt*, 242-43.

13 *Das Amt*, 197-99 (on the meeting), 199 for the quotation (Source: Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Nachlass Schleier, NL965/24 II, Amtliche Niederschrift der Zeugenaussage, 11 June 1946, 32, 36. On the propaganda, see Jeffrey Herf, *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

that phrasing implies that the Nazi regime and its Foreign Office were distinct in some way and opens the way to apology. Of course, German diplomats did not all regard the Nazi regime with the same degree of enthusiasm and act identically. However, collaboration with and integration into the regime were the norm in the Foreign Office of this period, reluctance to cooperate exceptional, and resistance extremely rare.

II.

Such real resistance to the Nazi regime as is usually associated with the Foreign Office—resistance defined as action to bring down the Nazi state or sabotage its policies—actually came primarily from diplomats who were no longer active, including Albrecht von Bernstorff, Eduard Brücklmeier, Ulrich von Hassell, Otto Kiep, Richard Kuenzer, Herbert Mumm von Schwarzenstein, and Friedrich-Werner von der Schulenberg, and from individuals who were not really diplomats at all, having been recruited to carry out special assignments in the central offices, as were Hans Litter and Adam von Trott zu Solz, or abroad, as was Georg Duckwitz with the German Mission in Copenhagen. Heroic and rare exceptions among the professional diplomats were Hans Bernd von Haefen, the second man in the Cultural Policy Section, who participated in Helmuth James von Moltke’s Kreisau Circle, knew in advance of the plan to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944, and paid for that with his life later that year; Rudolf von Scheliha of the Press Section, who passed information on the Holocaust to Carl Burckhardt in Switzerland and was caught up in the capture of the so-called “Red Orchestra” espionage organization and executed in December 1942; and Gerhart Feine of the German Mission in Hungary, who worked with the Swiss Vice-Consul in Budapest in the Fall of 1944 to place 50,000 Jews in the city under Swiss diplomatic protection.¹⁴

Among the 6,500 employees of the Foreign Office in 1943, one can count the total number of genuine resisters on one’s hands. That Adam von Trott claimed otherwise to his Gestapo interrogators and that Joseph Goebbels did so to the German people via the diaries he intended to publish hardly proves the contrary. Trott’s assertion was, first, an evasion—an attempt to avoid naming his few fellow conspirators by claiming that everyone around him was in on the plot—and, second, a justification—an assertion that he was not a lone traitor but the expression of general opinion. The regime’s pronouncements, including the relevant passages in the Goebbels diaries, had a different

14 On these figures, see the relevant entries in *Historischer Dienst des Auswärtigen Amtes* (ed.), *Biographisches Handbuch des deutschen Auswärtigen Dienstes 1871-1945*, 3 volumes (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2000, 2005, 2008), and Wolfgang Benz and Walter H. Pehle, eds., *Lexikon des deutschen Widerstandes* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1994).

political valence but also were self-serving exaggerations. They were part of the Propaganda Minister's desperate and fierce efforts in Nazism's waning days to generate a new "stab in the back legend" and to shift the blame for what was befalling Germany.¹⁵

Given all of this, the limited extent of even oppositional sentiment, let alone action, in the Foreign Office that was reported in the only credible surviving contemporaneous document about political attitudes there prior to 1945 should come as no surprise. Its author, Fritz Kolbe, did not belong to either the Higher Service in the Foreign Office or the Nazi Party, but from the end of 1940 on, he managed the office of Ambassador Karl Ritter, the Foreign Office's liaison with the German Army and an advisor to Ribbentrop on issues of war economy. In this capacity, Kolbe came in contact with a great many high-ranking members of the diplomatic corps and saw a host of secret documents. Beginning in August 1943, he began using his authorized trips to Bern in Switzerland to pass some of these documents to Allen Dulles, the station chief of the OSS, the American intelligence organization. In April 1945 Kolbe delivered a remarkable document of his own creation, a list of 241 employees of the Foreign Office still resident in Berlin at the end of March 1945, along with their titles, office locations, and Kolbe's political evaluation of each.¹⁶ Of the 104 non-clerical personnel listed, Kolbe classified as "anti-Nazi and suitable for further employment" exactly 9 people, in other words, fewer than one in ten, and as "provisionally employable after a warning" another 28. As "unsuitable" and deserving of immediate dismissal and in most cases arrest, he listed the remaining 67 individuals, almost two-thirds of those he surveyed. To be sure, many of the diplomats who later claimed varying degrees of knowledge of wartime conspiracies against Hitler, such as Wilhelm Melchers and Herbert Blankenhorn, were no longer in Berlin in March 1945 and thus not evaluated by Kolbe, but even if one credits their autobiographical accounts, his ratios are telling. We have no reason to think that they did not apply to the entire German Foreign Service, including personnel posted abroad or in offices that had been evacuated from the capital.

