

HITLER'S BROWN DIPLOMATS

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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DIE ZEIT, HAMBURG

In early February 2005 something unprecedented in the history of the German Foreign Office occurred: 128 retired diplomats rebelled against Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer. They published a large-sized death notice for their late colleague Franz Krapf, a former member of both the NSDAP and the SS, in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. In the Federal Republic Krapf had risen to the posts of German Ambassador in Tokyo and Head of Germany's Permanent NATO Delegation. The paid notice in the *FAZ* was their protest against an order issued by Fischer according to which former members of the Foreign Service who had been members of the Nazi party were no longer to be "honorably remembered" in an internal publication of the Foreign Office.

The ex-diplomats' sensational move triggered an entirely unintentional reaction. For the Foreign Minister then decided to go on the offensive in order finally to tackle a task all of his predecessors had neglected: to have the history of the Foreign Office during the Nazi regime and its repercussions in the Federal Republic examined by an independent commission of historians. Four years after it began its work, the commission has now presented its final report in the shape of an almost 900-page long publication.

What these four historians—Eckart Conze (Marburg) and Norbert Frei (Jena) from Germany, Peter Hayes from the United States, and Moshe Zimmermann from Israel—and their team of twelve staff members have achieved is astonishing. Not only did they study the files in the Foreign Office's Political Archive, including the personnel records that had been kept classified for decades, they also extended their research to numerous national and international archives. Maintaining a high academic standard, they meticulously interpreted the vast amount of material. The Foreign Office's role during the Third Reich is analyzed in an unemotional and differentiated manner. The Foreign Office's carefully maintained image, according to which the Office had, with only a few exceptions, bravely withstood the onslaught of National Socialism, is dismantled almost entirely. The

German Foreign Office was not a hotbed of stalling resistance or an island of decency amidst Nazi barbarism, but an important supporting pillar of the National Socialist regime right from the beginning.

These findings are not entirely surprising. In 1978 the American historian Christopher Browning had published a pioneering study on the infamous *Judenreferat* [Jewish Affairs Department] of the Foreign Office, officially known as Department D III in the “Germany” Section, titled *The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office*. (It has only just been translated into German, 32 years after its publication.) In 1987 Hans-Jürgen Döscher published his dissertation *Das Auswärtige Amt im Dritten Reich: Diplomatie im Schatten der “Endlösung”* [The Foreign Office During the Third Reich: Diplomacy in the Shadow of the “Final Solution”], and, eight years later, another study, *Verschworene Gesellschaft: Das Auswärtige Amt unter Adenauer zwischen Neubeginn und Kontinuität* [Conspiratorial Circle: A History of the Foreign Office under Adenauer Between a New Beginning and Continuity]. Browning’s and Döscher’s studies, however, not only met with skepticism and rejection among diplomats; they didn’t manage to influence public opinion either. The fact that political science professor Theodor Eschenburg of Tübingen, assisted by Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, was allowed to slam Döscher’s book as unsound in an article in *Die Zeit* in 1987 was symptomatic; the old network was still active, even four decades after the Wilhelmstraße Trial, in which Ribbentrop’s State Secretary Ernst von Weizsäcker was the main defendant. After Eschenburg’s death he turned out to have briefly been a member of an SS-affiliated organization.

This publication by the commission of historians has several advantages over the works of Browning and Döscher: its approach is broader, it does not examine just the Foreign Office’s Nazi past but also, in the more extensive second part, the way the Foreign Office dealt with that past. In addition, it is written very clearly and precisely so that it has the potential to appeal to an audience beyond scholars. What had been missing up until now—a comprehensive, readable, source-based synthesis and overview—finally has been provided.

