

## THE GERMAN FOREIGN OFFICE, THE NAZI DICTATORSHIP, AND THE HOLOCAUST: A CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON *DAS AMT UND DIE VERGANGENHEIT*<sup>1</sup>

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Not since the publication of Daniel J. Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* in 1996 has a book on the history of National Socialism had as great a public resonance in Germany as the report of the independent commission of historians appointed in July 2005 by then Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer. The commission's task was to address the "history of the Auswärtiges Amt [German Foreign Office] in the National Socialist era, the treatment of this past after the reestablishment of the Auswärtiges Amt in 1951, and the question of continuity/discontinuity in personnel after 1945" (12).<sup>2</sup> The book, edited by four university professors from Germany, the United States, and Israel and written by twelve collaborators, is divided into two largely unconnected parts. The first part, approximately 300 pages long, deals with the Auswärtiges Amt in the Third Reich, primarily with its personnel structure and the role it played in the Holocaust. The second part, about 400 pages long, shows how the Auswärtiges Amt, the political community, and the West German public dealt with the Amt's Nazi-era past after 1945.

My observations focus on the first part of *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit*, which has been the focus of the debate about the book thus far. How do the findings presented in the commission's report fit within the current state of research? What advances in knowledge does it offer? Why has the book created such controversy? And what does that controversy tell us about our historical and memory culture, the expertise of specialists and the state of research on contemporary history?

### I. The Auswärtiges Amt and Its Personnel

Historians agree today that the Auswärtiges Amt was not a "foreign body" (*Fremdkörper*) within the Nazi system of rule. Rather, like other governmental institutions and traditional elites, it contributed to the establishment of a totalitarian regime and to the realization of its policies of racist disenfranchisement, conquest, annihilation, and genocide. Already the Nuremberg Trials, where the onetime Foreign Ministers Konstantin Freiherr von Neurath and Joachim von Ribbentrop

1 This article is a shortened version of the author's essay "Das Auswärtige Amt, die NS-Diktatur und der Holocaust. Kritische Bemerkungen zu einem Kommissionsbericht," *Vierteljahresshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 59 (2011): 167–92. Additional references can be found there. I cannot comment here on the debate that followed the publication of my essay in April 2011 or on the reaction of the four editors, who have thus far responded to my critique with invective rather than argument.

2 Page numbers cited in parentheses refer to: Eckart Conze, Norbert Frei, Peter Hayes, and Moshe Zimmermann, with the collaboration of Annette Weinke and Andrea Wiegeshoff, *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit. Deutsche Diplomaten im Dritten Reich und in der Bundesrepublik* (Munich, 2010).

were convicted along with State Secretary Ernst von Weizsäcker and several other diplomats, determined that the Auswärtiges Amt was complicit in violent and criminal acts.

That finding was long obscured in the Federal Republic by an exculpatory myth that was propagated not only by foreign service personnel. There was little that scholarly work on Nazi foreign policy<sup>3</sup> or the fact that many compromising documents had been published early on in the series *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918–1945 (ADAP)*<sup>4</sup> could do against this manipulation of the past. Since the late 1970s, starting with the pioneering studies by Christopher R. Browning and Hans-Jürgen Döscher, basic research on the participation of the Auswärtiges Amt in Nazi crimes appeared and refuted many aspects of early postwar versions of the past.<sup>5</sup>

The commission of historians could thus rely upon a solid basis of well-documented specialist literature. The first section of its report is essentially a synthesis of what was known. Given the previous lack of an overview of the research on the subject, it is a considerable accomplishment to have provided a compact, accessible survey for the general public. This achievement in synthesis is marred, however, by a simplification and over-interpretation of the results of previous scholarly research.

While one can certainly agree with the unsurprising conclusion that the Nazi dictatorship's diplomatic elite did not fundamentally differ from other old elites in their professional and moral deformation, one would expect a scholarly analysis to make careful differentiations. The career civil servants of the Auswärtiges Amt can be compared in many respects to the military elite. The generals and general staff were also characterized by social, professional, and political-ideological homogeneity; with their revanchist goals, nationalism, and political and racial animosities, they too could make common cause with the Nazis on a number of points.<sup>6</sup> Just like older diplomats, older officers allowed themselves, despite reservations, to become part of the Nazis' ever more radical policy of violence. They too integrated themselves within the system of totalitarian rule through numerous acts of accommodation and individual *Gleichschaltung* (synchronization). Resistance was the exception. That applies to the foreign service as well, as the commission rightly emphasizes – even though the myth of the Auswärtiges Amt as a “hotbed of resistance” (*Hort des Widerstands*) had been dispelled long ago.

