

The American Historical Review Vol. 108, Issue 1.

#### Book Review

*Robert Gellately. Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany. New York. Oxford University Press. 2001. Pp. xvi, 359. \$35.00.*

This study builds on Robert Gellately's previous research on the Gestapo and German society. Based on his own investigations of the police in Würzburg and Düsseldorf and practices of denouncing individuals to the authorities in the Third Reich, he sketches a broader account of the extension and radicalization of the Gestapo and SS system of terror from 1933 to 1945. Gellately relies in the main on recent scholarship, and parts of the book read like a kind of compendium of relevant historical inquiry over the past fifteen years, principally by German scholars.

Initially, Gellately shows that Nazi terror was directed primarily against the Communists, wasting few words in this connection on the Social Democrats and trade unions. During the first year of Nazi rule, some 100,000 Germans were subjected to the tortures and indignities of the concentration camps; the author estimates that an approximately similar number of victims were tortured by the SA in other "wild" camps and cellars. Gellately argues that these numbers were relatively small in comparison to the massive abuses of the Bolshevik October Revolution or the Chinese Revolution; but for him to contend that the upheaval in Germany was thus "harmonious" is doubtless an exaggeration. Nonetheless, it is certainly accurate to note that the Nazis—who enjoyed the backing of some forty percent of the electorate before their seizure of power, and whose bitterest foes were within the ranks of the organized working class and among Roman Catholics—succeeded in expanding their base of support during the first four or five years of their rule. The main underlying factors were their evident successes in economic and employment policy and in the realm of foreign affairs, areas not explored in the present study.

Gellately shows how the system of the political police was successively consolidated in terms of both organization and ideology, in theory functioning to help establish a "harmonious society, free from conflict," in which the problems of modernity were eliminated by isolating and eradicating their causes (from crime to hereditary disease, once political opponents had been expunged). It is highly unlikely that Nazi theorizing on police law (Gellately cites in particular publications by Werner Best) had much resonance among the broader population. Nonetheless, such writings did probably serve to allay doubts in the middle classes and most particularly within legal and judicial circles regarding the progressive erosion and evisceration of constitutional law and civil liberties.

Gellately provides no new insights into Nazi Jewish policy. He notes that Jews were often denounced to the police by their "Aryan" neighbors or associates at work. The author devotes ample space to the practice of denouncing neighbors and associates, emphasizing that some fifty percent of such denunciations came from the ranks of the general population rather than from within the bureaucracies of terror. It is generally recognized that an essential feature of denunciations is precisely the fact that they do not stem from the apparatus of surveillance and repression but come from the broader populace. This phenomenon is common to all totalitarian dictatorships, which seek by this insidious means to establish a regimen of fear that could never be successfully maintained solely by the presence of large numbers of police. Unfortunately, the author does not tell us whether the number of such denunciations in Nazi Germany was relatively high by comparative standards.

Overall, these particular chapters remain the most instructive and interesting compared with other sections of the book. Those on foreign forced workers are basically a rehash of material from Gellately's first book, limited here solely to Polish civilian workers. The chapters on the extermination camps, the death marches, and the exploitation of Jewish prisoners as slave laborers fall short of the current state of historical knowledge.

The real problem with this book lies elsewhere, however. Its introduction and conclusion project a quite different contextual frame from that examined here, misleadingly expressed by its English (and even more by its German) title. For example, the reader is told that, in 1933, only a "mini-wave of terror" swept over Germany subsequent to the Nazi

seizure of power; that the Germans were "certainly pleased" about the building of the concentration camps; and that the present study provides proof "that the majority more or less accepted the racist teachings, and at the very least showed few signs of being troubled by them" (p. 261). Yet that same reader will probably have had a quite different impression from what is stated earlier in the course of the study. Gellately contends that "people cooperated when it came to enforce antisemitism and the racial measures aimed at foreign workers." Yet only a bit earlier, the author quotes a Nazi report from Munich complaining that "the instances of unbefitting, defeatist, insurrectionary, and treasonous behaviour of German citizens, also of those in official positions, with regard to foreign workers and prisoners of war, gather daily" (p. 254). Yet the book's conclusion is silent on that, emphasizing instead that "the National Socialists and the German people got caught up in a murderous game of pillorying, excluding, and eventually eliminating unwanted social 'elements' and 'race enemies.'"

Such generalizing and undifferentiated statements are not substantiated by this study. Indeed, it is methodologically unconvincing to draw conclusions about the supposed concurrence of "the" Germans in regard to mass crimes during the war based on propagandistic newspaper reports about the early concentration camps replete with embellishing descriptions about the purportedly positive dimensions of sports, labor and the love of order and discipline inside their fences. Likewise, the large number of denunciations cannot serve as support for the thesis that there was some sort of "pact between the Gestapo and the population." It is possible that the book's title, introduction, and conclusion may well have been shaped more by the guiding interests of the publisher than the intention of the author. Yet there can be no doubt: such overdrawn and catchy theses tend to do more harm than good to directions in historical inquiry that have long sought to establish the precise and differentiated extent of cooperation and consent among the broader German population with the policies of the Nazi regime.

*Ulrich Herbert, University of Freiburg*