

Citation style

Michels, Eckard: Rezension über: Eckart Conze / Norbert Frei / Peter Hayes / Moshe Zimmermann, Das Amt und die Vergangenheit. Deutsche Diplomaten im Dritten Reich und in der Bundesrepublik, München: Karl Blessing Verlag, 2010, in: German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol. XXXIII (2011), 2, S. 76-82, DOI: 10.15463/rec.1189736742

First published: German Historical Institute London Bulletin, Vol. XXXIII (2011), 2

GERMAN HISTORICAL INSTITUTE LONDON

Bulletin



copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

ECKART CONZE, NORBERT FREI, PETER HAYES, and MOSHE ZIMMERMANN, *Das Amt und die Vergangenheit: Deutsche Diplomaten im Dritten Reich und in der Bundesrepublik* (Munich: Karl Blessing Verlag, 2010), 880 pp. ISBN 978 3 89667 430 2. €34.95

With the exception of Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*,¹ no book on contemporary Germany history has received as much attention from the German public in the last twenty years as this study, published in late October 2010. *Das Amt* was not only widely reviewed in the German media, and sometimes strongly criticized, by Hans Mommsen, for example.² It was also noticed abroad, in publications ranging from *Time* and the *Wall Street Journal*, to *Libération*, *El País*, and the *Economist*.³ Even the BBC *News at Ten* broadcast a brief report about the book's publication on 27 October 2010. And despite its length, coming in at more than 700 pages of text, 70,000 copies were sold within three months. The book is a summary of the work of an independent commission of historians, set up in the summer of 2005 by Joschka Fischer, Germany's then Foreign Minister, to look at the German Foreign Office's involvement in the Nazi regime's crimes, and at how the ministry, which was re-founded in 1951, has dealt with this past.

What prompted this initiative on Fischer's part was the publication, in spring of 2003, of a white-washed obituary for Franz Nüsslein in the German Foreign Office's house journal, *AA-Intern*. From 1962 to his retirement in 1974, Nüsslein had served as the Federal Republic of Germany's consul-general in Barcelona. During the war, however, he had worked as a lawyer imposing death sentences on Czechs in the Nazi Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Neither these years in the Third Reich, nor the fact that he had been punished by the Czech authorities, was mentioned in Nüsslein's obituary. Thereupon Fischer decreed that in future his ministry would not, after their deaths, honour diplomats tainted by association with the Third

¹ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London, 1996). Published in German as *Hitlers willige Vollstrecker: Ganz gewöhnliche Deutsche und der Holocaust* (Berlin, 1996).

² *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 16 Nov. 2010.

³ See the review of the press at <www.zeitgeschichte-online.de/portals_rainbow/documents/pdf/auswaertigesamt/pressespiegel.pdf>, accessed 2 June 2011.

Reich. This ruling provoked a storm of protest from a number of diplomats, both retired and still active. Pointing to Fischer's own radical past as a left-wing extremist and street fighter in Frankfurt in the 1970s, they argued that everyone had the right to make mistakes. Members of the German Foreign Office, they claimed, should therefore be judged not only by their political pasts, but on the basis of their achievements in the 'new' German Foreign Office from 1951.

The work of this commission also triggered historiographical work in other German ministries. Since the summer of 2009, a panel of experts under the leadership of Hans-Peter Ullmann, an economic historian at Cologne university, has been working on the role of the Ministry of Finance in providing money for rearmament, the financial exploitation of the countries occupied during the war, and the financial victimization of the Jews from 1933. The experts have also been exposing personal continuities in its successor ministry in the Federal Republic of Germany after 1945. Inspired by the sensation caused by *Das Amt*, the panel published an interim report in the autumn of 2010 which claimed that the Finance Ministry had been much more deeply involved than the Foreign Office in depriving Jews of their rights and in their annihilation, and that it was therefore more guilty of the crimes of the Third Reich than the Foreign Office.⁴ Even the Federal Republic of Germany's Ministry of Justice, which had been seen to deal with its own past in the period 1933 to 1945 comparatively well by staging a touring exhibition and publishing a catalogue already in the late 1980s,⁵ has now, in response to discussion of *Das Amt*, decided to look further at how it dealt internally with the Nazi legacy in the early years of the Federal Republic.