3 Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, *Nationalsozialistische Außenpolitik 1933–1938* (Frankfurt am Main, 1968).

4 *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918–1945 (ADAP)*, series A–E (Göttingen [and elsewhere], 1950–1995). The volumes in series C (1933–1937) and D (1937–1941) also appeared in English translation.

5 Christopher R. Browning, *The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office: A Study of Referat D III of Abteilung Deutschland 1940–1943* (New York, 1978); Hans-Jürgen Döscher, *Das Auswärtige Amt im Dritten Reich. Diplomatie im Schatten der „Endlösung“* (Berlin, 1987); Sebastian Weitkamp, *Braune Diplomaten. Horst Wagner und Eberhard von Thadden als Funktionäre der „Endlösung“* (Bonn, 2008); Michael Mayer, *Staaten als Täter. Ministerialbürokratie und „Judenpolitik“ in NS-Deutschland und Vichy-Frankreich. Ein Vergleich* (Munich, 2010).

6 See Johannes Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer. Die deutschen Oberbefehlshaber im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion 1941/42*, 2nd ed. (Munich, 2007); Jürgen Förster, *Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat. Eine strukturgeschichtliche Analyse* (Munich, 2007).

Although Hitler and his confidants distrusted the old elites in the civil service, diplomatic corps, and military, and repeatedly announced plans to replace them with “genuine National Socialists,” the Nazi regime remained dependent on their competence and professionalism for many years. In this regard, however, there were important differences between the diplomatic and military elite. The Nazi regime, up to its final days, had to entrust the conduct of war and military administration—core aspects of its policy of violence—to officers who had been trained and socialized in Imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic. The old officer corps could not be replaced – and continued to serve until literally the last shot was fired.

The situation was different with the diplomatic corps. The process of transformation took place earlier and with more lasting effects. The personnel structure of the *Auswärtiges Amt* during the Nazi era is one of the focal points of the commission’s report. New and nuanced findings might have been expected on this issue, since the authors could draw upon personnel files and the hitherto published volumes of a detailed biographical encyclopedia.<sup>7</sup> That expectation went unmet, however. The report’s one-sided conception and apodictic tone stand in the way of a balanced account and are repeatedly contradicted by facts about personnel policy that find mention in the report. That leads to obscurities and inconsistencies.

Which part of the personnel does the report examine? It focuses on the senior service (*höherer Dienst*), which ranged from legation secretaries to the State Secretary (*Staatssekretär*), and on academic experts employed during the war. Which areas and individuals are important for the commission’s interpretation? The authors distinguish between “classic” diplomacy and the new tasks imposed by criminal racial and occupation policies as well as between “old” and “new” diplomats. The report concentrates on the *Amt*’s participation in the Nazis’ rule by force in Germany and Europe and consequently gives particular weight to the departments, divisions, and foreign outposts involved: until May 1940 above all the department D/Deutschland, thereafter the newly established “Abteilung Deutschland” (renamed the *Referatsgruppe Inland II* in April 1943) and its “Jewish department” (*Judenreferat*; D III, later In II A), and the diplomatic missions in the countries and regions under German control, whose key positions were staffed by “new” diplomats.

For the commission’s line of argument, “classical diplomacy” is only of marginal relevance. It is surprising then that the authors

7 *Auswärtiges Amt, Biographisches Handbuch des deutschen Auswärtigen Dienstes 1871-1945* (Paderborn, 2000- ); three volumes (A-R) have appeared to date.

refer to that sphere of activity to demonstrate the homogeneity and continuity of the diplomatic elite. In their analysis, the replacement of the diplomat Konstantin von Neurath in the foreign minister's office by the party man Joachim von Ribbentrop in February 1938 did not have any significance for personnel policy. Contradicting that point, however, the report shows that important positions in the areas of primary interest to the commission were increasingly filled with outsiders from Nazi Party organizations and young diplomats "with party backgrounds." This form of Nazification began during Neurath's final years as foreign minister but intensified after Ribbentrop's appointment. The beneficiaries were above all the staff members of the Dienststelle Ribbentrop, a Nazi Party foreign policy office under Ribbentrop's direction, 28 of whom were transferred to the Auswärtiges Amt after Ribbentrop's appointment as Foreign Minister and subsequently held "key functions in the policy of annihilation" (128).

