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# Public Knowledge of the Shoah in Nazi Germany

LARS FISCHER

Bernward Dörner, **Die Deutschen und der Holocaust. Was niemand wissen wollte, aber jeder wissen konnte.** Berlin: Propyläen, 2007. 891 pp. €29.90. ISBN 978-3-549-07315-5.

Jeffrey Herf, **The Jewish Enemy. Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust.** Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 2006. x + 390 pp. \$ 29.95. ISBN 978-0-674-02175-4.

Peter Longerich, **'Davon haben wir nichts gewusst!' Die Deutschen und die Judenverfolgung 1933–1945.** Munich: Siedler, 2006. 448 pp. €24.95. ISBN 978-3-88680-843-4.

The famous correspondence between Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer still bears instructive and moving testimony to the contentiousness of the call for a stronger historicisation of National Socialism that became increasingly vocal in the early-to-mid 1980s.<sup>1</sup> The aspirations of its proponents were far from unproblematic and the anxieties of its critics anything but unjustified. Yet the actual outcome of the historicisation process that has become a reality over the last quarter of a century has confounded the expectations of both camps. Far from producing a banal and harmless image of German society's interaction with the Nazi regime, acquiescence and complicity have taken centre stage in every walk of life that

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has been subjected to detailed scrutiny and the notion of *Resistenz* as anything other than the exception that confirms the rule has become all but obsolete. The potential for contention has consequently shifted. With the emphasis now on continuity rather than discontinuity and the far-reaching, albeit selective, affinities between much of German society and the National Socialist regime, the question arises whether all this ultimately renders twentieth-century German society as a whole more National Socialist or the realities of life between 1933 and 1945 less National Socialist than previously assumed. Could the regime rely on most Germans to comply on most issues without having to resort to large-scale coercion or did it refrain from large-scale coercion because it simply did not see the need to enforce conformity on all but a small number of core issues and consequently allowed for a considerable degree of compromise and diversity in all other areas? Either way, of course, the almost total absence of serious opposition to a regime that perpetrated unprecedented crimes against humanity becomes a more vexing issue than ever before.

Against this background, it is little wonder that the question of just how widespread knowledge of these crimes was amongst Germans prior to 1945 has drawn a considerable amount of renewed interest in recent years. Much of the research of the last two or three decades has suggested that most ordinary Germans, far from encountering the Nazi regime as a permanent infringement and threat, led what they themselves considered perfectly 'normal' lives, at least until the bombing of the German cities brought the effects of the war home and raised new questions about its merits and prospects. Yet, as Marion Kaplan has rather aptly put it for the pre-war years, 'what many Germans insisted on classifying as "normal" did not look that way to Jews. Nor did it look normal to a few Germans then or to those of us who look back now. ... Normal life amid the subjugation and humiliation of others is not so normal after all.'<sup>2</sup> This surely holds true all the more for 'normal life amid the systematic physical annihilation of others', unless, of course, those leading their 'normal' lives really did not know about the genocide. The research presented in the monographs under review suggests that this is a singularly implausible suggestion.

These monographs both build on, and move beyond, earlier pioneering scholarship by David Bankier,<sup>3</sup> Otto Dov-Kulka,<sup>4</sup> Ian Kershaw,<sup>5</sup> and others and come on the heels of Eric Johnson and Karl-Heinz Reuband's intriguing yet methodologically problematic volume, *What We Knew*. Based on the evaluation of some 3,000 responses to a written questionnaire and almost

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200 detailed interviews with contemporaries of various backgrounds, Johnson and Reuband concluded that between one-third (Reuband) and half (Johnson) of the German population 'became aware of the mass murder' before 8 May 1945.<sup>6</sup> Their findings were broadly consistent with various polls conducted between 1961 and 1998 in which the number of respondents claiming to have had knowledge of the Shoah prior to the end of the war lay between 32 and 40 per cent.<sup>7</sup> Even at the best of times, though, as a historical source people's recollections are at least as tricky as they are indispensable and cannot simply be relied upon without being related to other forms of evidence. This problem is all the more acute when it comes to an issue as thorny as this and people are being asked to recall, after more than half a century, not only what they know and remember but also how and when they acquired that knowledge and recollection. This makes the material that Johnson and Reuband have gathered no less intriguing on its own terms but their heavy dependence on it does raise some very serious questions about the validity of their inferences and conclusions.

Herf, Longerich, and Dörner, by contrast, move on much more solid ground in that their arguments are based almost entirely on contemporary source material, an approach that still presents more than enough methodological problems as it is. To put it bluntly, there are no smoking guns here. And how indeed can there be any expectation that historians will ever be able to prove the case definitively one way or the other, short of our finding a database compiled before the end of war in which every single German documented, under conditions that rule out any possible dissimulation or distortion, whether conscious or unconscious, what exactly he or she knew? Götz Aly is entirely right when he points out that it is impossible to determine in an objective fashion how representative and significant individual quotations pried from various sources are on their own terms.<sup>8</sup> To his mind, actions speak louder than words and he concludes that rather than trying to reconstruct what people had to say about their own insights and motivation we should focus on their actions: how many people gave strongly Nazi-identified first names to their offspring, how many people left the churches, how many people bought government bonds, how did people announce the loss of relatives killed in the war, etc., and how did these behavioural patterns change over time? These are doubtless all interesting questions and their exploration renders intriguing material yet it is surely a positivist illusion to assume that the empirical data thus accumulated could tell us anything without being subjected to interpretation

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and contextualisation in the same way as any form of textual evidence. Indeed, when are historians ever in a position to offer objective certitude on a big question like this? For the most part, historians argue for the greater plausibility of one scenario over another and they do so deploying as evidence a selection of the available material. In short, in purely epistemological terms it is indeed conceivable that by some coincidence or stroke of misfortune or due to some breathtakingly well orchestrated conspiracy all the evidence presented in these three monographs to suggest that most Germans had a fairly good idea of what was happening to the Jews in the East in fact reflects the exception that confirms the rule and is not representative of the bigger picture. Yet the real question, of course, is not whether it is theoretically conceivable that the interpretations offered in these monographs might be wrong but whether we have concrete and demonstrable reasons to assume that they are.