It becomes evident right in the first chapter (“The Foreign Office and the Establishment of the Dictatorship”) that no pressure was required in order to get the Wilhelmstraße officials in line with Nazi policy after the National Socialist rise to power. In fact, they willingly served their new master from day one. “As of January 30, 1933 the Foreign Office was the Foreign Office of the Third Reich and it operated as

such until 1945,” reads the analysis. High-ranking diplomats eagerly devoted themselves to the task of trivializing and justifying to their foreign counterparts the deprivation of rights and persecution of Jews that began immediately after Hitler’s seizure of power. “Foreign countries have great difficulty understanding the anti-Jewish program since they have not experienced our inundation by Jews themselves,” Ernst von Weizsäcker, then minister at the embassy in Oslo, commented on the boycott of Jewish businesses of April 1, 1933. The only high-ranking Foreign Office official to quit the service in the spring of 1933 because he did not want to be part of the new regime was the ambassador in Washington, Friedrich von Prittwitz und Gaffron.

Even before the Second World War, an active exchange of information developed between the Foreign Office headquarters in the Wilhelmstraße and the nearby Gestapo headquarters. Germany’s foreign missions eagerly participated in the surveillance of German emigrants. Expatriations, too, were often initiated by the Foreign Office, as in the case of Thomas Mann in May of 1936. The revocation of Mann’s citizenship was preceded, among other things, by a written opinion advocating it from Ernst von Weizsäcker, by then minister at the German embassy in Bern, who accused the writer of having “rewarded the patience that the German authorities have shown toward him with ridicule” and thus engaged in “hostile propaganda against the Reich from abroad.”

The authors give two explanations for the unopposed integration of the Foreign Office into the regime’s mechanism of repression and violence: first, a mentality dating back to the Kaiserreich that combined a pronounced *esprit de corps* with a high measure of conformity and antidemocratic as well as anti-Semitic sentiment; second, the identity of the Office’s and the regime’s goals in foreign policy. Top diplomats, just like the military elite, agreed with Hitler that the Treaty of Versailles had to be done away with as quickly as possible and that Germany had once again to rise to the level of a great, even a world power. The Foreign Office’s support of Hitler’s revisionist policies was indispensable since it helped to assuage the Western powers and to mislead them about his further expansionist plans.

The authors decidedly contradict the claim that the Foreign Office was usurped by Nazi careerists early on. After 1933 the homogeneity of the veteran diplomatic elite remained essentially intact. The study also demonstrates that the replacement of the compliant Foreign

Minister Constantin von Neurath by the Hitler acolyte Joachim von Ribbentrop in February 1938 did not constitute a decisive break in this continuity. Career diplomats continued to occupy the key positions. Career diplomat Ernst von Weizsäcker assumed the second highest position of State Secretary.

There has been much speculation about Weizsäcker's role under Ribbentrop. In his memoirs (published in 1950, a year before his death) he claimed not to have aspired to his new position. In the end, he had taken up this "cross" in order to prevent greater evil. Joining the NSDAP and simultaneously accepting the SS rank of *Oberführer* had been the "sacrifices" he had to make in order to serve the greater good of "maintaining peace".

The commission's report does not doubt Weizsäcker's motivation, but corrects his account in two respects: first, the report notes that diplomats could avoid joining the SS if they wanted to. Second, it points out that Weizsäcker's basic intention was not maintaining peace but avoiding a major war which would have endangered the existence of the Reich itself, a subtle yet important difference. In the process, State Secretary Weizsäcker overestimated his capacity to influence foreign policy through Ribbentrop. For the authors, Weizsäcker personifies the dilemma of a top diplomat who believed he had to collaborate in order to influence policy and who became increasingly entangled in the regime's brutal politics in the process.

In the summer of 1939, when all of Weizsäcker's attempts to avoid military conflict had failed due to Hitler's absolute determination to wage war, he did not draw the logical conclusions but remained in his position. He defended himself in September 1945 by saying that resigning "would have equaled the crew of a ship in distress hiding below deck once it realizes the captain is a madman!" The report calls this an "absurd conception of service"—for Germany was by no means "in distress" in the summer of 1939, in fact it was preparing to subject Europe to its regime.

The authors rightly emphasize that the war was a racist campaign of conquest and annihilation beginning with the attack on Poland in September 1939 and not just with the attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. The question if and how the Foreign Office was involved in the monstrous crimes committed during the war is a main focus of the study. The verdict could not be any clearer: The Foreign Office was informed thoroughly about Germany's barbaric methods of

warfare and the criminal character of its occupation policy right from the beginning. It was aware of both the mass death of Soviet POWs and the annihilation of European Jews.

