

Anatomy of a Police State

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The Order of the Death's Head: The Story of Hitler's SS, by Heinz Höhne; translated from the German by Richard Barry, *New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1970. xii+690 pp. \$12.50.*

WITHIN A HALF DOZEN years (1939-45) the Nazi *Schutzstaffel*, better and fearsomely known by the letters SS, compiled a record of mass murders unmatched since the time of the Mongol conquerors, and perhaps not even then. The victims included more than five million European Jews, between three and four million Poles, Ukrainians, Russians and Gypsies, besides scores of thousands of Germans, some of them real or suspected enemies of the regime, some merely persons who were deemed mentally or physically defective and therefore unworthy of inclusion in the eugenically purified *Volk*. And yet Herr Höhne in this long and labyrinthine, detailed and documented history succeeds in showing that the SS was not, like its apparent counterpart

the Soviet NKVD, "an organization constructed on some diabolically efficient system", rather it was, like the Third Reich itself, an irrational and incredibly ramified structure held together by no principle except the accumulation of power and having no policy except blind obedience to the whims of the dictator for as long as the faith in his genius prevailed. Otherwise, like the regime itself it was a chaos of contradictions riddled with intrigues, rivalries, jealousies and even hatreds. "Thank God!" exclaimed Sepp Dietrich, commander of the *Leibstandarte* SS, on hearing that Reinhard Heydrich had been assassinated in Prague. "That sow's gone to the butcher at last!"

Originally, the SS was merely a small group within the SA (*Sturmabteilung*), or brown-shirted street fighters. Its purpose was to serve as a bodyguard for Hitler to whom its members were bound by a special loyalty. The SA was very important to Hitler during his struggle for power, but from an early point in his career as an agitator

he had recognized that the allegiance of the storm-troopers was conditional; that they might under certain circumstances look elsewhere for a Führer. Röhm and his followers, for example, had no great interest in the National Socialist political nostrums; their ambition was to replace the *Reichswehr* as the principal organ of defense, but Hitler knew that if his revolution was to succeed he could not afford to antagonize the Army. At the same time the brothers Strasser and others were accusing Hitler of repudiating the socialist part of national socialism and thereby of betraying the proletarians to appease the military and the bourgeois nationalists.

Mere economics drove the SA leaders into opposition against their political rivals and against Hitler. The unemployed were streaming into the SA, attracted both by its extremist slogans and by its standard of cooking. . . . The SA commanders, unwilling to lose their new recruits, were clamoring for more money, for the line between Nazis and Communists was thin indeed; but the Gauleiter, who had the money, kept the purse strings tight. . . . This miserliness gave rise to a nasty suspicion . . . [that] the Party leaders were finding the SA an obstacle to their climb to power and respectability. Inflammatory cries were to be heard, such as "Adolf is betraying us, the proletariat!" Anonymous pamphlets decrying the party leaders began to appear: "We, the proletarian section of the Movement . . . are quite happy to starve in order that our dear 'leaders' can enjoy themselves on their salaries of 2,000-5,000 marks a month. We were also overjoyed to hear that at the Berlin Motor Show our Adolf Hitler had spent 40,000 marks on a large new Mercedes."

Even before this, however, Hitler had decided that he needed the SS as something more than a bodyguard: he needed it as an instrument wherewith to curb or if need be to crush the SA. The task of creating this

instrument was entrusted to a party zealot, Heinrich Himmler, who in January 1929, was named *Reichsführer-SS*. With that appointment, observes Herr Höhne, "the most murderous chapter in the history of German party politics was about to open."