The task Jeffrey Herf has set himself is a clearly defined one. He systematically explores Nazi propaganda and propaganda directives in order to reconstruct what (and how much) the regime, by deploying a 'mixture of secrecy and blunt talk' (p.viii), was in fact telling the German population about the genocide against European Jewry, thus rendering the Shoah, to the extent that it was meant to remain a secret, a secret 'hiding in plain sight' (p.268). As he clarifies from the outset, 'The evidence and argument in the following pages detail what the Nazi regime told Germans, not what "ordinary" Germans, or "most" Germans, made of it' (p.15).

Herf identifies himself as an adherent of 'modified intentionalism' (p.vii). He pays considerable attention to the dynamics resulting from the rivalry between Goebbels and *Reichspressechef* Otto Dietrich, not least because Dietrich 'worked in Hitler's office on a daily basis' and 'bringing Dietrich back into the history of Nazi propaganda thus reinserts Hitler into the day-to-day construction of the story the Nazi regime told Germans and the world on a daily basis' (p.24). This is all the more significant since Hitler in fact required Goebbels, from August 1942 onwards, to issue press directives (of which more than 75,000 were circulated between 1933 and 1945) only through Dietrich. Herf argues that 'in supporting Dietrich's prerogative, Hitler was defending his own control over the government's instructions to the German press' (p.26). Goebbels, on the other hand, stayed in control of the *Wochenspruch der NSDAP*, the party's motto of the week, on which more in a moment. Herf's account ultimately seems to fall squarely within the parameters of the recent synthesis between intentionalism and functionalism

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that concedes the regime's polycratic nature yet considers it a source not of weakness and self-destruction but of flexibility and resilience and thus of strength. His emphasis lies on the 'cooperation among different and at times antagonistic institutions'. To be sure, 'high-ranking officials engaged in turf battles ... But they also cooperated with great effectiveness in pursuit of a common goal' (p.272).

The *Wochenspruch*, displayed in poster form all over the country, along with other posters like it, plays a crucial role in Herf's argument. 'Aside from the weekly newsreels', he suggests, 'no form of Nazi visual propaganda made so crucial a contribution to the regime's presentation of ongoing events' (p.14). These posters were 'ubiquitous' (p.15) and 'penetrated deeply into the daily life of German society, but its influence was much less visible to the world outside Germany' (p.138). They 'stared out at the mass public for a week at a time in tens of thousands of places German pedestrians were likely to pass in the course of the day' and one would be hard pressed to argue with Herf's conclusion that 'we do not know what people in Nazi Germany made of the wall newspapers' but 'we do know that people saw them' (p.274).

Antisemitic messages featured prominently on these posters and most prominently while the killings of Jews in the death camps were at their height (p.31). Yet it is above all else the *Wochenspruch* for the week from 7 to 13 September 1941 that is truly astonishing. Issued just as 'the vision of the Final Solution ... crystallized in the minds of the Nazi leadership', and on the eve of the five-week window in which, on Browning's account, the regime moved towards its systematic implementation,<sup>9</sup> the *Wochenspruch* for this week reiterated Hitler's infamous 'prophesy' first made in the *Reichstag* on 30 January 1939: 'Should international finance Jewry once again manage to plunge the peoples into a world war then the outcome will be not the victory of Jewry but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe.'

This 'prophesy' had been repeated and reiterated in various permutations by leading representatives of the regime at important junctures and has drawn considerable attention in recent scholarly debate. For Herf, it demonstrates blatantly how 'the Nazi leadership embedded the most extraordinary statements expressing its determination to exterminate and annihilate Europe's Jews within a seemingly ordinary and normal narrative of attack and counterattack in war' (p.266).<sup>10</sup> It thus played a key role in the regime's strategy that 'combined blunt speech about their general intentions with suppression of any facts or details regarding the Final Solution' (p.268).

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On Herf's reading, this 'mixture of blunt speech and suppression of the facts' was designed to 'consolidate a "covenant of gangsters,"<sup>11</sup> while offering to the silent, indifferent, and uncurious majority a fig leaf of plausible deniability' (p.269).

Yet whatever the motives of the regime may have been, the very existence of this particular *Wochenspruch* surely begs the question: what did Germans think this poster was trying to tell them, if not exactly what it did tell them? The counter-argument is, of course, that Germans may have assumed that this 'prophesy' was meant metaphorically. Yet the Nazi regime owed much of its popularity not least to the fact that it was, domestically at least, straight-talking and did not shy away from harsh measures when it came to keeping its promises and doing exactly what it had said it would. The real question, therefore, is why Germans should have assumed that a regime generally respected because it could be relied upon to tell it as it is and mean business should have meant this one particular promise not literally but metaphorically. Nor, of course, as Dörner rightly points out, would it have been news to most Germans that the regime was in fact perfectly capable of systematically annihilating groups of people deemed unworthy to live: the so-called euthanasia programme T4 had already proved this beyond a shadow of a doubt (pp.421–2). Herf ultimately concludes that

during World War II anyone in Nazi Germany who regularly read a newspaper, listened to the radio, or walked past the Nazi political posters between 1942 and 1943 knew of the threats and boasts of the Nazi regime about intentions to exterminate European Jews, followed by public assertions that it was implementing that policy. Claims of ignorance regarding the murderous intentions and assertions of making good on such threats defy the evidence, logic, and common sense. With confidence we can say that millions and millions of Germans were told on many occasions that the Jews had begun a war to exterminate the Germans, but that the Nazi regime was exterminating the Jews instead. (p.267)<sup>12</sup>

