

The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps. *By Michael Thad Allen.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xii + 377 pp. Illustrations, figures, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN 0-807-82677-4.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Fear

Michael Allen has written an important book that describes how the horrifying ideological and organizational foundations of genocide during the Third Reich were established with the help of the Business Administration Main Office (WVHA), a brutal bureaucracy within the SS. This special division, organized to turn the vision of a Nazi New Order into reality, built the underground facilities for producing weapons (such as the V-2 rocket project and the Messerschmitt-262 jet engine), allocated concentration-camp inmates to private industry, and constructed the camps themselves, right down to the gas chambers. The Holocaust is unthinkable without its organization men, whose collective efforts enabled the infamous camp commandants and doctors to carry out their gruesome killings.

Allen shows how eagerly this corps of German civil engineers threw themselves into creating a giant program of “extermination through work” (p. 16). He bases his story on the ideas and careers of seventeen senior WVHA officials who were tried at Nuremberg, and on the lives of several others who committed suicide at the end of the war. Of the survivors, only Oswald Pohl, one of Allen’s main protagonists, was hanged for his crimes; the rest received shortened jail sentences or were pardoned (p. 274). Although Allen is largely concerned with the behind-the-scenes bureaucrats of genocide, such as Adolf Eichmann (who organized the deportations), rather than the Rudolf Hösses (who directed Auschwitz), he does not lose sight of the victims, and throughout the book he emphasizes the contrast between the enormity of their crimes and the pathetic flimsiness of their punishments.

The Business of Genocide both supplements and counters Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1993), which examined the influences that allowed ordinary soldiers with differing motivations and backgrounds to participate in mass murder. However, in spirit and thesis, Allen’s book more closely resembles Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners:*

Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust (1997). Allen attributes the motivations of these SS officials to ideology, which he sums up as a combination of Aryan “racial lunacy” and engineering romanticism (“anticapitalist productivism”) (p. 96). In his view, these men did not act as opportunistic careerists or apolitical technocrats but, rather, were impelled by a desire to “modernize” the Third Reich and thus to “manufacture, literally, German unity and Nazi values” (p. 32).

Creatively mixing biographies, books, and pamphlets written by the perpetrators with engineering assessments, statistical reports, and archival WHVA records, Allen offers arguments that significantly advance our understanding of the Third Reich. He demolishes Hannah Arendt’s vision of the passionless bureaucrat, one who was a mere cog in the machinery of power, the theme on which she based her 1963 portrayal of Eichmann (*Eichmann on Trial: The Banality of Evil*), labeling him one of many of the “one-dimensional men” who simply followed orders. Allen makes creative use of American management literature, offering in his scrutiny of SS middle managers a perverse version of Olivier Zunz’s *Making America Corporate, 1870–1920* (1990). Like any large-scale organization, the SS relied on the local initiative and conscious dedication of middle managers. Building this machinery of death required more of them than simple obedience. Ironically, the opinion that these men were no more than cogs in a machine was the argument they themselves adopted in their defense at Nuremberg. This view, now widespread, has emerged as a dominant theme in analyses of the Third Reich that distinguish between ideologues, such as Heinrich Himmler, and technocrats, such as Albert Speer.

Allen convincingly shows the shallowness of this distinction. He demonstrates that deep ideological convictions, not conscienceless careerism, motivated these SS engineers. Allen finds that the leadership principle of the *Führer*, a notion of restless or ruthless activism in which “will” alone could overcome obstacles (many of the SS leaders, for example, appeared to think that if they issued enough orders, their ideas would be realized: “I just began to give orders and things began to happen . . . ,” p. 236), was sustained by a pool of ideas filled with contradictory “tributaries” and “eddies.” Among these was a sense of hypernationalism, built on the notion of Aryan racial supremacy and pride in the emergence of national cultural renewal and modernization. Their pride

stemmed from faith in inventions (itself a signifier of Aryan superiority), science, wonder gadgets (from the V-2 to brick-making kilns), and Fordist mass production. This ideology generated an “aura of futurism” that allowed accounting sheets, organizational charts, bricks, and Volkswagen Beetles to “glow in such men’s minds” (p. 90). They envisioned anticapitalist SS corporations, which would rid Nazi business of the “salesman’s point of view,” and imagined settlement programs of the Nazi New Order, which would take the form of a mass-produced suburb of Biedermeier homes, in eastern Europe. Instead, this vision realized itself in the construction of horrific concentration camps.

Allen refutes arguments made by other historians that the SS acted in the interests of raw, blind power to create a “state within a state” (p. 242). Mostly in his footnotes Allen attacks many historians’ portrayals of private industrialists like Ferdinand Porsche, Albert Speer, or Werner von Braun, who claimed they relied only reluctantly on SS labor. After 1942, private industry *invited* the SS to provide it with concentration-camp inmates. Allen also thinks that the distinction between power-hungry ideologues and rational industrialists disguises the overlap in common values held by the SS and other Germans, allowing civilians, especially those in private industry, to portray themselves as “resisting” SS encroachments. Allen argues that a consensus of values and a program of broad cooperation within a network of SS, government, and private firms, rather than uncoordinated activism, antithetical interests, and dysfunctional “polycracy,” carried the war forward. The Third Reich was functional enough to battle much of the planet and to murder millions.