The commission's overarching interpretation is also contradicted by its findings regarding the ministry's wartime personnel structure, which state that Ribbentrop's personnel policy aimed "to integrate representatives of important party organizations within his ministry and to limit career diplomats to a narrowly curtailed group of tasks" (154). The domestic and Jewish departments and most of the foreign postings in German-ruled Europe were dominated by Party activists and Nazified civil servants. The commission's report wavers between acknowledging this fact and trying to replace the "master narrative" (295) juxtaposing "old" and "new" diplomats with an equally questionable narrative of a negatively homogeneous government agency—a narrative that disregards most of the distinctions noted in the report.

There are sufficient examples among the diplomatic elite to show that civil servants who had joined the foreign service before 1933 participated in the disenfranchisement of groups targeted by the regime, its preparations for war, exploitation, and annihilation when that was asked of them. But in contrast to the military, the Auswärtiges Amt was characterized by a certain division of labor between career civil servants and the party-loyalist newcomers. Whereas career civil servants continued to dominate in the classic diplomatic functions and thereby advanced the Nazis' aggressive foreign policy, positions in the new areas of policy (racial policy, occupation, economic exploitation, and the Holocaust) were primarily assigned to party loyalists who had newly joined the foreign office.

The commission's suggestion, in the book's introduction, that drawing a distinction between traditional diplomats and Nazi careerists must be regarded as a diversionary tactic (12) does as little to advance scholarship as does its general line of argument attributing almost all actions on the part of the foreign service to *the* Auswärtiges Amt and *the* diplomats—that is, to the ministry as a whole and to all of its personnel. By wartime at the latest the foreign service was no longer so homogeneous. Of course, there were not two foreign ministries, a good “old” one and a bad “new” one; and, of course, there were many points of connection between different areas of responsibility. Nonetheless, ignoring the evident differences in personnel structure and in the division of responsibilities within the Auswärtiges Amt stands in the way of a nuanced, hermeneutic, and inductive general analysis.

## II. The Auswärtiges Amt and the Holocaust

The diplomatic elite's participation in the disenfranchisement, persecution, and murder of Europe's Jews is the second central subject of the commission's investigation. Scholarly research has demonstrated that the Auswärtiges Amt actively participated in the exclusion of Jews from the National Socialist “national community” (*Volksgemeinschaft*) in the early years of the dictatorship. The acceptance and, at times, eager implementation of the regime's “Jewish policy” was facilitated by the conservative elite's anti-Semitic consensus that the “disproportionate influence” of Jews in German public life had to be brought to an end. Leading representatives of traditional diplomacy like Neurath and State Secretary Bernhard von Bülow share responsibility for the first phases of anti-Semitic discrimination and persecution. Only a few diplomats refused to go along with anti-Semitic policies or decided to resign. Members of the foreign service were confronted with a question of conscience well before 1938 or the outbreak of the war. The response of the overwhelming majority was shameful.

The commission's report describes the involvement of the Auswärtiges Amt in racial policy in the years up to 1939 on the basis of existing scholarship, but suggests a linear development and uses the concept of the “final solution” (*Endlösung*), which long had a multiplicity of meanings, in a potentially misleading way. A fundamental problem of the commission's interpretation is that it clearly rests on the premise that the disenfranchisement of the Jews led inevitably to their murder and that this course must have been clear to the members

of the diplomatic elite even before the start of the war. This premise contradicts scholarly findings on the unfolding of developments that culminated in the Holocaust. Despite all the ominous signs, which those involved interpreted differently, the decision to carry out the mass deportation and mass murder of Jews was not taken until the war was underway— and even then, the decision was the result of a complex series of developments that culminated in genocide in the late summer-early fall of 1941.

The first phases in the regime's anti-Jewish policy—the marginalization, disenfranchisement, and plundering of the German Jews and the application of pressure on them to emigrate—were generally accepted, supported, and in some cases actively carried out by the old-line ministerial civil service, including the personnel of the Auswärtiges Amt, isolated reservations and protests notwithstanding. When it came to the next, more radical steps of deportation and murder, the Nazi leadership believed that it could no longer trust old elites and officials. From 1938 on, it therefore transferred these tasks increasingly to new institutions and actors. The Reich bureaucracy's self-adaptation to Nazi rule was now increasingly supplemented by the growing power of new central agencies and the Nazi Party's infiltration of older agencies. The party and, above all, the SS and the police took over the leading role in translating the eliminationist radical anti-Semitism of the state's leaders into action. The Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA) established in September 1939 became the control center of the "final solution." By contrast, the regime's targeted manipulation of the old elites and institutions varied in pace and results. The upper ranks of the military, for example, remained highly homogenous and became radicalized on their own without the influence of Nazi newcomers, whereas the Auswärtiges Amt, as noted above, experienced a quantitative and qualitative change in its personnel structure.