Of all the leading actors in the macabre melodrama of the Nazi epoch Himmler is perhaps the most enigmatic. The general judgment is that he was a kind of monster, hardly to be explained in human terms. The American journalist Louis Lochner, who had opportunities to observe him, considered him stupid. The physiotherapist Felix Kersten, who saw him often and intimately, found him wanting in critical faculty, a woefully poor judge of men, troubled by a sense of inferiority, but having a softer, sentimental side which sometimes could be worked upon to save intended victims from the gas chambers or the gallows. The Swiss psychiatrist Max Picard saw in him the prototype of the disjointed McLuhanesque man produced by the modern schizophrenic society and by the mass media for whom nothing, either good or bad, is related to anything else. To Picard the terrifying thing about the atrocities directed by Himmler, Heydrich, Kaltenbrunner, Eichmann and the rest was not so much their scale and savagery as the fact that they were perpetrated without rancor or passion. Thus, thought Picard, there was no sense of personal guilt in the perpetrators;

. . . neither was the apparatus guilty, because it produced these crimes purely by accident and might as well have been converted for something else. This is the reason why the whole Nazi machine, and in general the whole German mechanization, . . . were already terrifying before these outrages. One had the feeling that only a little lever had to be pushed in order to gear this engine of economy, this mechanized culture, to atrocity production. . . . The hand could already be seen, the hand on the white face of the dial which only had to be set to "atrocity" in order to produce it.¹

The venerable historian Friedrich Meinecke perceived in characters like Rosenberg, Heydrich and Himmler those *terribles simplificateurs* whose coming had been predicted two generations earlier by Jakob Burckhardt. Meinecke, too, detected a relationship between Nazi methods and technological values. The expansion of technology, he wrote, had

created a new social class whose psychological structure is markedly different from that of previous social classes, both those of the old agrarian state and of the new bourgeoisie. . . . An intellect sharply concentrated on whatever was utilitarian and immediately serviceable took possession of mental life. . . .²

Sometimes, said Meinecke, men of this class, after tending for years to see everything in purely pragmatic terms, are suddenly seized with metaphysical and utopian fantasies and seek to realize their visions by technological methods. They become "social engineers," obsessed with the necessity of remaking the world and its people. Himmler, who received the doctrine of "blood and soil" from Walther Darré, was not a technician, but he had had a brief experience at farming and seems to have been persuaded that by selective breeding the racial purity ascribed by Tacitus to the blond and barbaric Germans of antiquity could be restored. He hoped to demonstrate this in the *Schutzstaffel* and thereby create a new aristocracy, a supernobility within the super-race.

Herr Höhne tells us that in drawing up the plans for his neo-aristocracy Himmler borrowed liberally from the forms and usages of other arcane and élite organizations, especially the hated and admired Freemasons and the Jesuits. Another unacknowledged model seems to have been the medieval Order of Teutonic Knights, which in contrast to the internationalized Templars and Hospitallers, admitted only nobles of pure German origin. The knights, however, took vows of celibacy, whereas Himmler demanded that each of his underlings, af-

ter a carefully supervised mating, produce at least four offspring. The knights, though siding occasionally with the emperor against the pope, were steadfastly Catholic until Reformation times,³ whereas Himmler, though a pious Catholic in his Bavarian boyhood, was converted to the religion of Wagner and Wotan, and thereafter relished the hope, as he told Kersten, of seeing the pope publicly hanged in his tiara and pontifical vestments. Finally, the knights had accomplished in Prussia what Himmler and Darré were attempting without success in Poland and the Ukraine: they had eliminated the original pagan inhabitants and had replaced them with Christian German colonists.

The SS when Himmler took it in charge numbered only a few dozen men, mostly rough-and-ready proletarian or petit bourgeois types. These were now required to produce spear and distaff genealogies proving pure "Aryan" antecedents back to the year 1800, thus sending them on long chases, sometimes lasting for years, through church registers and other books and documents. The same proofs were required, of course, of recruits, though in the case of officers and officer cadets lineages had to be traced to 1750, or for about a half dozen generations. The earliest recruits for the new chivalric order, mostly of aristocratic or middle-class origin, were from veterans of the *Freikorps*, those roving bands of mercenaries which had played such a part in the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary turmoils of the years immediately following the armistice of 1918 and the collapse of the monarchy. There were about 70,000 such veterans and

. . . they were possessed of an "insatiable restlessness, a determination to burn themselves out; they felt the primeval male urge permanently to court danger. They accepted the disdain of the corpulent, sedentary bourgeoisie and returned it full measure. . . ." These men were ripe material for a doctrine of uninhibited use of force. The traditions and norms of the old-style military dis-

cipline had been swept away and their place was taken by a drumhead court-martial system. . . . Anyone the Free Corps thought guilty they shot. Human life, either their own or that of others, counted little; their watchword, like that of the later Waffen-SS, was to deal out or accept death. In 1930 Ernst von Salomon extolled the Free Corps for their "ruthless action against armed or unarmed enemy masses, their limitless contempt for the so-called sanctity of human life and their marked disinclination to take prisoners under any circumstances." Ten years later these were the hallmarks of Himmler's soldiers.