The irony here, of course, is that Kolbe's evaluations *both* discredit the myth of the Foreign Office as a bastion of opposition to the Third Reich *and* lend credence to those Germans who told the Allies in the early 1950s that finding qualified and experienced diplomats who did not have at least outwardly pro-Nazi pasts was almost impossible. Indeed, the task grew more difficult in the first years after the war,

15 Cf. the interpretation of Heinz Schnepfen, "Vom Jagdtrieb historischer Ermittler," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 59 (2011), 595-600.

16 *Das Amt*, 319-20 (Source: United States National Archives and Records Administration, RG 226, E190C, Box 07, Personal des Auswärtigen Amtes nach dem Stand Ende März 1945, 17 April 1945, enclosed in letter from 110 to Climax and Philip Horton, 19 April 1945).

since 7 of the 37 diplomats Kolbe labeled “provisionally employable” or “anti-Nazi” died then, 6 of them in Soviet captivity.

Yet, the former and future German diplomats who later emphasized this difficulty were the same people who built the postwar legend of the Foreign Office as an oppositional bastion. Chief among them was Wilhelm Melchers, and that fact, too, has an ironic side. For Melchers appears to have engaged in retrospective projection of his own wily earlier behavior and motives onto many of his colleagues. Having been careful to keep his fingerprints off anything highly incriminating, even as Consul in Haifa in 1938-39 and thereafter in Berlin as head of the Orient Desk, which encompassed the Near East and entailed close relations with the Mufti of Jerusalem, Melchers, whose Party membership dates from the day Germany invaded Poland, even had an act that saved lives to his credit, albeit one that resulted from purely pragmatic considerations. In hopes of keeping Turkey neutral in the war, he had obstructed the SS’s desire to round up Turkish Jews residing in Europe until Turkey decided to permit the repatriation of at least some of them.¹⁷

The story of how the image of the Foreign Office and Nazism came to diverge profoundly from the reality described here did not begin with Melchers, although he was the author of decisive contributions to the process. Herbert Blankenhorn, who spoke good English thanks to his service at the German Embassy in Washington in 1936-39, laid the foundation for a romanticized postwar image in a report written for his American captors in early June 1945 entitled “The German Foreign Office under the Nazi Regime.” Following up on his earlier disarming admission that “we were all guilty for submitting to such a regime,” the report depicted Ernst von Weizsäcker as the leader of a long and losing rear guard action on the part of professional diplomats in the Foreign Office against the relentless ascent of amateurish and ignorant National Socialist appointees. The document also listed 30 “professional officials” in the central sections of the Office, including Blankenhorn himself, who had entered the diplomatic service before 1933, become merely nominal Nazis whom the Party distrusted, and been “outspoken opponents of the regime.”¹⁸ Blankenhorn thus expanded the number of alleged anti-Nazis in the Ministry well beyond Kolbe’s 9 and their presence well beyond the Cultural Policy Section where Haeften and Trott had worked. Needless to say, Blankenhorn did not specify to whom and how these people had been “outspoken,” and the diaries of Marie Vassiltchikov, a translator in the Foreign Office who was close to several of the conspirators of July 1944, indicate