The report's account of the war years does not do justice to the complex and multifaceted process of the radicalization of an institution and its personnel. Too often, the report intersperses accepted facts with controversial findings or incorrect information. The Auswärtiges Amt was undoubtedly "extraordinarily well informed" about Nazi crimes, and German diplomats were without question "facilitators of occupation, informed parties, and—repeatedly—accomplices" (167). Nonetheless, the formulation that "*the* German diplomats *enabled* the leadership of the Third Reich to carry out an inhumane program until the end of the war" [emphasis added] is too broad to accept.

And what is meant by the following assertion: “Although the entire civil service was indispensable for anti-Jewish measures, in the end the Auswärtiges Amt was the only ministry authorized to participate directly in the implementation of this policy beyond the Reich’s borders” (169). Since German occupation policy was characterized by a plethora of special agencies and attempts at self-empowerment by every possible Reich agency, it is absurd to attribute an exceptional status to the Auswärtiges Amt. This claim, which is not further elaborated, is also misleading because it suggests that the Auswärtiges Amt was not only indispensable but decisive in carrying out the Holocaust, equal in influence to the Reichssicherheitshauptamt. In the commission’s view, it was with the transition from emigration to a “territorial final solution,” namely the plans in 1940–41 for a “relocation” of the Jews (to Madagascar, for instance) that the Auswärtiges Amt began to play a “leading role in Jewish policy” (183). Elsewhere in the report, it is claimed that the Auswärtiges Amt and the Reichssicherheitshauptamt closely cooperated on “Jewish measures”—which is true—and that “sometimes the one, sometimes the other” took the lead (287). The diplomatic corps and the SS alternating in spearheading racial policy and genocide: that interpretation is not only surprising but absurd.<sup>8</sup>

No less surprising is the unsubstantiated claim that the Auswärtiges Amt seized “the initiative for a solution to the ‘Jewish question’ on the European level” after the German invasion of the Soviet Union and “directly participated” in the decision on the “final solution.” “The fate of the German Jews was sealed on September 17, 1941: on that day, a meeting between Hitler and Ribbentrop took place” (185). In this formulation, this thesis stands in opposition to nearly all research on the genesis of the decision in favor of genocide. It is contradicted by the fact that Ribbentrop’s influence within the Nazi hierarchy rapidly decreased during the war and that, by 1941, he was informed about fundamental policy decisions but rarely participated in making them. Accordingly, his ministry had virtually no say about the *Ostraum* (eastern theater) from the outset.

At other points in the commission’s report, connections between knowledge of criminal acts and complicity in them are drawn too quickly. The report includes broad speculation on what German diplomats could have known and must have known about the Nazi leadership’s intentions regarding the Jews. Already in 1938, “the signs were multiplying that Hitler had decided to pursue the most radical of

8 Recent general histories of the Holocaust do not assign nearly so large a role to the Auswärtiges Amt. See: Peter Longerich, *Politik der Vernichtung. Eine Gesamtdarstellung der nationalsozialistischen Judenverfolgung* (Munich, 1998); Saul Friedländer, *Das Dritte Reich und die Juden. Verfolgung und Vernichtung 1933–1945* (Bonn, 2006). The same holds for the classic studies by Raul Hilberg: *Die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden*, expanded paperback edition, 3 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1990); *Täter, Opfer, Zuschauer. Die Vernichtung der Juden 1933–1945* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992).

all ‘solutions’” (172). And, according to the report, “the” Auswärtiges Amt had already spoken out in early 1939 in favor of “striving toward a ‘comprehensive solution’ [*Gesamtlösung*] in the form of a ‘Jewish reservation’ [*Judenreservat*] or through physical annihilation” (174). Moving the “resolutions” (*Entschlüsse*) for a genocidal “final solution” as well as the ministerial bureaucracy’s knowledge of those resolutions back in time to 1938/39 is, to put it mildly, audacious. By contrast, it has long been known that the diplomatic elite were well informed about the first mass murder of Jews in the occupied areas of the Soviet Union and about the radicalization of policy toward the Jews through reports from the Reichssicherheitshauptamt. The commission’s conclusion that the Auswärtiges Amt “not only took note [of the RSHA reports] but also used them as the foundation for its own ministerial actions” (186) is, however, as speculative as its equation of awareness with “sympathy” (*Verständnis*) (188).

