

Himmler's Machine

"The SS: Alibi of a Nation," by **Gerald Reitlinger** (Viking, 502 pp. \$6.50), is a Briton's analysis of the chief instrument of the Nazi terror. Professor Fritz Stern of Columbia University reviews it.

By Fritz Stern

GERALD REITLINGER, a British student of modern Germany, has acquired unsurpassed knowledge of the most abominable aspects of Nazism, though his acquaintance with other sides of the regime seems less secure. "The Final Solution," published in England in 1953, is his authoritative account of the liquidation of European Jewry, and his present volume "The SS: Alibi of a Nation 1922-1945" deals more specifically with their executioners, who were in fact the main instrument of the Nazi terror. As Himmler, their leader, said in Kharkov in 1943: "We will never let that excellent weapon, the dread and terrible reputation which preceded us in the battle of Kharkov, fade, but will constantly add new meaning to it."

The S.S. grew from relatively humble beginnings; when Himmler assumed its command in 1929 it was a small, specially selected Praetorian Guard, overshadowed by the far larger number of Storm Troopers. Himmler, obsessed with the dream of racial purity, and resolved to make the S.S. a thoroughbred elite, carefully screened applicants and during the first years of power rejected 85 percent of them. But with power came new duties; the S.S. assumed police functions and organized not only the dreaded Gestapo and the concentration camps, but various intelligence agencies as well. After the Blood Purge of June 1934, the S.S. established and preserved an absolute monopoly of terror in Germany. The war brought an even greater expansion to the S.S., and incidentally a rapid decline of its Germanic purity. Foreigners and "racial Germans" living in occupied countries were pressed into its ranks, and the S.S. recruitment policy inaugurated that vast and unhappy uprooting of Germans from Eastern Europe which ended only a decade later. New terror organizations of the S.S., especially the so-called special commandos, ravaged the conquered areas of eastern Europe. Regular divisions of S.S. troops were attached to the army, and "the final solution" of the Jewish problem was entrusted to the S.S. as well.

Himmler, "that universal crank."

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was a reluctant, remote-control killer, and even in the building of his own empire he spent little passion or energy. The assassination of his vicious assistant and potential rival, Heydrich and the failure of the July 20 conspiracy vastly increased his power. Towards the end of the war the S.S. had become "a state within a state." But Himmler's S.S. was no more cohesive and well-organized than was the Third Reich itself. The different organs of the S.S. followed separate, often conflicting, policies, which Himmler only intermittently directed, and each was in competition with rival authorities, the Army, the Foreign Office, and the six other security services that enveloped Germany with a politically useful sense of insecurity. Himmler was too small and mediocre a man to master his power; in the end only the weak and defenseless—the insane, the Jews, the East Europeans, the nameless hostages—suffered the fury of his machine. The strong were not compelled, and the rival intriguers in Hitler's Empire were not subordinated.

The history of the S.S. is indescribably ugly, and the pictures of their massacres which S.S. troops left behind, and which are here published, make this ugliness more inescapably immediate and concrete. Dealing with such material Mr. Reitlinger could not remain dispassionate, and it is to his credit and to the great advantage of the book that on the whole he writes with restraint. He is, nevertheless, harsh on the Germans, harsh on those who pretend that the S.S. alone was guilty and who thus make it the alibi of the nation. His book shows

that the S.S., however, much abetted by other Germans, was the principal agent of Nazi atrocities, and for such atrocities as he relates any nation would stand in need of an alibi.

GERMANY TODAY: The English are so addicted to understatement that even many of their first-rate journalists—of whom J. A. Cole, author of "Germany My Host" (Abelard-Schuman, \$3.50) is obviously one—face their readers with the diffidence of a Dickensian clerk. This deceptively modest book is not merely a leisurely traveler's diary but a sharp portrait of a crucial period in a nation's history.

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East Germany the author discovers to be an even more fiercely competitive society, with deliberate disparities of income. He offers not only an astute analysis of art and the press, but explains why a people no less industrious than its brethren in the West has been reduced to the inefficiency and slovenliness of the Soviet's Eastern European satellites.

—PETER JACOBSON



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