17 Corry Guttstadt, *Die Türkei, die Juden und der Holocaust* (Berlin: Assoziation A, 2008), 271-82, 481-83.

18 *Das Amt*, 337-38 for the admission (Source: U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, RG 65, Entry 136 AB, Box 154, FBI File on Blankenhorn, Interrogation of Mr. Blankenhorn, 14 April 1945, 6-8). For the report and the accompanying correspondence identifying its author, see RG 59, Central Decimal File 1945-49, 840.414/6-745, Box 5702; the quoted words and the list appear on pages 8-10.

that he, in fact, was anything but.¹⁹ Three months later, in September 1945, Emil von Rintelen, the former director of the Political Section, reinforced Blankenhorn's claims by providing an American general with political evaluations of 72 senior personnel in the central sections, rating 28 of them as "reserved" or "critical" toward Nazism.²⁰ And, in October in Shanghai, Erich Kordt, who had been attached to the German embassies in faraway Japan and then China since February 1941, gave American intelligence a list of 40 diplomats posted both at home and abroad "whose anti-National Socialist attitude was unquestionable."²¹

Intended to persuade the American occupiers of the breadth of anti-Nazi sentiment in the Foreign Office, these three documents give a rather different impression when laid side by side. Not only do they provide no evidence of actual oppositional actions on the part of the people listed, aside from Kordt's efforts in London in 1939 to get Britain to stand firm in the Danzig crisis; the discrepancies among them suggest remarkably amorphous and inconsistent standards of inclusion. Altogether, the Blankenhorn, Kordt, and von Rintelen lists contain 83 different names, yet 70 of these appear on only one list, 10 on two, and just 3 on all. Moreover, only 1 of Kolbe's 9 "anti-Nazis" appears on even one of the other lists, and only 12 of his 28 "provisionally employable" people do. Clearly, such accounts might ingratiate their authors with Allied intelligence agencies, but they were unlikely to stand up to cross-examination in court if the U.S. followed through on its declared intention to place former professional diplomats on trial for complicity in Nazi crimes.

This is where Wilhelm Melchers came in, both literally because he was galvanized by the prospect of such a trial, and figuratively because he now proffered a kind of evidence that might be more difficult to undercut, namely that of two authoritative voices from the grave. In February 1946 as part of his denazification proceedings, Melchers had written a long memo regarding the conspiracy of 20 July 1944 that rested entirely on his uncorroborated memory and that furnished two central pillars of postwar apologetics surrounding the Foreign Office. First, he presented Weizsäcker as an inspiration for and central figure in the plot; and second, Melchers claimed that two days before the failed coup, he discussed the current personnel of the Foreign Office with the martyred von Trott, who affirmed that it was still "healthy" at its core.²² By June 1947, as the American trial plans began to coalesce, Melchers had allied with Erich Kordt and other of Weizsäcker's former associates to defend him as the

- 19 Marie Vassiltchikov, *Berlin Diaries, 1940-1945* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), especially 181. Birgit Ramscheid, *Herbert Blankenhorn (1904-1991)* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 2006), 64-76, carefully reviews the evidence regarding Blankenhorn's relationship with the principal resistance figures, depicting him as aware of the conspiracy, sympathetic, and adept at making fun of Nazi hacks in the Foreign Office, but not as a central participant.
- 20 U. S. National Archives and Records Administration, RG 226, XL Intelligence Reports, Box 292, Entry 19, Report XL 20140, The Organization of the German Foreign Office during the Last Year of the War, 18 September 1945; signed by General P.E. Peabody; the political evaluations appear on pages 6-13.
- 21 *Ibid.*, RG 84, Entry 2531B, Box 85, E. A. Bayne to Walter Rudlin, 13 October 1945, enclosing Supporting Memorandum to the Personal History Statement made by Dr. Erich Kordt; the list is Section III of the document.
- 22 *Das Amt*, 306 and 402 (Source: Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Nachlass Häften, v. 1: Aufzeichnung von Dr. Wilhelm Melchers, 28 February 1946, 14 and 32; also in Nachlass Becker, Bd. 9/2).

embodiment of the self-sacrificing and principled civil servants who had labored constantly from within to check the worst Nazi excesses. Melchers now also claimed to have learned from Helmut Bergmann that Weizsäcker had tried continuously to plant or retain anti-Nazis in key positions within the Foreign Office.²³ The former deputy head of the Personnel and Administrative Section, Bergmann was one of the only two men whose name appeared on all four of the lists of putatively anti- or non-Nazi diplomats to which we have referred, and he had disappeared into Soviet custody in April 1945, never to be seen or heard from again.