Alongside numerous pointed theses presented without adequate evidence stand solid passages in which the scholarly literature is well summarized and enriched by archival discoveries. The report deals with the war years by region, which makes for a certain amount of repetition but has the advantage of offering a clearly structured overview. It claims to deal with the Auswärtiges Amt’s part in German rule over half of Europe, but in fact the “comprehensive account” (*Gesamtdarstellung*) (11) concentrates overwhelmingly on the persecution and murder of the Jewish population. The report finds that the Amt was “fighting a losing battle” in occupied Soviet territory and was only an “uninvited spectator” (201). In the Reich Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia it had “no influence to speak of” (222); and it had only “limited” opportunities in the Generalgouvernement (225). Since the occupied Polish and Soviet territories were the central arena of the Holocaust, these findings significantly qualify the report’s core thesis that the Auswärtiges Amt played a leading role in the regime’s crimes. The ministry’s influence in Norway was limited, too, and somewhat greater but still not important in Belgium. In Denmark, the diplomat responsible for maritime affairs, Georg Duckwitz, contributed to the rescue of the majority of Danish Jews.

The situation in France was very different. The German embassy in Paris was able to establish itself as a key authority alongside the military occupation administration and the SS and police agencies. It assumed a correspondingly large share of responsibility for anti-Semitic measures. Diplomatic influence in the Netherlands was much

more limited, but there too representatives of the *Auswärtiges Amt* participated in the violent policies directed at the local population. The involvement of the ministry and its personnel in the “final solution” in Serbia, Greece, and Hungary was considerable. Particularly shocking was its active assistance in the deportation, in the spring and summer of 1944, of 437,000 Jews from Hungary to Auschwitz, where 320,000 of them were murdered on arrival. Here the figure given in the commission’s report (180,000) is clearly too low. The *Amt*’s participation in the murder of Jews and its cooperation with the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* in Southeastern Europe is beyond dispute, even if there, too, one cannot really speak of it having had a “leading role.” In the states allied with the *Reich*, the representatives of the *Auswärtiges Amt* also frequently played a pernicious role in “Jewish policy.” Its complicity was especially significant in Slovakia, Croatia, and Bulgaria.

Who were the main actors in the *Auswärtiges Amt*’s assistance in the Holocaust? A sober analysis must include the observation that the decisive officials in the department responsible, the *Abteilung Deutschland* (later the departmental division *Inland II*), and its “Jewish department,” which worked closely with the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*—Martin Luther, Franz Rademacher, Eberhard von Thadden, and Horst Wagner—were “new” diplomats who had joined the foreign service in the late 1930s and were closely associated with Nazi Party organizations. Other important confidants of Ribbentrop’s and the Nazis in the *Auswärtiges Amt* included State Secretary Gustav Adolf Baron Steengracht von Moyland, State Secretary Wilhelm Keppler and the department heads Hermann Kriebel (personnel), Walter Wüster (information), and Franz Alfred Six (cultural policy). The majority of the foreign service members seriously implicated in Nazi crimes in occupied Europe were newcomers who had been transferred from the *Dienststelle Ribbentrop*, the Nazi Party’s overseas organization, the party itself, or the SS or SA: Otto Abetz (France), Otto Bene (the Netherlands), Manfred Freiherr von Killinger (Slovakia, Romania), Hanns Ludin (Slovakia), Eduard Veessenmayer (Serbia, Hungary), Siegfried Kasche (Croatia) und Adolf-Heinz Beckerle (Bulgaria), to name only the most important. In addition, there were also the police attachés and consultants on “Jewish affairs” on loan from the police agencies and the SS.

The commission’s report attributes the actions of these perpetrators generally to *the Auswärtiges Amt* and *the diplomatic corps* as

a whole. By contrast, the commission treats the opposition figure Adam von Trott zu Solz, who first joined the *Auswärtiges Amt* in June 1940, as if he did not really belong to the foreign service. Trott, they write, did not feel “particularly tied personally or institutionally” to the *Auswärtiges Amt* and was “increasingly stylized as a member of Wilhelmstrasse” only after 1945 (302). Such differences in assigning “bad” and “good” newcomers to the foreign service are rather inconsistent.

