

## SKELETONS IN THE FILING CABINET

REVIEW OF *DAS AMT UND DIE VERGANGENHEIT: DEUTSCHE DIPLOMATEN IM DRITTEN REICH UND IN DER BUNDESREPUBLIK*, BY ECKART CONZE, NORBERT FREI, PETER HAYES, AND MOSHE ZIMMERMANN (MUNICH: BLESSING, 2010).

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In May 2003, a retired interpreter, formerly employed by the German Foreign Office, complained to Foreign Secretary Joschka Fischer that a former diplomat with Nazi connections had received an honorable obituary in the ministry's newsletter. Fischer stopped that practice immediately and asked an independent commission of historians to investigate the Foreign Office's Nazi past and the official treatment of that past after 1945. The inquiry's result is not a dry commission report, but the breathtaking story of the German Foreign Office's history as an organization from the rise of the National Socialists to power to the present-day Federal Republic. The book, written by an international team of twelve German and American historians around the four lead investigators, Eckart Conze (University of Marburg), Norbert Frei (Jena University), Peter Hayes (Northwestern University,) and Moshe Zimmermann (Hebrew University, Jerusalem), offers a gripping story of the continuities in twentieth-century German history.

When *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit* was first presented to the public in October 2010, Fischer, by then former German Foreign Secretary, commented that this was "the obituary they deserved." "They" were the Foreign Office's old guard, mostly (but not exclusively) members of the German aristocracy, with strong links to West Germany's political and cultural elites. These networks had created and perpetuated the notion that the Foreign Office was the shining white knight among German institutions in the Federal Republic and had had a key role in the German resistance against Hitler. This book investigates the intellectual baggage and social background that German diplomats took with them from the Nazi era into the Federal Republic, and thus fundamentally questions that benign self-interpretation. In doing so, it goes well beyond an organizational history. It embeds the history of the Foreign Office's bureaucracy in the personal, political and media networks that reached deep into the hallowed circles of the West German liberal media, such as the weekly *Die Zeit* and the magazine *Der Spiegel*.

In this book, we encounter diplomats such as Franz Rademacher, who was in charge of Jewish affairs in the German Foreign Office. In his application for leave in October 1941, he gave “liquidation of Jews” as the reason for his business trip to Belgrade. Every secretary and registrar in the Foreign Office was therefore in a position to know about the Foreign Office’s involvement in the Holocaust. We also learn of the attempts by the Ministry to strip the writer Thomas Mann, living in exile near Zurich, of his German citizenship in order to punish him for his anti-National Socialist stance.

Insiders have known about the Foreign Office’s Nazi past for a long time. The Nuremberg Wilhelmstraße Trial (1948/9) singled out the Foreign Office as a key object of investigation. The historians Eliahu Ben Elissar, Christopher Browning and Hans-Jürgen Döscher have written about the Foreign Office’s involvement in the Holocaust and in Nazi politics more generally. Hence, although significant and breathtaking in their detail and contextualization, the stories of the personal involvements of many German diplomats in the Holocaust are not even the most important contribution made by this study. More significant is the connection it establishes between the ministry’s Nazi history and its more recent past. The authors force us to reconsider continuities in German history beyond individual biographies and beyond remnants of reactionary ideologies. They develop an entirely new angle to address this fundamental question by zooming in on the state, its structure, its bureaucracy—and their relationship to German society from the early 1930s to the present.

This is history at its very best, one of the most original empirical contributions to an assessment of the role of National Socialism in twentieth-century Germany and possibly one of the most important books on contemporary German history in the last decade. The book demonstrates in breathtaking detail how, despite individual acts of refusal (and, very rarely, resistance), the Foreign Office adapted to the new regime almost immediately after the National Socialists had come to power. And it shows how these networks of power and influence reached deep into the social and political fabric of the Federal Republic. For example, the “Central Department for Legal Protection” in the Foreign Office, set up by the former National Socialist prosecutor and judge Hans Gawlik, played an active role in procuring legal protection for German war criminals living abroad well into the early 1970s. With the help of the Red Cross, Gawlik developed a system that warned those war criminals about countries in which

search warrants had been issued; and the Foreign Office's diplomatic networks played an active role in trying to thwart attempts at prosecution. The authors report in the book that they had problems gaining access to some of the files in the Foreign Office archives, which is all the more striking as some of them had already been published as part of edited document collections. Today, the old guard is only tiny, but all the more vocal: former diplomats have been engaged to discredit the book in a letter writing campaign to Germany's main national center-right newspaper, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. The newspaper's book review editor Rainer Blasius has put himself at the forefront of a campaign by conservative German historians such as Horst Möller and Gregor Schöllgen to discredit the book's findings by pointing out minor infelicities in the citation of primary sources. Interestingly, they concentrate on the Nazi period and have little to say about the central question of continuities.

The illusion of the apolitical civil servant was able to survive the war, not least because it satisfied the needs of many for some form of historical reorientation in the period after Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender, and its subsequent loss of national sovereignty and even national territory. A key episode in this transition was the campaign around the trial of Ernst von Weizsäcker, secretary of state in the Foreign Office between 1938 and 1943, ambassador to the Holy See, 1943-5 and father of the West German president Richard von Weizsäcker, at the Wilhelmstraße Tribunal. The Tribunal was one of the principal organizations for the re-founding of the West German state after 1945. With the trial against von Weizsäcker, nothing less than the survival of the diplomatic caste appeared to be at stake, a caste whose members regarded themselves as the incarnation of German statehood. The public relations campaign around the trial succeeded in making von Weizsäcker the tragic hero of the failed opposition against the Nazi regime. This allowed the civil servants to redeem their self-image of belonging to an unpolitical and ultimately fair-minded bureaucracy for the post-1945 period.

This interpretation of Germany's transition from National Socialism to democracy in the West after 1945 transcends both the interpretation of a "zero hour" in 1945 and the idea of a "restoration" of conservative values, propagated by many critics and left-wing intellectuals since the early 1960s. But it also asks us to question more recent arguments about the "liberalization" of West German political culture after 1945. Like all good obituaries, therefore, this study

carries an important message for the living. Fundamentally, it demonstrates that, in the words of Karl Marx's critique of Hegel's doctrine of the State, bureaucracy "is a network of practical illusions, or the 'illusions of the State'." These illusions suggest that bureaucracy is distinct from society and can act as a bridge between society and the State. No other bureaucratic organization had practiced, cherished and believed in those illusions as much as Germany's Foreign Office, engaged, as it was, in representing the German state both at home and internationally.

This book thus highlights the uncanny traces of what Eckart Conze has called a "criminal organization" (a term commonly used to describe the death squads of the SS) in the personnel, procedures and general operation of the Ministry after its re-creation in 1951. Not only German readers should be unsettled by the book's general message: seemingly apolitical bureaucratic neutrality often contains within it the seeds and traces of intolerance, racism and violence. Bureaucracies and bureaucrats, despite the veneer of the rationality of bureaucratic procedures, might well be capable of complicity in the most irrational and heinous crimes, if they encounter the appropriate environment. In Nazi Germany, civil servants' belief in apolitical bureaucratic procedures was lethally mixed with National Socialist ideology aimed at creating an ethnically pure Nazi empire. The modern liberal belief in the reliability of bureaucratic procedures conceals these uncomfortable continuities. This book suggests powerfully that it is civility and decency that are the exception and deserving of analysis. *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit* does not merely advance our understanding of twentieth-century German history. It also highlights meticulously the paradoxes of modern government and society in general.

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