Melchers' *modus operandi* of telling non-disprovable inside stories was only one of many devices by which former diplomats typically sought to exonerate themselves after the war and, more specifically, avoid the potential penalties mandated by the Allied denazification process, which included loss of property and voting rights, and could prohibit return to the civil service for up to ten years. A process of mutual whitewashing sprang up in which diplomats exchanged attestations to each other's reservations about this or that action by the regime or evasion of this or that Nazi command. The most trivial indicators of hesitation about or deviation from the Party line became signs that one had "remained decent" ("anständig geblieben"), while in many cases the most damning indicators to the contrary, including membership in the SS, were concealed or obfuscated. Abetted by the declining willingness of German denazification courts even to question the autobiographies that former diplomats provided, many of them swiftly found posts after the war in the occupation administration or the fledgling institutions of German self-government. Although under Allied regulations all senior professional diplomats were to be brought before denazification courts categorized as "main perpetrator" or "perpetrator," almost none emerged from them as such; the process degenerated into an exoneration factory (*Entlastungsfabrik*).²⁴

Case 11, the so-called Ministries Case that began before an American Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in November 1947, threatened this trend of events and more. Among those accused of culpability in Nazi crimes—from conspiracy to wage aggressive war to participation in the murders of Jews and Allied servicemen--were eight former senior officials of the Foreign Office, including Ernst von Weizsäcker, who had served as the Foreign Office's top official (*Staatssekretär*) from 1938 to 1943. In contrast to its response to the indictments and conviction of Foreign Ministers Joachim von Ribbentrop and Constantin

23 *Das Amt*, 409-10 (Source: Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Nachlass Becker, Bd. 9, Melchers to Becker, 9 January 1948).

24 *Das Amt*, 342-52.

von Neurath by the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in 1945-46, the entire German diplomatic caste now reacted as if under direct attack. In fact, it was, for the indictment of Weizsäcker and his colleagues represented a rejection of distinctions between “real” and “nominal” Nazis and an assertion that what senior governmental figures had done and/or allowed was more important than their putative levels of National Socialist fervor. All the members of Germany’s elites whose defense since 1945 had been that they had acted as loyal state servants, apolitical and neutral specialists animated by duty and patriotism, and thus had not been discredited by the deeds of Nazi Germany, stood implicitly in the dock, as did their aspiration to return to prominent positions in the nation’s life. This is why not only Wilhelm Melchers rose to Weizsäcker’s defense, but also a united front of the nation’s old elites, including church functionaries, politicians, academics, and journalists. Convinced that they were refuting outrageous charges of “collective guilt,” Weizsäcker’s defenders had no trouble rationalizing extensive, behind-the-scenes manipulation of evidence. Hellmut Becker, Weizsäcker’s young lawyer, staged his defense in the style of a public relations campaign, the ugliest dimension of which became attempts to smear the chief prosecutor, a Jewish German and former Prussian civil servant named Robert Kempner, that descended into naked antisemitism.²⁵

That the judgment of the tribunal in Case 11 derided Weizsäcker’s conduct as “unresisting resistance” and convicted him and 6 of the other 7 indicted diplomats on one or more of the various charges suggests that the arguments of Melchers and Becker failed, but their actual impact is apparent in the wide gap between the harsh wording of the court’s verdict and the mildness of its sentences.²⁶ More importantly, the defense strategy struck a chord with German public opinion. By 1949, when the judgments came down, Germans were increasingly disposed to accept the conveniently self-exculpating view that Nazi bosses and SS fanatics had been the perpetrators, not the society and institutions that had served and strengthened Hitler’s regime. And, focusing on Weizsäcker’s predicament, stylized as inability to turn on his beloved country because it had repugnant leaders, suited postwar Germans’ egocentric fixation on their own suffering, not on what they had done to others. Moreover, after 1949, in the environment expressed and fostered by the Amnesty Law, the end of denazification, and legislation pursuant to Article 131 of the Basic Law of the Federal Republic that restored jobs and pension rights to almost all civil servants who been removed from

25 *Das Amt*, 380-420, 428-32.