Himmler began also to woo the German nobility, hitherto scorned by the Nazis as "decadent" and "Jew-ridden," and with so much success that "seniority lists of the SS began to resemble a series of pages from the *Almanach de Gotha*." The princes, dukes, counts and so on may have been museum pieces, but there were also admitted to the SS pure twentieth century types from the educated middle-class—such men as Walter Schellenberg, Reinhard Höhn, Franz Six, Otto Ohlendorf, all names to be mentioned afterward with a shudder.

Almost all of them drifted into the SD [Heydrich's Security Division], giving it a legalistic and intellectual atmosphere foreign both to the front-line-soldier socialism of the SS veterans and the vulgar lower-middle-class National Socialism of the early days. . . . They were typical of the hardboiled SS technocrats, the "social engineers" who provided the Führer dictatorship with the necessary veneer of legality and organization; they were astute realists with no ideology other than that of power, but they were also spiritually rootless and uninhibited by any of the generally accepted norms of conduct.

The TV formations (*Totenkopf Verbände*) which provided the sadistic guards for the concentration camps, were, it seems, recruited mainly from the uneducated peas-

antry, but the *Einsatzgruppen*, which carried out the mass liquidations, came from the Security Division and from the various police organizations, including the Gestapo, that were presently brought under Himmler's control. Under Himmler and Heydrich the police had ceased to be agencies for the preservation of order and the protection of life and property and became an apparatus of terror ruthlessly employed for the perpetuation of power.

Heydrich's vision was of a close-knit system of supervision, covering every facet of the national life and guaranteeing the total dominance of the Nazi party. . . . He sketched out a political police force which differed from its predecessors in one decisive aspect: previous police systems had been satisfied to catch enemies of the state *in flagrante delicto*; they acted when some definite danger could be detected; Heydrich's police . . . were to track down the enemy before even his thinking, let alone his actions, savored of resistance. . . . The police force was no longer to be a defensive organization, it was to pass to the attack—not only that; it was to be the "educator" of the people, the omnipotent purifier, cleansing the nation of all nonconformist ideas.

Theoretically, the concentration camp—a term introduced into political science and into history by the SS—was to be the classroom of the new political education; the frightful reality, however, was something very different.

The more gullible National Socialists may genuinely have believed that the purpose of the camps was to reeducate political opponents and, after a probationary period, release them again; in practice however, the camps were planned from the outset as instruments of terror for the maintenance of the regime. . . . The torture sheds of Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen were intended to demonstrate to the Germans the fate awaiting those who opposed the

Führer. . . . Stories which filtered through the barbed wire were passed on by the grapevine—of the Buchenwald “Cowstall” arranged for nape-of-the-neck shooting, of the Dachau “Dog Kennel” where prisoners could only lie wedged together on their sides, or of the rigged accidents in the Mauthausen quarries—simply increased the terror and panic which the words “concentration camp” induced in Hitler’s Germany.

The SS played no part in the violence and terror that accompanied Hitler’s accession to power in January 1933; it was the SA that was turned loose in the streets on that occasion to horrify the world with its brutalities. Seventeen months later, however, the SS came to world notice by carrying out the first of its mass murders at the order of Adolf Hitler. Ernst Röhm and eighty-two others, not all of them Nazis, were seized and shot without trial on the pretext of a nonexistent plot and with the tacit approval of many of the high Army commanders. Though a few like General (afterwards Field-Marshal) von Kleist were skeptical, Heydrich managed to persuade the others that they were destined for liquidation if the SA succeeded in an attempted coup. Thus after the consummation of the “blood purge” there was a good deal of premature and as it proved fatuous rejoicing in the Reichswehr.