To be sure, the responsibility of numerous career civil servants is beyond dispute. The perpetrators also included “old” diplomats such as Felix Benzler, the *Auswärtiges Amt*’s representative in Belgrade, and Fritz Schönberg, the consul general in Salonika, and numerous lower-ranking officials serving abroad. Moreover, one should not underestimate the assistance that the *Amt*’s traditional departments provided to its “Jewish department.” Senior *Auswärtiges Amt* officials serving under the Nazi true believer Ribbentrop—including the career diplomats who held the top positions in the ministry until 1943—were not only informed about the path to the “final solution” in general (Under State Secretary Luther represented the ministry at the Wannsee Conference) but also about the collaboration of departments in their own ministry. The conduct of a conservative senior official such as State Secretary von Weizsäcker could be described as having swung between approval and a resigned, formal acceptance of responsibility. It is beyond dispute that the participation of often anti-Semitic “old” diplomats in formulating “Jewish policy” undoubtedly helped remove obstacles on the way to the Holocaust.

The core thesis of the commission’s report—that the *Auswärtiges Amt* and its staff played a central, at times even leading role in the Nazi regime’s anti-Jewish measures and were significantly involved in the decision to launch the Holocaust—is, however, untenable. The diplomatic elite certainly participated in the Nazi regime’s crimes, including the disenfranchisement, persecution, and murder of Jews. Nevertheless, it is important not to overlook qualitative distinctions between individuals and departments within the ministry or the complicated and contradictory nature of the process of radicalization. The commission’s sweeping and undifferentiated interpretations represent a step backwards from scholarly efforts to achieve a nuanced picture of the multilayered responsibility for the Holocaust. Current scholarship sees a complex interaction of the entire apparatus of the state in which the *Auswärtiges Amt* was only

one of many components. The course, tempo, and scope of the policy of murder was determined above all by Hitler and the SS. Anyone who attributes excessive importance in this process to an institution that was not unimportant but nonetheless subordinate such as the *Auswärtiges Amt* runs the risk of underrating the initiative, responsibility, and actions of the main perpetrators.

### III. The Foreign Ministry without Foreign Policy

The commission's simplification of the question of responsibility for the Holocaust consists not only in its insufficient effort at setting the *Amt's* assistance in anti-Jewish measures within its political, military, and bureaucratic as well as structural, intentional, and functional contexts. The report's narrow perspective on the Holocaust and its prehistory is also inadequate. As a result of this self-limitation, the Nazis' other crimes are neglected and the genocide of the Jews is detached from an essential context. Nazi rule involved numerous other complexes of crimes touching millions of victims beyond the Holocaust, particularly in Eastern Europe, where the exploitation, abuse, and murder of POWs and non-Jewish civilians were part of everyday life under German occupation. If this aspect of the Nazi rule receives only passing mention in the commission's report, the traditional task of the foreign service is almost entirely neglected: "classic" foreign policy.

How is an assessment of the *Auswärtiges Amt* in the Nazi dictatorship possible without examining the intentions and conduct within its core area of professional concern? The commission's report makes only superficial mention of the motives and hopes most diplomats had in welcoming the change of regime in 1933, quickly coming to terms with the new rulers, and helping establish the dictatorship. Nor does the report consider the diplomatic corps' response to the new regime in light of the development of the diplomatic elite from the late years of the Empire. The path that led from revanchist thinking before 1933 to support for Hitler's radical foreign policy should be part of a scholarly analysis of the diplomatic elite because otherwise their conduct during the Third Reich appears to have been almost without preconditions. On this topic, however, the commission's report offers only inadequate and contradictory hints. For the 1930s, the report briefly mentions that "Hitler increasingly sought to set the course, method, and tempo of foreign policy and to leave merely routine day-to-day business to the professional elite in the *Auswärtiges*

Amt” (89). A few lines later, it says that Hitler could not and did not want to dispense with most of the diplomats in the “implementation of revisionist policy”—which does not sound like being shunted aside and left with routine work. With regard to foreign policy in the years from 1939 to 1945, the report makes do with the brief comments that “classic diplomacy” and the “old diplomats” lost influence under the conditions of the war (138, 152).

The commission thus makes things easy for itself. German foreign policy during the “years of peace” (*Friedensjahre*) up to 1939 has been well researched.<sup>9</sup> That knowledge is hardly used in the report. For the war years, however, there are no general surveys of German diplomacy, and bilateral relations with numerous countries and many aspects of foreign policy have not yet been studied. The commission had the opportunity to make a real contribution here and to determine whether the diplomatic corps did, in fact, exercise little influence in its core areas of competence after 1939. To what extent, for instance, was it the doing of the diplomatic elite that the unstable coalition with states like Italy, Japan, Finland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania held together as long as it did and thus prolonged Germany’s reign of terror over large parts of Europe? Did the Foreign Office give serious thought to how the German Reich could prepare for peace or at least avoid a catastrophic dictated peace settlement? Dealing with such questions regarding the influence of the *Auswärtiges Amt* on foreign policy during the war could have helped to demonstrate this elite’s professional and moral deformation: its failure and its involvement in wrongdoing—which was not limited to its ancillary roles in the rule of occupied Europe and in the Holocaust.