26 For the quotation from the verdict, see U.S. Department of the Army, *Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals*, v. 14, 91.

office by the Allies, holding the Foreign Office to a higher standard of erstwhile political purity seemed unreasonable to many Germans. It also seemed increasingly unrealistic to the Western Allies, who long since had accepted that a democratic and pro-Western Federal Republic could not be built without the help of many people with compromised pasts.

III.

These circumstances explain not only the swift commutation of the sentences meted out in Case 11, but also the fact that the Foreign Office founded by the new Federal Republic of Germany in March 1951 took on both the name of the old entity in Berlin's Wilhelmstraße and a great many former occupants of the building. Thanks to the influence of Blankenhorn and Melchers on the recruitment of new consular officials, West Germany already had reneged on its public and private promises to the Western Allies that it would not enlist diplomats who had been members of the NSDAP. The practice had gone so far by late 1951 that a multi-party Parliamentary Investigating Committee undertook a review of 22 senior appointees and in June 1952 ruled that their pasts made 3 unsuitable for appointment altogether, 3 others, including Melchers, unsuitable for assignment to the Personnel Section, and 3 more unsuitable for posting abroad. The Committee also surveyed 237 of the 397 people who had been recruited to the new Higher Service and established that almost half of them had belonged to the NSDAP; among 129 re-employed veterans of the old Foreign Office, the share was 69%. Conversely, people who had been persecuted by the Nazi regime, i.e., real opponents of it, came to only 9% and 12% of the two groups, respectively.²⁷ But, if discomfort with this pattern was sufficient to provoke the investigation, it was not enough to make most of the recommendations stick or to shock either the German public or the Western Allies, who still possessed and *never once* exercised their right to veto appointments to the Foreign Office. Instead, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, a man with a seismographic feel for both German public opinion and his room for maneuver with the Allies, brought the whole matter to a close by calling, in the Bundestag, for an end to “sniffing around for Nazis” (“Naziriecherei”), and the floodgates opened.²⁸

From 1950 to 1954, the number of members of the Higher Service who had belonged to the NSDAP rose from 58 to 325, which raised the percentage of Nazis to a higher level than had prevailed in 1937. Interestingly, given the argument that the Foreign Office needed

27 *Das Amt*, 352-53, 485 (Sources: Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Nachlass Haas, Bd. 13; Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Sammlung Strobel, ED 329/4, Informationsbericht Strobel, 18 June 1952).

28 *Das Amt*, 487 (Source: Deutscher Bundestag, Stenographische Berichte, WP 1, 22 October 1952, 433).

the experience of these people, more than half of the former Party members in the Higher Service as of 1952 had not served previously as diplomats.²⁹ The Personnel Section initially decided to distinguish between “Party members and Nazis” by excluding people who had joined the Nazi Party before 1933, recruits to the General SS, and so-called “activists,” but made exceptions almost immediately, most notoriously perhaps in the cases of SS-*Untersturmführer* Franz Krapf, Herbert Müller, who as part of the German Section had been sufficiently involved in deportations to have to give up his post as Ambassador to Portugal when he was exposed in the late 1960s; and Otto Bräutigam, who had been a senior official in the Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories during most of the period 1941-44 and whose diary, later published by the East Germans, recorded his approval of the shootings of Jews.³⁰ Later, especially after the Federal Republic acquired sovereignty in 1955, the Foreign Office relaxed even these rather porous standards, and the number of former members of the SS increased noticeably.