Champaign glasses clinked in the officers’ messes. When the last SA leaders had been shot, General von Reichenau telegraphed to [Conrad] Patzig, his head of counter-espionage, in erratic English: “*All caught.*” Major-General von Witzleben rubbed his hands saying: “What a pity! I ought to have been there.” . . . The only discordant voice was that of Captain (Retired) Erwin Planck [son of the famous physicist], previously a secretary in the Reich Chancellery; he warned General von Fritsch: “If you look on without lifting a finger, you will meet the same fate

sooner or later.” It was a prophetic remark; von Fritsch fell as the result of a similar intrigue; von Witzleben ended on a meat hook, condemned by the Peoples’ Court [for complicity in the attempted assassination of Adolf Hitler, July 1944].

The SS did not plan or devise the monstrous “final solution” to the Jewish problem, though when the order for it from Hitler was transmitted by Göring, the SS carried it out with a thoroughness and ferocity that after more than a quarter century still numbs the imagination. The officers of the *Einsatzgruppen* assigned to the bloody work by Heydrich were not for the most part psychopathic or criminal types as popular belief has represented them but rather intellectuals of one sort or another—“highly qualified academics, ministerial officials, lawyers and even a Protestant priest and an opera singer.” Except for Arthur Nebe, afterwards involved with the Beck-Goerdeler conspirators, none seems to have volunteered; on the other hand hardly any refused, though a few found pretexts for evading actual participation in the slaughters. In the earlier stages there were instances of nervous breakdowns and even suicide among the guilt tormented *Einsatzkommandos*. Even Himmler himself, on a tour of inspection, became sick with horror after witnessing the execution of 200 Jews at Minsk, but recovered to exhort his men to further hardness in the pursuit of duty. The cure for the horrors was more horror. Dr. Otto Rasch decided there was nothing like a brotherhood of guilt for improving morale. Accordingly, he ordained that every member of the group he commanded

must partake of the collective guilt; scenes of horror witnessed in common were to form the bond of comradeship holding the unit together; collective blood guilt was to be its cement. Rasch insisted that every man of his *Einsatzgruppe* take part in executions; the individual had to “overcome himself.” There was hardly a man in this *Einsatz-*

gruppe who did not suffer from "the most horrible dreams," an eyewitness reported. Nevertheless, the aim was achieved—the camaraderie of guilt.

The substitution of gas poisoning for shooting as the method of extermination created a fresh psychological problem. At first the gas was administered in sealed vans, and Ohlendorf thought this would

produce an "intolerable psychic burden" for his men, for after the executions they would have to unload the distorted bodies—frequently covered in excrement—and so the executioners would be brought face to face with what they had done—the moment of truth from which Ohlendorf wished to save them.

And yet there were some Nazis and even some members of the SS who rebelled against the murders and did what they could to prevent them. Wilhelm Kube, Commissar-General of White Ruthenia, took the Jews of his district under his personal protection until he himself was killed by a bomb placed under his bed by a Soviet partisan. Dr. Werner Best, sometime legal adviser to Heydrich, contrived the escape of a great number of Danish Jews into Sweden. Bernhard Lösener and Wilhelm Stuckart succeeded in talking Himmler out of a contemplated extermination of Germans of part Jewish ancestry and German-Jewish partners of mixed marriages. Toward the end of the Third Reich even Himmler, urged on by Schellenberg and in complete defiance of the Führer, ordered an end to the murders, hoping to use the surviving Jews as a bargaining point in his efforts to negotiate a truce with the Western Allies. But by that time Hitler was being deserted on all sides; even the Waffen-SS, which had fought for him with such fanaticism, fury and ruthlessness rebelled against his final frenzied commands.