As is so often the case, media reports both in Germany and abroad focused on the seemingly sensational aspects of *Das Amt*. They concentrated on what is supposed to be new, namely, that the German Foreign Office was much more deeply involved in the Third Reich's crimes than has so far been acknowledged, and that between 1945 and the publication of this book, it did not face up to this. Among professional historians, however, these alleged revelations evoke no more than a tired smile, as in the case of the *Wehrmacht* exhibition

⁴ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 7 Nov. 2010.

⁵ *Im Namen des Deutschen Volkes: Justiz und Nationalsozialismus*, exhibition catalogue (Cologne, 1989).

Book Reviews

mounted by Hamburg's Institute of Social Research in the mid 1990s. This did no more than disseminate the findings, in a less nuanced and more popular form, of academic studies by Wilhelm Krausnick and Christian Streit which had been published fifteen years earlier.⁶ Essential aspects of what is presented in *Das Amt* have been known since Christopher Browning's research of the 1970s and that done by Hans-Jürgen Döscher in the 1980s and 1990s. These findings, recently given added depth by the work of Sebastian Weitzkamp,⁷ can be summed up as follows: the German Foreign Office had been permeated by members of the Nazi Party since 1933; it was involved in the Final Solution implemented during the Second World War; and finally, after 1945, there was continuity among staff who refused to face up to their own dark past, holding on instead to their self-image of an institution more or less resistant to Nazism.

What is new about the book, therefore, is not so much the central argument as the more comprehensive and much better documented account of the German Foreign Office's past as compared with the pioneering studies in the field mentioned above. This is largely because its authors were granted unhindered access to the personnel files of the 'old' and 'new' Foreign Office before the closed period of thirty years after the death of the actors, which applies to ordinary users, had elapsed. Although many other archives were also consulted, these astonishingly productive files are the main primary source on which the book is based. The flip side of this person-centred approach, however, is that the study falls apart into dozens of accounts of the fates of individual diplomats, each documented in great detail – an approach, incidentally, which had reduced the value

⁶ Christian Streit, *Keine Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941–1945* (Berlin, 1978); Helmut Krausnick and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges: Die Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD 1938–1942* (Stuttgart, 1981).

⁷ Christopher Browning, *The Final Solution and the German Foreign Office: A Study of the Referat D III of Abteilung Deutschland 1940–1943* (New York, 1978); Hans-Jürgen Döscher, *Das Auswärtige Amt im Dritten Reich: Diplomatie im Schatten der Endlösung* (Berlin 1987) and id., *Verschworene Gesellschaft: Das Auswärtige Amt unter Adenauer zwischen Neubeginn und Kontinuität* (Berlin, 1995); and Sebastian Weitzkamp, *Braune Diplomaten: Horst Wagner und Eberhard von Thadden als Funktionäre der Endlösung* (Berlin, 2008).

of Döscher's Ph.D. thesis in the 1980s.⁸ The depiction of the recruitment and individual working lives of diplomats between 1933 and 1945, their strategies of justification and suppression after the end of the Third Reich, and their succession to positions in the 'new' Foreign Office from 1951 and their careers in it, prevents the authors from taking a wider perspective and analysing the activities of the institution as a whole.

This is a shortcoming mainly in the first, shorter part of the book dealing with the years 1933 to 1945 and for which Moshe Zimmermann is responsible. He focuses largely on the German Foreign Office's involvement in the exclusion and annihilation of the Jews. Almost no notice is taken of other aspects of the institution's work, such as the classical fields of diplomacy, economic relations, and cultural policy abroad. Nor is much mention made of its role in the recruiting of forced labourers, the formulation of war aims, and the plundering of cultural assets, or, indeed, of the institution's loss of significance as the main actor in foreign policy, which was visible from as early as the 1930s. Moreover, the first part of the volume is written in an accusing and hostile tone that, in case of doubt, always finds against the historical actor. Thus, for example, repeated mention is made of the fact that individual diplomats had spoken out against the persecution and murder of the Jews and the suppression of the Slavic population in the occupied areas of the USSR. Yet, it is suggested, their motives were not humanitarian, but purely pragmatic in nature, as the measures criticized either harmed Germany's standing abroad, or made the conduct of war more difficult. Apart from the fact that it is difficult for historians to make such judgements even when they can consult a large number of ego-documents, more source criticism is called for here. Humanitarian arguments would have evoked a quizzical response from the diplomats' superiors or other departments, such as the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Security Head Office), or may even have harmed the diplomats' careers. In a racist state such as the Third Reich, only pragmatic arguments had any chance of improving the situation of those affected. But this cannot lead us automatically to conclude, as this volume does, that all diplomats lacked empathy for the victims of these policies.