For Longerich too the regime's propaganda plays a central role and he covers much of the same ground as Herf, though based on a broader source base. In particular, Longerich emphasises that, at least prior to the autumn of 1938, the coverage in various dailies was more diverse than one might expect, given the regime's concerted efforts to direct the press. Whether this diversity ultimately amounted to more than the articulation of varying emphases within an overarching consensus is debatable, but Longerich's point is well

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made and the material he presents certainly renders a much more nuanced picture of the relevant press coverage.

Longerich's discussion is complicated by the fact that he is trying to establish not only what Germans knew but also how they felt about the regime's anti-Jewish policies and, eventually, the genocide. Against this backdrop, there are two central conceptual problems with Longerich's discussion of the regime's propaganda efforts. Firstly, it is predicated on the extremely undialectical assumption that the regime resorted to propaganda only when and if it needed to do so because the population was out of step with its priorities. To put it bluntly, the more antisemitic the regime's propaganda the more critical of antisemitism he assumes the population to have been. To Longerich's mind, the fact that the regime had to keep renewing its efforts therefore vouches for the fact that Germans for the most part did not accept the regime's antisemitism. This is by no means an implausible suggestion but by the same logic it would be equally plausible, of course, to infer that antisemitism must have been popular whenever the regime was not prioritising its antisemitic propaganda efforts. What Longerich's approach seems to rule out *a priori* is the possibility that the regime could have intensified its antisemitic propaganda because it hoped this might be a means of tapping into existing anti-Jewish sentiments and thus mobilising the population, in other words, that it prioritised antisemitic propaganda at certain junctures not because it had to but because it could. Needless to say, theoretically speaking these are all equally plausible suggestions and the real issue is whether one can demonstrate compellingly that one of them offers the most likely actual, rather than a merely possible, explanation for the regime's actions at various junctures.

Longerich's failure to contemplate that the regime's reliance on antisemitic propaganda could be a sign not of weakness but of strength is all the more remarkable given the second conceptual problem with Longerich's discussion of the regime's propaganda, namely, his adherence to a rather unsophisticated notion of antisemitism as a form of scape-goating. The escalation of antisemitic propaganda in the run-up to the Nuremberg laws, we are told, was part of an 'attempt to neutralize the widespread dissatisfaction and apathy of the population and hold internal trouble makers and enemies responsible for the apparent mismanagement that large parts of the population sensed and articulated' (p.76). In 1937, antisemitic propaganda was intensified in order to 'redirect' towards the Jews the 'aggression and fear that had been aroused amongst the populace by the

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risky foreign policy and intensified domestic repression' (p.109). In the summer of 1941, the regime decided 'to take control of the complex constellation of problems' it found itself up against by initiating 'a new offensive against "the Jews"' (p.163) and in November of that year Goebbels began to foreground 'the Jewish Question' again in order to pre-empt sinking morale as the Soviet campaign lost momentum (p.190), and so on.

I have yet to be convinced that the scapegoating paradigm can make any genuine contribution to the explanation of antisemitism anyway but even on its own terms it self-evidently presupposes what it is presumably meant to explain. Surely one can only 'redirect' negative energies towards an already stigmatised group. Longerich's reliance on the scapegoating paradigm therefore only works if one assumes an already existing widespread predisposition towards the regime's antisemitism among the German populace. Yet this, in turn, would flatly contradict his assumption that surges in antisemitic propaganda demonstrate the absence, or at least the acute weakness, of this sort of predisposition.

The regime's propaganda efforts apart, Longerich's second main focus is on reports of all kinds that (at least ostensibly) sought to capture public opinion within Nazi Germany. This includes both reports produced by different institutions within the regime and reports compiled by its opponents, most notably the exiled Social Democrats. Longerich is to be commended for discussing the methodological implications of any attempt to use these reports in some detail and much that he has to say is intensely thought-provoking. Yet plausible or at least conceivable enough as they all are on their own terms, I fail to see that Longerich actually substantiates the criteria and interpretative rules that he introduces; nor does he himself seem to apply them consistently throughout the book.

Charting popular responses to the deportation of Jews from Germany, to take a particularly blatant example, Longerich refers to a report from Münster (pp.195–6). This report states that the deportations were the talk of the town but also claims that most people welcomed the deportations. The former bears out the point Longerich is trying to make, the latter flatly contradicts Longerich's own assumptions. How does Longerich get out of this pickle? He states that the author of the report is in all likelihood a supporter of the regime and one must therefore discard his 'subjective' observations and judgements. Yet what supposedly qualifies the observation that the deportations were the talk of the town as 'objective' and the claim that people agreed with the measure as 'subjective'? On a similar note,

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Longerich regularly argues that the absence of anti-antisemitic protests from most reports demonstrates, or at least might demonstrate, not the actual absence of such protests but most likely a reluctance on the part of the reports' authors to register such protests (e.g. pp.51, 119).