The same omission applies to the prewar period. The report’s brief remarks on foreign policy before 1939 do not provide a picture of how the foreign service allowed itself to be harnessed for an ever more radical revisionist and expansionist foreign policy, thereby contributing to the preparations for a war of aggression. On this issue, too, the commission passed up the opportunity to set the *Auswärtiges Amt*’s past into the broader political history of the Nazi dictatorship. Narrowing the examination to a few aspects of foreign policy, even if central ones such as “Jewish policy,” reinforces the lack of contextualization. In the end, the report does not explain how the *Amt*’s participation in Nazi crimes fit in with its “classic” foreign policy activities, how “new” and “old” diplomacy influenced one another and became intermingled, or to what extent the ministry’s conduct of diplomacy

9 See, above all, Jacobsen, *Außenpolitik*; Gerhard L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, 2 vols. (Chicago/London 1970/1980); Rainer F. Schmidt, *Die Außenpolitik des Dritten Reiches 1933-1939* (Stuttgart, 2002). For an overview of recent research, see Marie-Luise Recker, *Die Außenpolitik des Dritten Reiches*, 2nd ed. (Munich, 2010).

aided a criminal foreign policy. The part that the Auswärtiges Amt played in the criminal policies of the Nazi state would have been clearer if the commission had taken its core diplomatic activities into consideration. The commission only partially fulfilled its mandate to investigate the “history of the foreign service in the era of National Socialism”: a comprehensive assessment of the Auswärtiges Amt is not possible without inclusion of foreign policy. Thus, even after the publication of the commission’s report, the deficit in the scholarly literature that Marie-Luise Recker noted twenty years ago remains: “A thorough, archive-based account of the structure and policies of the Auswärtiges Amt in the Third Reich is still missing.”<sup>10</sup>

#### IV. Public Perception and Contemporary History

*Das Amt und die Vergangenheit* immediately attracted public notice unusual for a scholarly work. The official presentation of the report in the Auswärtiges Amt on October 28, 2010, was accompanied and even preceded by reviews of the book and interviews with the editors in the major German newspapers as well as on radio and television. The tenor of the reviews and media coverage was overwhelmingly positive, even enthusiastic. The commission’s report quickly made it onto the bestseller list and remained there for many weeks. A contributing factor to that success was the spectacular formulation used by the commission’s spokesperson, Eckart Conze, in summarizing the report: “The Auswärtiges Amt was a criminal organization (*verbrecherische Organisation*).”<sup>11</sup> That pronouncement went beyond the conclusions of the report itself and caused unease among the other editors.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, Conze’s general verdict was frequently cited and bolstered interest in the book. That Conze called an *institution* involved in numerous crimes of the Nazi state an *organization* was not coincidental. He was alluding to the concept of organized crime, which was transferred from American anti-mafia law to the prosecution of German war crimes and Nazi crimes via Allied Control Council Law No. 10 of December 20, 1945 (Article 2). Under that law, mere membership in a “criminal organization”—rather than individual responsibility for a crime—constituted a criminal offense. The verdict in the Nuremberg war crimes trial found the Nazi Party’s political leadership, the Gestapo, the SD, and the SS to be criminal organizations—but not the Reich government or the Wehrmacht, nor even the SA, on the grounds that its members were not “in general” involved in crimes. There was no discussion at Nuremberg of classifying the Auswärtiges Amt as a criminal

10 Recker, *Aussenpolitik*, 67.

11 Interview with Eckart Conze, *Der Spiegel*, Oct. 25, 2010, 40.

12 See the interview with Nibert Frei: *Die Zeit*, Oct. 28, 2010, 22: “That is a concept from the prosecution at Nuremberg that does not appear in our book....The ministry shares responsibility for the regime’s crimes, but the concept is not analytically helpful.”

organization; consequently, Conze's accusation was, in effect, a belated pronouncement of guilt.

That Conze's sweeping judgment met with widespread public resonance and has since been closely linked to the report's reception shows the public's need for unambiguous pronouncements about Nazi-era perpetrators and victims cast as large groups. The success of the commission's report is also due to the public's need for information. Public interest in National Socialism today centers on the Holocaust, which, after long having been marginalized, has increasingly shaped German memory and memorialization culture since the 1980s. That development is to be welcomed, but carries with it the risk that the "felt" identification with the victims and the associated pathos of *Betroffenheit* (empathic consternation) will be exhausted in rituals that ultimately stand in the way of genuine engagement with the history of National Socialism and can provoke counterreactions that hamper the open discussion of the past in civil society.