The reports on the activities of the Operations Units [*Einsatzgruppen*] of both the Security Police [*Sicherheitspolizei*] and the Security Service [*Sicherheitsdienst*] in the Soviet Union, which left no doubt about the systematic character of the mass killings, were received by the Foreign Office, where they were summarized and signed by State Secretary Weizsäcker and Undersecretary Ernst Woermann. At the Wannsee Conference of January 20, 1942, which was supposed to coordinate the various authorities' efforts to carry out the Holocaust, Undersecretary Martin Luther represented the Foreign Office. The only copy of the conference protocol ever to be found after the war was discovered in the Office's files.

Members of the Foreign Service did not just know about these crimes, however; they acted as accessories. As the report states, “[t]he more the number of territories falling under the Third Reich's sphere of control grew, and the more radical the policy towards Jews became, the more the Foreign Office was involved in the planning and politics of the ‘final solution.’” German diplomats proved to be compliant aides to the Reich Main Security Office [*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*]. They were involved in deportations of Jews in many places and sometimes initiated them as well. The propaganda that the Office spread abroad assured that rumors circulating about mass killings could be dismissed as “horror stories.”

The study shows that Weizsäcker became an accessory even though he tried to conceal it. For example, he made a characteristic change to the draft of a reply by Franz Rademacher, head of the “Department of Jewish Affairs” [*Judenreferat*], to SS-Obersturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann of March 1942, in which the Foreign Office agreed to the deportation of 6000 French Jews to Auschwitz: while the draft originally read there were “no concerns” about the plan, the edited version states that the Foreign Office raised “no objection” to it. Furthermore, when SA-Obergruppenführer Hanns Elard Ludin, who held the office of envoy in Bratislava, reported in June 1942 that the deportation of Slovakian Jews essentially had come to a standstill, Weizsäcker first instructed him to inform Slovakian President Jozef Tiso that this had made “a very bad impression” in Germany, but later softened the message: the cessation of deportations would cause “surprise” in Germany.

Yet the authors are careful to avoid generalizations. The actions and reactions of Foreign Office representatives are studied separately and in detail for each European country occupied by Nazi Germany or allied with it. The results shed light on a broad spectrum of behavior—from anticipatory obedience and routinely bureaucratic handling to naked connivance. Attempts to save Jews as made by a member of the embassy in Hungary, diplomat Gerhart Feine, in 1944, remained exceptional.

According to the commission, one cannot speak of significant opposition in the Berlin head office of the Foreign Service. Weizsäcker's inner circle essentially disbanded in 1940/41; at his own request, he was transferred to the Vatican as Ambassador in 1943. It was only on the periphery of the Foreign Office, namely in the Information Office, that a small circle of Hitler's opponents gathered around Adam von Trott zu Solz and Bernd von Haefen. Both were members of the Kreisau Circle around Helmuth James von Moltke and Peter Yorck von Wartenburg, and thus the main focus of their resistance lay outside the Foreign Office. Both were involved in the planning of July 20, 1944 and were executed after the failure of the coup d'état.

How did the diplomats deal with their past after 1945? The report attributes a key role to the Wilhelmstraße Trial of 1948/49. In this follow up to the Nuremberg trial eight former members of the Foreign Service found themselves in the dock, with Ernst von Weizsäcker the highest-ranking among them. Weizsäcker was defended by the young attorney Hellmut Becker, son of former Prussian Minister for Culture Heinrich Becker, who had died in 1933. (It turned out after Hellmut Becker's death in 1993 that he had joined the NSDAP in 1937.) Assisting him was Weizsäcker's younger son Richard, who interrupted his studies at law school in Göttingen for this purpose.

For the first time, we read a description of how the defense managed to get the large circle of former Foreign Office staff to come to the aid of the accused and exonerate him of all charges by means of notarized affidavits. At the same time a smear campaign was launched against the American prosecutor Robert M.W. Kempner, which is without doubt one of the most shameful chapters of German postwar history. Kempner, a former official in the Prussian Ministry of the Interior who had been dismissed in 1933 due to his Jewish background and who had managed to escape into exile in the US, was defamed as

“Dr. Sixtus Beckmesser”, “Kempner-Freisler”, and “Talmi-American”; not even anti-Semitic stereotypes were off limits.