Or take, on a more systematic note, Longerich's utilisation of the exiled Social Democrats' Sopade reports. As Longerich explains (pp.28–32), these reports were compiled and published outside Germany and the information on goings on within Germany was relayed via the 11 border secretaries who played a crucial role in maintaining the contact between the activists inside Germany and the exiled party executive. The material went through two rounds of sifting and editing, first by the border secretaries, then by the editors of the final published reports (Erich Rinner and Fritz Heine). On the other hand, a substantial proportion of the reports was written neither by the informants nor by the border secretaries but by Rinner or Heine themselves following interviews with informants. As Longerich points out, the security of the informants also needed to be taken into consideration and various details were routinely omitted or altered simply in order to maintain the informants' cover.

Longerich's discussion of likely biases in the Sopade reports' portrayal of the state of affairs inside Germany is strangely inconclusive. On the one hand, he suggests that Rinner and Heine were fully aware of the fact that their informants were likely to be only too prone to present an overly optimistic picture exaggerating the extent of active and/or passive resistance and placing little emphasis on popular complicity with the regime, especially among workers (p.29). From this one might imply that the editors would have tried to counteract this inclination by foregrounding reports that did focus on antisemitism in general and popular support for the regime's anti-Jewish measures in particular.

On the other hand, Longerich stresses that the reports were not merely a means of enlightenment but also an integral part of the exiled Social Democrats' propaganda efforts in its desperate struggle against the Nazis. Consequently, assumptions as to how the reports could be circulated and might generate income most effectively also played an important role in determining editorial principles. On Longerich's account, Rinner assumed that reports on the situation of the Jews would extend the reports' appeal. He cites from a letter written to Salomon Adler-Rudel in January 1938, in which Rinner suggests that 'our reporting on the terror against the Jews reaches circles in England and America that are not directly touched by

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Jewish information efforts' (p.32). This would seem to imply that Rinner considered it such a high priority to make known to the world what was happening to the Jews that he wanted the reports to serve this cause. Yet Longerich quite rightly places this quotation in the context of Rinner's endeavours to extend the influence of the reports. Rinner's intention was exactly the opposite: he wanted to utilise the widespread interest in the fate of the Jews to make known to the world the fate of the Social Democrats both within Germany and in exile. Hence, Longerich concludes, an increased emphasis on antisemitism in the reports need not imply an escalation within Germany but may well simply reflect Rinner's attempts to utilise this topic more extensively for tactical purposes. Needless to say, this tactical consideration was ultimately predicated on long-standing assumptions about a Jewish predominance in the press and undue Jewish influence on public opinion, especially in the US, and for this reason alone we should view the priorities and editorial principles Rinner and his peers applied in their coverage of relevant goings on inside Nazi Germany with some suspicion.

The notion that Jews were unduly adept at publicising their own fate, potentially at the expense of other victims of the Nazi regime, seems to have been fairly widespread among Social Democrats at the time. Take the following discussion following James Macdonald's appointment as League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.<sup>13</sup> On 24 October 1933, Rudolf Breitscheid, the party's former foreign policy spokesman and joint parliamentary leader who had fled via Switzerland to Paris and was later killed in Buchenwald, wrote to Paul Hertz, his contact in the party executive now based in Prague, that it would be 'most desirable' if a political refugee from Germany worked in an advisory capacity for Macdonald. 'If this can be engineered at all, I would recommend, though, that you do not suggest a candidate of Jewish extraction. You won't take this the wrong way, but I think that everything should be avoided that would make this institution too look like one run by Jews. The welfare for Jewish refugees is in any case already by far the best organized.'<sup>14</sup> Responding on 27 October 1933, Hertz (who came from a Jewish background) immediately reassured Breitscheid that 'it is my opinion too, that we should avoid anything that might turn this refugee relief organisation into a Jewish affair. Consequently, I do not take your remark that we should refrain from suggesting a candidate of Jewish extraction the wrong way.'<sup>15</sup>

On 6 December, Hertz wrote to his friend and associate, Otto Nathan, who had managed to flee to the US and was trying to set up a meeting with

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Macdonald that, should he succeed, 'I would be extremely grateful, of course, if you could impress on him that the problems of the political refugees are no less urgent than those of the Jewish refugees.'<sup>16</sup> In January 1934, Nathan reported back that he had met Macdonald, together with Albert Einstein and 'a rich Jewish sponsor from N.Y.'. He (Nathan) and Einstein had 'underlined very emphatically that the whole business must not be organised in a purely Jewish vein [*nicht rein jüdisch aufgezogen werden müsse*] and that there are many cases among the non-Jews (Soc + Comm) who are at least as badly if not worse off'.<sup>17</sup>

Now, these remarks were all made at a time when it was well nigh impossible to anticipate what exactly lay in store for European Jewry, the rapid deterioration of their civic status in Germany notwithstanding, and equally hard to dispute that Communists and Social Democrats had encountered an unprecedented campaign of outright systematic repression and violence. Yet a letter to Hertz written by Rudolf Breitscheid's son, Gerhard Breitscheid, on 11 November 1933 lends an altogether more sinister tone to this entire discussion. Commenting on Macdonald's appointment, Gerhard Breitscheid wrote, 'I bet the Jews have already moved heaven and earth to ensure they're "in on it"'. Hertz presumably knew Macdonald's assistant, Mildred Wertheimer, from her time in Berlin, Gerhard Breitscheid suggested. 'She is a Jewess, intelligent and exceptionally smart. If you don't intervene, only the Jewish emigration problems will be treated and made public.'<sup>18</sup>