The consequences for Germany’s postwar diplomacy were serious, particularly with regard to personnel and public relations. By the mid-1960s, the allocation of ambassadorships became an increasingly delicate task of matching pasts and posts: senior diplomats with “unburdened” histories went to formerly occupied or enemy countries, those with “burdened” political records stayed in Bonn or went to Arab, Asian, Latin American or formerly neutral states. Even their presence there sometimes led to embarrassment. Werner Junker, a former NSDAP member and participant in deportations from the Balkans, became Ambassador in Argentina in the last half of the 1950s. While there he made no attempt to find Adolf Eichmann after his indictment by a court in Cologne, even though two of Eichmann’s sons appeared before the consular division of the Embassy in Buenos Aires and obtained passports in their own names. Junker also shielded Karl Klingenfuss, a former official of the German Section in the Foreign Office, from his own government’s extradition request.³¹

Less outwardly visible was the creation of an inhospitable atmosphere in the Foreign Office for “re-emigrants,” people who had left voluntarily or compulsorily during the Nazi years and who now wanted to return to service. Werner Peisser found himself kicked from post to post by ambassadors who invented reasons for not accepting a reinstated Jew.³² Other such individuals learned they had to prove their loyalty by returning to Germany for a year before reinstatement,

29 *Das Amt*, 493-94.

30 *Das Amt*, 495, 589-95, 672-78.

31 *Das Amt*, 603-08. See, most recently, Deborah Lipstadt, *The Eichmann Trial* (New York: Schocken, 2011), 12.

32 *Das Amt*, 540-42 (Source: Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Personalakte Werner Peiser, Bd. 54870, Oellers to Pfeiffer, 20 November 1952, and Adalbert von Bayern to AA, 24 September 1954).

agreeing that they would not serve in the country that had harbored them, persuading their spouses to accept German citizenship and renounce all others, and demonstrating that the previous resignation had stemmed from “pure” and unselfish motives.³³ Perhaps the ugliest case of the last-named sort concerned Wolfgang Gans Edler Herr zu Putlitz, who had defected from his post in Holland to Britain in October 1939. Wilhelm Melchers blocked his reinstatement by citing at second hand the supposed testimony of another of the corpses Melchers found so handy, Putlitz’ former superior at The Hague who had died in Russian captivity. This superior had allegedly indicated that Putlitz had been blackmailed as a homosexual into changing sides and thus, said Melchers, he was a traitor, not a resister.³⁴ Fritz Kolbe found his way to appointment in the Foreign Office barred, not just by understandable fears that he might act again as an American agent, but also by unsubstantiated rumors that he had helped drive the last wartime German Ambassador to Switzerland to suicide.³⁵ Such readiness to believe the worst of people who had acted on their hatred of the Nazi state extended even to the matter of honoring their memory. For almost fifty years after the founding of the Federal German Foreign Office, it refused to recognize the resistance activities of Rudolf von Scheliha on the basis of the findings of the Gestapo investigation of 1942—ultimately disproved by historical research—that he had worked for and been paid by the Soviet Union.³⁶

Still another adverse consequence of the personnel policy of the 1950s was to drag the Foreign Office into elaborate efforts to cover up or otherwise protect employees implicated in war crimes. After Franz Nüßlein was rehired following his deportation from Czechoslovakia as a “non-amnestied war criminal” in 1955, the Foreign Office hid his personnel file in a wall safe and pressured the German publishers of the translation of Gerald Reitlinger’s *The Final Solution* to insert supposedly exonerating information in the author’s accounts of the wartime roles of Werner von Barga and Otto Bräutigam in the killing of Jews.³⁷ Indeed, the practice of protecting putative war criminals was extended beyond the ranks of the Foreign Office: Until 1969, the Foreign Office’s Central Legal Defense Agency (Zentrale Rechtsschutzstelle) considered a legitimate part of its responsibilities to be compiling lists of Germans under investigation or indictment elsewhere and disseminating these via the German Red Cross, so as to make sure that those affected did not blunder into arrest. Among the early beneficiaries of the work of this agency were Klaus Barbie and Kurt Lischka, both former SS officers and Gestapo chiefs. As late as 1968,

33 *Das Amt*, 534-38, 542-45.

34 *Das Amt*, 548-50.

35 *Das Amt*, 551-58.

36 *Das Amt*, 558-69.