The “standard-bearer in the fight against Kempner,” as Richard von Weizsäcker correctly noted in November 1949, was Hamburg weekly *Die Zeit*. As late as September 1951 its editor-in-chief Richard Tüngel ran an article against the former prosecutor titled “This Vermin Must Be Stopped” and demanded that American High Commissioner John McCloy expel him from Germany.

In his memoirs published in 1983 Kempner was still outraged that “the distinguished gentlemen of the Foreign Office in their blood-sprinkled white vests [i.e. clean records]” got off so lightly. Weizsäcker was sentenced to seven years in prison, which were reduced to five years in December 1949. He got an early discharge in October 1950. Like many other convicts, he profited from the change in the global political situation. The Cold War prompted the Allies to quickly close the “denazification” chapter in order to win over the new West German state and its old elites as allies in the confrontation with the Soviet Union. To quote the report: “Nuremberg had become passé.”

The chapter titled “Constructing the Myth” gives insight into how former members of the Foreign Service concocted their apologetic self-perception. A note of February 1946 written by former Legation Counselor Wilhelm Melchers is a key document in the internal myth-making process, which began quite early. In it he not only elevated Weizsäcker’s circle to a breeding ground of the conspiracy of July 20; he also attested that the Foreign Office in general had remained “healthy” at its core, quoting the word of executed dissident von Trott zu Solz. The joint line of defense was built upon this basis: according to it, remaining in office was not condemnable at all but rather a stance dictated by politics as well as morals in order to fight the Nazi system from the inside. One’s own involvement in the criminal policies was quickly reinterpreted as the heroism of perseverance. The claim that there really had been two Foreign Offices during the “Third Reich”—one which had remained “uncorrupted” and consisted of the old elite and another, “corrupt” one made up of National Socialist upstarts—fitted in very nicely with this myth. Clearly this legend served the purpose of creating an acceptable tradition that facilitated re-entry into the service.

It still is surprising to read how easily the Wilhelmstraße diplomats managed to re-establish themselves in the reorganized

Foreign Office. After all, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer had insisted that the new Foreign Office should have “as little as possible to do with the old guard.” Yet under the leadership of his confidant Herbert Blankenhorn professional qualification was given priority over questions about the former officials’ political past. Adenauer let this happen and soon even demanded an end to the “sniffing around for Nazis,” not least because of the political past of his State Secretary in the Chancellery, Hans Globke, who had been deeply involved in the Nazi regime. Thanks to the old networks high-ranking positions in particular were again staffed with members of the “old guard.”

The shadows of its past have always accompanied the history of the Federal Republic’s Foreign Office. Up until the 1970s the public was repeatedly roused by scandals about the Nazi past of high-ranking West German diplomats. These were fueled in part by GDR publications that, although mostly accurate, actually worked in the accused’s favor in the climate of the Cold War since they could be dismissed as communist propaganda.

Yet the commission’s report not only considers the continuities but also the innovations that have changed the face of the Foreign Service over the course of the past decades. The junior diplomats who slowly began to fill the ranks did not usually come from the circles of nobility and the wealthy bourgeoisie from which the old diplomatic corps had been recruited. Many of them had gotten to know and value the advantages of a democratic-liberal order during stays in the United States. Among the “old guard,” too, the willingness to revise old thinking with regard to foreign policy grew as a result of the successful Western integration of the Federal Republic. The doctrine of the primacy of the nation-state was replaced by a commitment to European integration and international cooperation. This shift came with a new, demure diplomatic style that played a major part in the Federal Republic’s return to the community of states as an equal and acknowledged member.

What did not change in all these years was the self-image of the Foreign Office regarding its role during National Socialism. The work of the commission of historians has demolished the basis for this self-image once and for all, and this achievement cannot be praised enough. The book should be required reading for all future diplomats. It would be good if other Federal Ministries also found the strength to have their past examined in a similarly unsparing manner.

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