Yet these are subtleties compared to the expressions of outright antisemitism articulated by leading Social Democrats in this period. It is not without irony that so much of Longerich's methodological consideration of the Sopade reports should hinge on correspondence between Rinner and two other leading Social Democrats: Georg Reinbold (not Reinhold, as Longerich calls him) and Wilhelm Sollmann. Johann Georg Reinbold (real name Simon Schwarz) was a former leading party official from Baden and now 'a typical border secretary',<sup>19</sup> while Sollmann was notionally a member of the exiled party executive, although the fact that he was not resident in Czechoslovakia prevented him from acting in this capacity.<sup>20</sup> As David Bankier reported in 2001, Reinbold's antisemitic remarks caused a major scandal in 1935/36, or rather, would (and arguably should) have caused a major scandal had they not been officially ignored.<sup>21</sup> Writing to the party executive on 26 October 1935 to express his dissatisfaction with their policies, Reinbold did not mince his words. 'As long as the world is not as we would want it', he wrote,

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our movement needs to be kept free of corrosive influences born of exaggerated internationalism. It is unacceptable that a group of Jewish intellectuals stamp all over everything that is in keeping with German sentiment, simply because they are incapable of thinking in accordance with a nation and its needs. ...

The new German party must engage in healthy national politics and enter the fray with the will to defend oneself and not let oneself be forced into a corner. If it fails to do so it will not be and a new workers' party will emerge that is before all else German and then German again and only then international.

... We are being poisoned by corrosive un-German elements that originate with a group of intellectuals most of whom can only think as Jews.

He then singled out none other than Sollmann as the exception that confirms the rule:

I pity poor Sollmann who has to find his work published in this company. What has always pained me the most is having to see those of our splendid German comrades from a working-class background who are stripped of their citizenship in the company of all the Veilchenbaum and Apfelblüte etc.<sup>22</sup>

The latter, needless to say, were supposed to be 'Jewish' names. No matter how much benefit of the doubt one may be willing to give when it comes to the ambiguities shown by Social Democrats vis-à-vis Jews and antisemitism in Imperial Germany or the Weimar Republic, Reinbold's remarks were not a matter of ambiguity but blatantly antisemitic and would surely have merited a clear response. Yet, as Bankier explains, 'the *sopade* did not call Reinbold to account for voicing such views, despite demands to do so, and when this topic was raised at the party executive meeting in May 1936 the leadership simply decided to restrict the number of those who would read the letter'.<sup>23</sup>

We might note in passing that Reinbold was not the only border secretary to circulate blatantly antisemitic remarks. Richard Hansen, who negotiated the contacts across the German–Danish border, shared Reinbold's anti-intellectual notion that the party was squandering far too large a proportion of its hard-earned income on its publishing enterprise. For Hansen this raised a rather self-evident question: 'Has the publishing house been taken

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over by Jews?<sup>24</sup> On 14 August 1936, he clarified that ‘we reject any cooperation with the Communists and any joint organisation. Yesterday, a representative of the Danish party made this very clear to a German émigré delegation consisting of two Communists and one Jew, namely, the former *Vorwärts* editor, Hirsch.<sup>25</sup> Evidently, then, the fact that Hirsch apparently supported the call for a united front with the Communists revealed that he was not a Social Democrat but in fact a Jew, and to Hansen’s mind the logic of this argument was presumably circular; it was also Hirsch’s Jewishness that made him want to sell out to the Communists in the first place.

To what extent Sollmann deserved to be singled out by Reinbold in the way he was is a moot point. On balance, Sollmann, who had been co-opted by the party executive as a representative of the party’s right wing, seems to have subscribed to the prevalent ambivalences in matters (supposedly) Jewish that were widespread among his peers but there is little to suggest that he shared Reinbold’s outright antisemitism. Bankier cites a letter to Hertz from 20 January 1936 in which Sollmann complains about the large number of Jews involved prominently in anti-Nazi activities. Though understandable, this would only vindicate the Nazis’ claims that the political émigré movement was part of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy.<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere he commented that it would have been impossible to appoint Hertz as Finance Minister in the Weimar Republic because ‘the German people would never have accepted this and it would have been bad for the SPD’.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Hertz initially suspected Sollmann of subscribing to Reinbold’s position yet subsequently changed his mind. ‘I have also been corresponding with Sollmann in this matter’, he reported to Breitscheid on 23 March 1936, ‘because certain formulations gave me the impression that R. was only reiterating in a more raw manner what he had heard from S. Yet Sollmann has emphatically denied this and indeed convinced me that he is incapable of propagating an antisemitism as *dumb* as that of Reinbold.’<sup>28</sup>

Both Hertz and Breitscheid belonged to the minority who were aghast. It would seem that Reinbold’s letter to the party executive did not in fact come as all that much of a surprise. On 13 February 1936, Breitscheid wrote to Hertz that ‘everybody knows that he [Reinbold] is persistently and ubiquitously indulging in an almost reckless antisemitism’. He explained that ‘I don’t really understand what he means by restraining the Jews’, i.e. by demanding that their influence be curtailed within the party. After all, ‘nobody has spoken in any instance for or against the Jews’.<sup>29</sup> It is not entirely clear how Breitscheid meant this remark. It could have been intended as a

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criticism, implying that if at least the party had actually spoken up for the Jews then one might be able to see where Reinbold was coming from. More likely, though, it was a reflection of the well-established Social Democratic trope that genuine anti-antisemitism needed to maintain a neutral stance and should take sides neither for nor against 'the Jews'. That even a member of the critical minority like Breitscheid may still have found this a plausible line of reasoning three years into the Nazi regime would be a sobering thought. When Hertz informed him more comprehensively about the content of Reinbold's letter and the reactions to it, Breitscheid responded on 27 February, not least by asking: 'And you're willing to put up with this?'<sup>30</sup> 'How was I to know', Hertz responded on 23 March 1936,

that one would simply take note of the letter here without further comment, its scandalous content notwithstanding; that nobody here would sense that silence in this case engenders complicity. ...