⁸ See Christopher Browning's review of Hans-Jürgen Döscher's book in *Francia*, 16 (1989), 255-6.

Book Reviews

The book attempts to destroy the justification strategy which ex-career diplomats developed while preparing for the Wilhelmstrasse Trial of 1948–9 in Nuremberg, and in particular for the defence of Ernst von Weizsäcker, former secretary of state who was being tried on behalf of the whole profession. According to their own accounts, the old career diplomats who were already serving during the Kaiserreich and the Weimar Republic were largely immune to National Socialism. They had remained in post only, they claimed, in order to prevent something worse, obeying Secretary of State Bernhard von Bülow's dictum that one did not leave one's country in the lurch just because it had a bad government. They suggested that the murder of the Jews, which most diplomats did not find out about until towards the end of the war, if at all, had been organized with the assistance of unqualified, opportunistic newcomers such as Undersecretary Martin Luther, who had been imposed upon the Foreign Office with Joachim von Ribbentrop's accession to office in 1938. According to the authors of the book under review, this myth was upheld until the publication of their study.

Two things are problematic about this. First, most of the examples which the first part of the book gives of diplomats who, either at the centre or in the occupied countries, took part in organizing the deportations of the Jews or stealing works of art were, in fact, diplomatic newcomers of this sort. We could mention Otto Abetz as ambassador in Paris, Edmund Veesenmayer as special envoy in Hungary in 1944, Franz Rademacher as adviser on Jewish matters in the Abteilung Deutschland division of the German Foreign Office, and Eberhard von Künsberg as head of the eponymous unit for confiscating cultural assets. Thus, going against its own argument, this study provides empirical evidence that there was a core of truth in the accounts of themselves provided by the Wilhelmstrasse diplomats after 1945. The study attempts to refute this by pointing out that the 'old' diplomats had dominated the central political, economic, and legal departments until 1945. But these departments are precisely those which, especially since the outbreak of war, had suffered an extreme loss of significance compared with those dealing with propaganda and Jewish policy. In terms of staff numbers, they did not expand like other departments dealing with the new areas of activity created by the war.

Secondly, the study provides no evidence that the German Foreign Office has upheld this white-washed view of the past in relation

to the outside world in recent decades. Before Fischer's initiative, the Foreign Office was certainly not looking for a critical re-working of its history, but to conclude from this that it was hanging on to an old version does not match up to reality either, at least since the 1970s. Attempts to discredit Döscher's Ph.D. thesis in 1987, for example, did not emanate from the German Foreign Office, but from individual members of the wartime generation, such as Theodor Eschenburg and Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, who were offended by the account of Secretary of State Weizsäcker, with whose family they were on friendly terms.

Yet apart from the fact that it attempts, with a great deal of fuss and ultimately unnecessarily, to destroy a myth that has not recently been actively spread or even really believed any longer, the second part of the book on the German Foreign Office's policy towards the past is much more balanced than the first and written in a less accusatory style. The second part makes clear that, despite personal continuity with the period before 1945, there was a re-orientation in the thinking especially of the higher-ranking diplomats who continued to dominate the Foreign Office in the 1950s and 1960s, not so much in numbers as in their political weight. Thus with a few exceptions, such as the Middle East departments with their traditional pro-Arab and anti-Israeli attitude, personal continuity did not mean that the diplomacy that had characterized the Foreign Office until 1945 was continued. The old Wilhelmstrasse diplomats quickly transformed themselves into advocates of multilateralism, cooperation with international organizations, and close ties with the West, rather than holding on to the idea of Germany as an autonomous Great Power whose function was to act as a bridge between East and West. Similarly, they remained loyal when power changed hands in 1969, and supported the new *Ostpolitik* pursued by the Social Democratic-Liberal coalition. It is precisely this adaptability, whether out of opportunism, a sense of reality, or perhaps a profound change of heart, that may be one reason why, in recent years, the German Foreign office and its past have not been of as much interest as the authors of this book think they should have been.

Book Reviews

ECKARD MICHELS is a Reader in German History at Birkbeck College, University of London. He is writing a biography of the Stasi spy Günter Guillaume who was responsible for the downfall of Chancellor Willy Brandt in 1974.