Not only positive identification with the victims but also negative identification with the perpetrators plays an important role. According to common opinion, nearly all Germans aside from the victims of persecution were perpetrators. Along with "felt victimhood," we now have felt guilt.<sup>13</sup> Memory becomes self-purification and is morally charged. The commission's report thus hits a nerve when it portrays the complicity of an old elite in terms of collective guilt and denounces its postwar "cover-up" of its past. The Manichean division between good and evil in memory culture facilitates both positive and negative identification. The result is a simplified image of the past that does not acknowledge different levels of complicity or complicated processes, and in which the history of National Socialism consists almost solely of the Holocaust. This perspective is potentially relativizing. If almost everyone who wasn't a victim was a perpetrator, doesn't any one individual bear only a small share of guilt? If German guilt is defined almost solely by the Holocaust, can other aspects of Nazi violence be neglected? The task of contemporary history is to counter such simplifications by advancing the historicization, contextualization, and differentiation of knowledge about the Nazi dictatorship. *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit*, however, does more to serve the expectations of the prevailing memory culture than to advance scholarly understanding.

The overwhelmingly positive initial response to *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit* was gradually supplemented by critiques from scholarly

13 Ulrike Jureit and Christian Schneider, *Gefühlte Opfer. Illusionen der Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (Stuttgart, 2010).

experts. Their criticisms focused on errors of fact, but primarily also on the sweeping interpretations.<sup>14</sup> Some critics, advancing political rather than scholarly arguments, went too far: How the commission came into being is no argument against its findings. It is legitimate for a governmental institution to have a team of expert scholars investigate its National Socialist past and its postwar engagement with that past. Some voices in the mass media responded sharply to the criticisms of the book put forward by individual historians. The critics were accused of querulousness, of trying to raise their own profile, and of jealousy as well as of professional incompetence and right-wing political leanings. Unfortunately, the four editors of the commission's report, too, have joined in the deplorable practice of accusing their academic critics of incompetence and revisionist tendencies.<sup>15</sup> On the many substantive points of criticism, however, the editors have had little to say.

Historians of twentieth-century Germany should reflect on whether, despite all the important detailed studies of the Nazi regime that have appeared in the past two decades, they have been neglecting the big questions about Nazi rule. Up into the 1990s, research on National Socialism was shaped by discussions of fundamental issues: how the National Socialist state functioned, what the relationship between ideology and expert knowledge was, how the Third Reich was able to extend its rule over Europe, and how Nazism was to be fit into German history and the history of Europe as a whole. Since then, however, research on National Socialism has narrowed. The dominance of new methodological paradigms ("cultural turn") and the constraints on researchers' time have made it difficult to address the big picture. While theory is becoming more important, the scope of research is shrinking and the larger picture is too often ignored. It is therefore striking that it was a leading expert on Nazism of the *older* generation, the 80-year-old Hans Mommsen, who pointed out that the commission's report oversimplifies matters by reducing the "ministry's past" largely to its role in the Holocaust. With this narrowing of scope, the report is perhaps a symptom of the current state of research on National Socialism. If the debate on *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit* leads to self-reflection on this point among historians of twentieth-century Germany, the book and the controversy it raised will have had a positive effect.

Translated by David B. Lazar, this article is a shortened version of "Das Auswärtige Amt, die NS-Diktatur und der Holocaust. Kritische Bemerkungen zu einem Kommissionsbericht," *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 59 (2011): 167–92.

14 See the articles by Christian Hacke (*Die Welt*, Oct. 26, 2010), Daniel Koerfer (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, Nov. 28, 2010), Gregor Schöllgen (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Dec. 7, 2010), Horst Möller (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Jan. 18, 2011), and, in particular, Hans Mommsen (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Dec. 27, 2010). The sharpest criticisms came in several articles in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* by the historian and journalist Rainer Blasius: see, for example, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Jan. 13, 2011). Even Christopher R. Browning voiced criticism of the first part of *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit* in the favorable review he published in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Dec. 10, 2010).

15 See the article by Eckart Conze, Norbert Frei, Peter Hayes, and Moshe Zimmermann in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Dec. 10, 2010. See also Norbert Frei and Annette Weinke, "Warum es um die 'Mumien' einsam wird. Das Ende der Legende vom 'anständig' gebliebenen Auswärtigen Amt," *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 55, no.12 (2010): 75–83.

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