This is already in part the answer to your question: 'And you're willing to put up with this?' I too believe that this letter called for the harshest consequences. ... That I did not call for them here is doubtless a grave omission. Yet I feared – and probably justly so – that I myself would be totally isolated in this question.<sup>31</sup>

Breitscheid was not content with this response. 'You Jews', he wrote on 28 March 1936,

insofar as you have separated yourselves from the Jewish community in religious terms are all too inclined to make light of antisemitism even when it dares show itself in your immediate proximity. In these instances you seek to justify the fact that you don't fight back with the argument that you are primarily Socialists and Jews only in the last instance. This excuse is convenient but by no means compelling. In this way you give succour to antisemitism amongst us and indirectly strengthen the Hitlerist cause. In contrast to you, I think I would put up quite a fight if I were a Jew and would also express myself very clearly to Sollmann if he only distances himself from R.'s 'dumb' antisemitism.<sup>32</sup>

The justification or merits of Breitscheid's stance need not concern us at this point. What this material and that presented elsewhere by David Bankier and others makes all too clear is that the attitudes of leading Social Democrats towards Nazi antisemitism and the fate of the Jews were problematic at the best of times in a way that Longerich's discussion does not reflect.

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Inevitably, the material from the Sopade reports that he actually cites nevertheless illustrates these vagaries and it is in any case hard to see how Longerich's introductory methodological considerations about the Sopade reports have supposedly shaped his discussion. As a general rule, this material renders the overall picture more optimistic, which would seem to contradict both of his initial contentions, namely that the editors weighted their emphases against the undue optimism of their informants and that tactical considerations are likely to have led to an over-emphasis on the significance and impact of antisemitism. None too surprisingly, Longerich is extremely reticent in commenting explicitly on this material. Take his survey of Sopade reports between late 1937 and the summer of 1938 (pp.116–17). To Longerich's mind they demonstrate that large parts of the population rejected the regime's more extreme measures against the Jews while gradually being taken in by the antisemitic propaganda. His point here, I hasten to add, is not that the reports themselves demonstrate the extent to which this holds true of the informants and the editors of the material, his point is that the reports show this process, in other words, he takes the reports themselves at face value. Yet these reports are in fact mutually contradictory and/or give considerable cause for scepticism.

Longerich begins with a report from Northern Germany stating that, while the 'core of organized labour' continued to reject the anti-Jewish propaganda, the 'broad mass of indifferent workers' was gradually succumbing to it; so much so that 'even people who did not even know what a Jew is are now blaming all their misfortune on the Jews'. To be sure, this was presumably a conscious form of hyperbole, but even so the claim that any significant number of Germans prior to 1933 'did not even know what a Jew is' is patently nonsensical and hardly suggests a differentiated understanding of the evolution and dynamics of antisemitism. Nor is the notion that people 'who did not even know what a Jew is' could arbitrarily be turned into convinced antisemites by four years' worth of (intermittent) propaganda frightfully convincing. The next two reports are from February 1938. One claims that there is not a trace of antisemitism to be found in Berlin which, again, is surely an utterly nonsensical contention. The other suggests that in Bavaria the population had by no means become antisemitic and the regime's anti-Jewish measures were being rejected 'everywhere'. It also explains, however, that the Bavarians were rejecting the regime's antisemitism by differentiating between different sorts of Jews which presumably means that they were distinguishing between 'good' Jews and

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'bad' ones while the regime anathematised all Jews in equal measure. Longerich then cites a number of reports from July 1938. Reports from south-western Germany suggest that the population continued to reject the regime's anti-Jewish measures and indeed showed its sympathy and compassion for the Jews when the risk was not too high. In Berlin, where in February 1938, we might recall, there was not a trace of antisemitism to be found, the picture was now rather mixed. On the one hand, there were quite a few people who voiced concern about the anti-Jewish 'excesses' of the regime but, on the other, 'due to the sustained antisemitic incitement many people have become antisemitic themselves'. Another report suggests that 'most' people in Berlin were either indifferent towards, or rejected, the regime's anti-Jewish measures and emphasises this point by explaining that 'even those who want the Jews to be pushed out of the economy and public life for the most part reject the cruel and inhumane methods used to torment the Jews'. The final report cited by Longerich is from Silseia. It 'also gives a mixed picture' and points out that the population was far too preoccupied with the prospect of war to show much interest in the 'Jewish Question'. What does emerge from these reports, as Longerich rightly points out, is the claim that the bulk of the population rejects the regime's anti-Jewish 'excesses'. Yet other than that, these reports surely raise rather more questions than they offer answers, and some very probing ones at that, none of which Longerich has addressed either in his methodological introduction or in his direct discussion of the Sopade material.

Ultimately, though, whatever Germans may have thought about the regime's anti-Jewish measures in general and the Shoah in particular, Longerich is in no doubt that 'general information about the mass murder of the Jews was widespread among the German population'. For reasons that he keeps to himself and that are in no way evident from the material he presents, he suggests that it was 'not the majority' of Germans but certainly a 'substantial proportion' of the population that was privy to this information (p.240) and one of his chapter headings refers to the Shoah as a 'public secret'. As he explains, 'numerous general hints from the leadership and the non-denial of rumours about the mass murder made the "Final Solution" an open secret' that could then be discussed 'without mentioning any details about the crime' (p.278). From the regime's point of view this was a desirable state of affairs because, 'in response to the emergence of rumours, disquiet among the population and queries from unsettled local officials, the regime had to clarify the status of the "Jewish Question" from

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time to time in a manner that revealed no details about the programme of murder yet confirmed the rumours' (p.255).