Allen has thus helped to move the debate past the long-standing differences between intentionalists and functionalists. Broadly described, intentionalists argue that Hitler planned the Holocaust from the beginning, while the functionalists hold that the mass exterminations emerged from a host of decisions that became increasingly radical, especially during wartime. However, he demonstrates that organizations do not engage in abstract power struggles lacking in ideological or motivational content. Without a motivated staff of middle managers, an effective organization, and cooperation among its many branches, the Third Reich could not have carried out its brutal campaign on such an industrial scale.

Nowhere do the various streams of Allen's argument converge more seamlessly than in his description of the engineer Hans Kammler, who wrote the innocuously titled book, *Foundations of Price Calculation and Organization of Construction Firms for Dwelling and Settlement Construction in City and Country*, which laid out the blueprint for a stultifying barracks suburb designed for Aryans. Kammler reappears at the end of the book as the expert engineer of the Buchenwald satellite camp, called Dora, which supplied the slave laborers who built the underground bunkers to house "miracle weapons" production. Those poor people became less than slaves. Slaves could at least be conceived of as a kind of capital investment, but Dora's laborers were considered to be "a kind of raw material expended like fuel" (pp. 222–30). At this facility, SS visions of modernity built on Aryan racial supremacy, modern industrial organization, "gee-whiz" technological modernity, and inhumane brutality came together in one horrific blend.

It is precisely at this point in his argument that Allen's other claims veer away from this neat confluence. The superorganized Hans Kammler or Gerhard Maurer, who shipped forced laborers to private industry, fit neatly into his argument, but, in reality, most of SS industry contained "large installments of self-delusion, hypocrisy, and poorly managed investments" (p. 242). Indeed, most SS businesses were unsuccessful shams. The aim of the SS was not to reap crass profits (although it often sought them in crass ways, as when it fenced materials stolen from inmates), but to raise the Aryan soul. WHVA officials were certainly ideologically committed, but they did not run their operations as businesses. Neither profits nor costs nor humans mattered. Under pressure to produce, these officials combed the camps for fit inmates, working at cross-purposes with the camp commandants, who were busy exterminating potentially suitable candidates for these work slots. One official argued that the SS needed to pay more attention to profits, only to be met with the scornful reply, "So what" (pp. 256–7). SS members made every effort to distinguish their operations from those of private industry, even during the Third Reich.

Its genocidal ideology and practice set SS organizations apart from other modern organizations. Although they drew up organizational charts, which are reproduced in the book, and relied on statistics and graphs in order to channel their labor force efficiently into these brutal construction projects, only by divorcing form from aim and content can

the claim be made that these SS organizations were no different from other modern corporate bureaucracies (p. 280). At Dora, one survivor remembered how the Death Head Unit guard had “slugged each one [prisoner]. Those able to remain standing were still usable; those who fell over from the blow were as good as dead.” Once the survivors were selected, WHVA officials created accurate, systematic statistics on the inmates who were “fit to work” (p. 225). In order to sustain his thesis that the SS was just like other forms of modern corporate organization in its use of statistics (p. 280), Allen must divorce ends from means, content from statistics. The categories of physically “fit” and “unfit,” however, do not exactly figure in the calculations of modern business organizations. The SS statistics betray their ideology and aims. However abstract, their numbers are based on inhumane categories and values.

The primacy of ideology, policing, and cruelty in the SS affected the nature of the organization itself. The SS may have modernized chain gangs and prisons, but it was still unlike other organizations, both in intent and efficiency. A graph of fluctuating “fit for work” statistics was not enough to control arbitrary and brutal camp commandants intent on killing the workers needed by the Reich. The SS was hardly a paragon of organization. Only by resting his argument on a category of the modern organization defined by abstracted hierarchies, flow charts, and statistics that are emptied of content or aims can he equate SS organization with the modern American corporation. Likewise, “modern” and “modernization” become empty definitions: sometimes “modern” means systematic; at other times, it stands for “best practice” or “efficiency.” In other cases, it may be a statistical signifier. Elsewhere, it may mean a vision of the future. Because all visions of modern society are by definition partial and arbitrary, according to Allen, an SS vision of modernity was no more or less selective than one imagined by Karl Popper or Ralf Dahrendorf, who defend democracy and an open society. Even if we agree that various theorists of modernity

define their terms differently, that “modernity” should not be equated with “rationality,” and that the “modern” implicitly circumscribes values that are considered desirable and undesirable, good and bad, forward- or backward-looking, nevertheless mass production, gee-whiz gadgets, ethnically cleansed settlements, and concentration camps should not necessarily be attached to the term “modern.” There is no reason for us to take these deluded criminals at their word. Allen’s own selection privileges charts, graphs, and statistics in the abstract as “modern,” which may or may not be a good signifier of it. Ultimately, however, Allen raises important questions about the modernity of the Third Reich, which continues to pose many conundrums for historians.

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