37 *Das Amt*, 585-89.

one of the principal officials in the Legal Defense Agency declared its work justified because “the worst crimes against humanity were the so-called war criminal judgments of individual or multiple enemy states because these in effect abolished prisoner-of-war status.”³⁸

Despite periodic flaps in the German and international press about incidents such as these and recurrent exposures of the wartime conduct of people who had entered the Foreign Office in the 1950s, by 1970, when Herbert Blankenhorn completed his term as Ambassador in London, or 1971, when Wilhelm Melchers died, either man could look back with considerable satisfaction on his efforts to mold the image of the German Foreign Office during the Nazi era and to shape its personnel during the initial phase of the Federal Republic. They had established in the public mind, not only in Germany, two not quite compatible perceptions. First, by making sure that people like them in background, training, and behavior dominated the postwar Foreign Office and that people of different and dissonant experiences were kept either down or out, they imparted an important historical-political message, namely that the way they claimed to have survived the Third Reich—at their posts and doing their duty, but in dissent—had been the right one, and that those who had done anything else were suspect. Second, through constant repetition and mutual reinforcement, these men and their allies in their age cohort had propagated the legend of the Foreign Office as an island of decency in the Nazi swamp. That the myth of the Office’s opposition and resistance had become official doctrine is demonstrated by the publication in 1979 of its pamphlet “Foreign Policy today” (*Auswärtige Politik heute*). It attested that “[t]he Foreign Office offered tenacious and time-winning resistance to the plans of the Nazi power holders without being able to prevent the worst. The Office long remained non-political and was regarded by the National Socialists as a site of opposition.”³⁹

Of course, the durability of these legends owed much to their convenience. Both at home and abroad, they legitimated the process of hiring people who had joined the NSDAP and served the Nazi state. They were so politically useful, in fact, that they outlasted the other simplistic fictions of the early 1950s concerning the forced complicity of German industrialists, the German churches, and the German Army, at least in the public mind. Even today, former diplomats who obtained new leases on professional life in the Federal Republic, along with their protégés, insist that postwar service justifies erasing earlier deeds from public memory.⁴⁰ Professional historians and even some members of the diplomatic service may have come to think more realistically about

38 *Das Amt*, 678-81; for the quotation, 680 (Source: Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, B 83, Bd. 574, Vermerk Steinmann, 28 August 1968).

39 *Das Amt*, 12. The original German reads: “Das AA leistete den Plänen der NS-Machthaber zähen, inhaltenden Widerstand, ohne jedoch das Schlimmste verhüten zu können. Das Amt blieb lange eine ‘unpolitische’ Behörde und galt den Nationalsozialisten als eine Stätte der Opposition.”

40 See Eckart Conze, Norbert Frei, Peter Hayes, and Moshe Zimmermann, “Unser Buch hat einen Nerv getroffen,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 10 December 2010, 13.

the Foreign Office after 1979, thanks to the publications of Christopher Browning and Hans-Jürgen Döscher, but the fact that Germans bought tens of thousands of copies of *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit* in the last two months of 2010 suggests that the general public had not.⁴¹

The largely positive public reception of *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit* also suggests something else: that Germans are no longer preoccupied with the inner struggles and subjective feelings of their countrymen in the period 1933-45, no longer absorbed by the desperate search for reassuring or escapist answers to the question “how could this have happened?” but instead now willing to focus on what those countrymen, diplomats included, actually did and did not do. In this climate, a generation’s timeworn evasions and excuses no longer command more attention than the shrieks of Nazi Germany’s millions of victims. Some may lament this development; we do not.⁴²

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41 Christopher Browning’s path-breaking *The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1973) did not appear in German until more than three decades later as *Die Endlösung und das Auswärtige Amt* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010). Hans-Jürgen Döscher’s important contributions were, in order of publication, *Das Auswärtige Amt im Dritten Reich. Diplomatie im Schatten der Endlösung* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1987), *Verschworene Gesellschaft: Das Auswärtige Amt unter Adenauer zwischen Neubeginn und Kontinuität* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1995), and *Seilschaften. Die verdrängte Vergangenheit des Auswärtigen Amtes* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2005).

42 For an appalling expression of such regret, see Bernhard Schlink, “Die Kultur des Denunziatorischen,” *Merkur* 745 (June 2011), 473-86.