It is this assumption that provides the main explanatory key for Dörner's account. His book carries the subtitle: what nobody wanted to know but everybody could know. He argues that the secrecy of 'a state-initiated mass crime directed against millions of people ... could never be guaranteed absolutely. Hence', the secrecy

could only serve the following purpose: *firstly*, the temporary concealment of the genocide, *secondly*, the exploitation of this 'window of opportunity' to create facts, so that one could then, *thirdly*, rely on the normative force of these facts and, *fourthly*, establish a taboo that would remain in force even when virtually everybody knew the 'secret' yet appreciated that saying it out loud would precipitate harsh sanctions. (p.606)

What was thus created was 'a "double bind" that denies the regime's crimes while at the same time indirectly confirming them' (p.489), not least in order to appease those who would hear of it anyway and might respond in a rash manner had they not been given to understand that what they were hearing was in order but not to be talked about. This notion is borne out not least by the non-euphemistic nature of what might well be considered euphemistic utterances. Dörner mentions the extremely intriguing example of a top secret communication that Himmler sent to Gestapo chief Müller on 20 November 1942. In it he refers to the 'increased mortality rate' among the Jews in the camps even though they obviously both knew what was really going on and there was no risk that the document would be seen by anybody who did not (pp.44, 448). What was being maintained, in other words, was not secrecy but the pretence of secrecy.

Dörner's is the most ambitious of the monographs under review and its scope the broadest. He begins by discussing the factors that (ostensibly at least) militated against widespread knowledge of the genocide during the war. He then moves on to the factors that facilitated this knowledge and explores the ways in which it spread and evolved over time before discussing how these issues were dealt with after 1945. He draws on a wide range of sources including official documents and reports, legal files, domestic and foreign newspapers, foreign radio broadcasts, allied flyers, opposition and resistance material, diaries and letters. Dörner is by no means oblivious to the already mentioned methodological issues raised by these various sorts of

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sources but he is fairly sanguine in his approach. He considers these sources no more and no less problematic than any other set of sources and simply goes about the business of making of them what he can. Some of his conclusions are more convincing than others but his discussion of the material is consistently thought-provoking and makes excellent use of recent historiographical insights. He draws on Eric Johnson's findings regarding the large numbers of Germans who did in fact listen to foreign radio stations, for instance, to throw an entirely new light on the significance of the BBC and, to a lesser extent, Radio Moscow in disseminating knowledge about the Shoah. Dörner generally rates the significance of the Allies' attempts to alert the German population to the Shoah and its implications rather more highly than most scholars to date have been inclined to do. These attempts were certainly too little too late, as he concedes, but they doubtless made it altogether more difficult for Germans to evade 'what nobody wanted to know but everybody could know'. He also examines the significance of foreign press reports, focusing not so much on the foreign press as a possible *source* of knowledge about the genocide but rather as its recipient, i.e. asking instead how the foreign press obtained the relevant information in the first place.

Dörner is also exemplary in his insistence on a clear distinction between the victims, on the one hand, and the perpetrators and bystanders, on the other. 'Given the hell on earth they found themselves in', he argues, 'it was almost inevitable that those facing annihilation repressed the unbearable mortal danger they faced every day.' Yet 'to infer from this a generalized notion exonerating the genocide's "bystanders" ("If the Jews did not realize what lay in store then how could we conceivably have known") is wrong. For the opportunities of observation and the behaviour of the "bystanders" and "witnesses" are governed by a different set of circumstances' (p.614). The situation of the victims, Dörner suggests elsewhere, was comparable to that of people who are terminally ill and unable or unwilling to accept the truth. 'Yet the perpetrators and bystanders did not face this dilemma' (p.444).

It is hard to do justice to the scope and ambition of Dörner's book, even in a more substantial review piece like this. The mosaic he pieces together out of all the material he assembles and reviews on almost 900 pages is a compelling and deeply depressing one. There is no doubt in my mind that it currently constitutes the definitive statement on public knowledge of the Shoah amongst Germans during the war and it will be interesting to see whether any scholars feel inclined to genuinely question, rather than refine and modify, the picture that Dörner has pieced together.

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It may well be that the contention that the Shoah was an open secret in fact no longer mobilises all that much resistance. It is in some ways remarkable (and for Anglophone scholars obviously something of an annoyance) that these two weighty monographs have been published in German.<sup>33</sup> This rather begs the question of how these two tomes might resonate with current public debate in Germany. One imagines that they were conceived not least against the backdrop of the developments outlined by Harald Welzer and his colleagues.<sup>34</sup> Their research suggested that increasing numbers of Germans now came to terms with the Nazi past by conceding that German society as a whole had indeed been implicated to a startling degree in the crimes of the Nazi regime while at the same time exempting the members of their own family who had been alive during the years of Nazi rule from this responsibility. Yet it would seem that this strategy is now already a thing of the past. Günter Grass' coming out in the summer of 2006 as a former member of the Waffen-SS in many ways finalised the shift to universal self-exculpation not through denial but through admission of guilt. The headline 'Sie waren dabei' ('They were involved')<sup>35</sup> has morphed from a damning accusation into a collective sigh of relief. If *even* Günter Grass was implicated and then lied about it, who is left to throw the first stone? As Frank Schirrmacher, the influential joint editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, put it, this was

a punch line that no novelist could have made up. The Germans' grand post-war narrative of guilt and shame, the gallery of the perpetrators, the complicit and the fellow travellers ends – and this is now surely the end – with Günter Grass and his confession. Grass is the last to say: I have remained silent for too long.<sup>36</sup>