As an historical exercise, Herr Höhne's work is at once important and frightening, the more so on both counts because of its thoroughness. Besides correcting many mis-

conceptions by earlier historians of the Nazi epoch, it sheds light on events and incidents hitherto mysterious or obscure. For Americans it contains implicit warnings, especially for political or revolutionary adventurers tempted to float to power on what seems a revolutionary tide. Despite the differences of vocabulary—the substitution, for example, of "soul" for "*Volk*"—the analogies between our present disorders and those that marked the later years of the Weimar Republic have not gone unobserved, but those who sought to exploit Hitler's demoniac powers of demagoguery in their own aims or interests ended by being destroyed or debased by him. Still another lesson lies in Herr Höhne's repeated insistence that the Nazi Reich was not, as popularly believed and as Hitler himself declared, a totalitarian state, or a state at all by any definition, but rather a kind of orchestrated anarchy. It was formless, totally irrational, without logic, law or morality—an anticipation of Professor McLuhan's post-linear universe which allows no continuity between one thing and the next. Twenty-five years ago Dr. Picard diagnosed Nazi Germany as merely the extreme example of the disjunction and irrelevance characteristic of twentieth century mankind.

¹*Hitler in Ourselves*. Hinsdale, Illinois: Henry Regnery Company, 1947.

²*The German Catastrophe (Die deutsche Katastrophe)*; translated by Sidney B. Fay. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1950.

³In 1522 the Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights, a Hohenzollern, embraced the Lutheran faith, renounced his vows, married and proclaimed himself hereditary Duke of Prussia.

A Retreat from Moscow

Odyssey of a Liberal: Memoirs, by Freda Utleý, *Washington, D. C.: Washington National Press, Inc., 1969. 318 pp. \$10.00.*

FREDA UTLEY once remarked that having enjoyed the advantage of a good English education, she had been able to make her way entirely on her own since her early twenties. The reader of her *Memoirs* will have reason to agree that she did have a good education, but will also perceive that she entered the arena of life with some additional equipment—a good mind, a remarkable memory, enormous energy and vitality, and a restless urge to live life to the full, to see for herself. In the present book she remarks that she, like her friend Bertrand Russell, “had the mentality which pursues beliefs and theories to their logical conclusion,” unimpeded, she adds, “by Goethe’s dictum that the essence of wisdom is to know when to stop.” These characteristics didn’t give her a serene life, but she has certainly led a full one, and she recounts it with all the spirit, honesty and impetuosity with which she has lived.

She was born in the precincts of the Temple of London, and grew up in a happy and affectionate family. Her father, who must have been an unusually talented man, was the son of a Yorkshire blacksmith, had a good education, and at the time of Freda’s birth was working as a journalist while studying law. He was an early member, and for a time Secretary, of the Fabian Society, knew Shaw, the Webbs and lectured on the same platform with Friedrich Engels. He later became quite successful in business, but was ruined by the 1914 war. He died in 1918, leaving his family virtually penniless and his two children to shift for themselves. Miss Utleý’s mother, vivacious, feminine, and beautiful, we are told, was the daughter of a wealthy Lancashire manufacturer of preserves. Freda was

brought up to believe that if man could be free, free of the superstitions of religion, of the shackles of property, of the restrictions of class, he could, on the basis of his reason and intelligence alone, create the good society. With such a heritage and temperament as hers and a student in the London School of Economics in the early 1920’s, the Communist party was an almost inevitable destination. It was, however, neither reaction to an unhappy family, to poverty, nor to the feeling of not belonging that brought her into the party. She did have some difficult times following the financial ruin of her father, but she had always been perfectly able to take care of herself, and when she joined the party was well established and at the threshold of what promised to be a brilliant academic career. Her road to communism was by no means the tortured path of, for example, Whittaker Chambers.

Disillusionment was as inevitable as the decision which preceded it. With a mentality that “pursued beliefs and theories to their logical conclusion,” merely joining the party was not enough, she had to go to Russia and live as a Communist. She had, in the meantime, married a Russian, of Jewish background, who was working in the Russian export agency in London. He was idealistically a Communist, but not a party member. Following a year in Japan, they went to Russia to live, somewhat against the better judgment of her husband. She has described her life in Russia in two other books, but it was not the midnight arrest, imprisonment without trial and resulting death of her husband which brought about her disenchantment, she was too honest and too perceptive to be bemused long by communism. In this connection, it is interesting to compare her with her friend Agnes Smedley, whom she met in China in 1938 when Miss Utleý spent a year in the war zone as a correspondent of the *London News Chronicle*. By temperament both women must have had much in common—each was highly idealistic, generous, sensitive to injustice and suffering, but Miss