In many ways, of course, this actually brings us full circle. Hannah Arendt famously ended her *Eichmann in Jerusalem* by explaining how, to her mind, the judges in Jerusalem should have explained to Eichmann the need for his execution in order to ensure that justice was not only done but also seen to be done. 'You', she suggested the judges should have said to Eichmann,

also said that your role in the Final Solution was an accident and that almost anybody could have taken your place, so that potentially almost all Germans were equally guilty. What you meant to say was that where all, or almost all, are guilty, nobody is. This is an indeed quite common conclusion, but one we are not willing to grant you.<sup>37</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Martin Broszat, Saul Friedländer, 'A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism', *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol.19 (1988), pp.1–47; and *New German Critique*, No.44 (1988), pp.85–126; reprint in Peter Baldwin (ed.), *Reworking the Past* (Boston: Beacon, 1990), pp.102–34.
2. Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp.9–10.
3. David Bankier, *The Germans and the Final Solution. Public Opinion under Nazism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).
4. Otto Dov-Kulka, "Public Opinion" in Nazi Germany and the "Jewish Question", *Jerusalem Quarterly*, No.25 (1982), pp.121–44; Otto Dov-Kulka, "Public Opinion" in Nazi Germany; The Final Solution', *Jerusalem Quarterly*, No.26 (1982), pp.34–45; Otto Dov-Kulka, 'The German Population and the Jews: State of Research and New Perspectives', in David Bankier (ed.), *Probing the Depths of German Antisemitism* (New York and Oxford, Jerusalem: Berghahn, Yad Vashem, LBI, 2000), pp.271–81; Otto Dov-Kulka and Aaron Rodrigue, 'The German Population and the Jews in the Third Reich. Recent Publications and Trends of Research on German Society and the "Jewish Question"', *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol.16 (1984), pp.421–35.
5. Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria 1933–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983).
6. Eric A. Johnson and Karl-Heinz Reuband, *What We Knew. Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany* (London: John Murray, 2005), p.393.
7. Cf. Peter Longerich, 'Davon haben wir nichts gewusst!' (Munich: Siedler, 2006), p.239, drawing on Reuband's own earlier work.
8. Götz Aly, 'Historische Demoskopie', in Götz Aly (ed.), *Volkes Stimme. Skepsis und Führervertrauen im Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2006), pp.9–21, here p.13. This extremely interesting but conceptually rather problematic collection which, it should be noted, focuses on popular *opinion* rather than popular knowledge, presents the output of a research seminar Aly conducted as a visiting professor at the Fritz Bauer Institut in Frankfurt/Main.
9. Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution* (London: William Heinemann, 2004), p.424.
10. As Herf rightly points out, 'denial of the uniqueness of the Final Solution was' thus already 'part of its implementation' (p.266).
11. This is presumably an allusion to Ernst Kris who was apparently the first to identify the mechanism of bonding based on common guilt with the relationship between regime and society in Nazi Germany. Cf. David Bankier, 'The Use of Antisemitism in Nazi Wartime Propaganda', in Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck (eds.), *The Holocaust and History* (Washington, DC, Bloomington and Indianapolis: USHMM, Indiana University Press, 1998), pp.41–55, here p.54 n.36.
12. For a succinct and extremely elegant exposition of Herf's overall argument see also Jeffrey Herf, 'The "Jewish War": Goebbels and the Antisemitic Campaigns of the Nazi Propaganda Ministry', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Vol.19, No.1 (2005), pp.51–80.
13. I am extremely grateful to the School of Humanities at King's College London and the University of London Central Research Fund for grants facilitating the research at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) in Amsterdam on which the following discussion is based, and to the colleagues at the IISH whose kindness and competence makes every stay there an immense pleasure.
14. IISH Collection Paul Hertz, Correspondence with Rudolf Breitscheid (folder XVI).
15. *Ibid.*
16. IISH Collection Paul Hertz, Correspondence K1-R.
17. *Ibid.*
18. IISH Collection Paul Hertz, Correspondence with Rudolf Breitscheid (folder XVI).
19. Lewis J. Edinger, *German Exile Politics. The Social Democratic Executive Committee in the Nazi Era*

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- (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956), p.58.
20. Ibid., p.99.
  21. David Bankier, 'German Social Democrats and the Jewish Question', in David Bankier (ed.), *Probing the Depths of German Antisemitism* (New York, Oxford and Jerusalem: Berghahn, Yad Vashem, LBI, 2000), pp.511–32, here pp.527–30.
  22. IISH Collection Paul Hertz, Correspondence KI-R.
  23. Bankier, 'German Social Democrats', p.529.
  24. Richard Hansen to Erich Ollenhauer, 18 June 1936. IISH Collection Paul Hertz, Correspondence A-E.
  25. Ibid.
  26. Bankier, 'German Social Democrats', p.522.
  27. Cited *ibid.*, p.523.
  28. IISH Collection Paul Hertz, Correspondence with Rudolf Breitscheid (folder XVI).
  29. Ibid.
  30. Ibid.
  31. Ibid.
  32. Ibid.
  33. Those who have some German but not perhaps enough to want to take on Longerich's and Dörner's combined 1,300 pages will find a concise summary of many of the relevant debates in Frank Bajohr and Dieter Pohl, *Der Holocaust als offenes Geheimnis. Die Deutschen, die NS-Führung und die Alliierten* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006).
  34. See Harald Welzer, *Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi. The Holocaust in German Family Remembrance*. *AJC International Perspectives* 54 (2005).
  35. *Die Welt*, 20 August 2006.
  36. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 12 August 2006.
  37. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (London: Penguin, 1994), p.278.