Targeted Terror: A Historiography of the Nazi Police State

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Cover Page Footnote
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In discussions of Third Reich terror, one controversial issue has been the degree to which the ‘ordinary German’\(^1\) population experienced terror, and if this terror could adequately account for the Germans’ complicity, cooperation, or collaboration with the Nazi Party. In other words, should ordinary German citizens be largely exempt from guilt of the Holocaust because they themselves lived in a state of fear of arrest, imprisonment, and death? Whereas some historians are convinced that the majority of Germans lived in a severe state of fear, others maintain that Nazi terror was selective and that ordinary Germans were largely spared. Historians Eric A. Johnson, Robert Gellately, and Karl-Heinz Reuband argue that the majority of ordinary Germans, defined by the Nazis as those who did not pose a threat to the regime, continued their everyday lives without fear of arrest by the Gestapo. There existed two “Nazi societies,”\(^2\) one of severe terror occupied by Jews and the other of minimal, if any, terror occupied by ordinary Germans.

The three historians agree that the actions of ordinary Germans during the Third Reich were not propelled by fear of the Nazi police, but they vary in their approaches to this revisionist scholarship. This scholarship arose out of historians’ questioning of how it was possible for


many ordinary Germans to commit crimes during the Third Reich if they lived in a state of terror.\(^3\) They consequently re-examined the idea of the Nazi police state. In his 1999 monograph, Johnson takes a more cautious approach to revisionism, arguing the importance of not underestimating the power or influence of the Gestapo and of not overestimating the role of denunciations.\(^4\) Gellately takes Johnson’s argument of German complicity a step further, maintaining that ordinary Germans were largely supportive of the Nazi regime. Johnson and Reuband stress the differences in Nazi terror experienced by the Jewish Germans and the non-Jewish Germans, while also suggesting that the perception of terror played an important role in the actions of the latter. Gellately’s and Johnson’s claims of ordinary German support for the Third Reich, accompanied by Johnson’s and Reuband’s findings of non-Jewish Germans’ support of Nazi ideology and absence of fear of Nazi terror, offer the best explanation of ordinary Germans’ heightened responsibility in the Holocaust.

In *Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews and Ordinary Germans*, Johnson challenges the previous scholarship on Nazi terror that claimed ordinary Germans were complicit to the Nazi regime because they lived in a constant state of fear. Instead, he maintains that there existed a critical difference between the terror experienced by Jewish Germans and the terror experienced by ordinary Germans during the Third Reich.\(^5\) Johnson characterizes Nazi terror as having had a “selective nature,”\(^6\) arguing that the Gestapo was comparatively “lenient”\(^7\) with the ordinary Germans.

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\(^3\) Johnson, p. 14.
\(^5\) Johnson, p. 9.
\(^6\) Johnson, p. 20.
\(^7\) Johnson, p. 317.
because it needed to conserve its limited resources for the extermination of the Jewish population. As evidence for the limited reach of Nazi terror over ordinary Germans, and even more limited desire to exert such terror, Johnson uses over 1,100 case files from the Special Courts of Cologne and Bergheim from 1933-1945, records from the Krefeld Gestapo during the Third Reich, and surveys and interviews of ordinary Germans who lived during the Nazi regime. Johnson asserts that limited Gestapo personnel meant targeted terror. Ordinary Germans knew the Gestapo had limited resources and a hierarchy of perceived threats in which they occupied the bottom, and they consequently continued their everyday lives without experiencing or living in Nazi terror.

A central component of Johnson’s claim of the “dualistic treatment” of the German population is that the Gestapo, although capable, had limited manpower and resources and thus chose to reserve its efforts for the Jews, Communists, Catholics, and other oppositional parties. It is for this reason that the majority of cases of ordinary Germans were brought to the attention of the Gestapo by neighbor denunciations. The Gestapo’s more lenient treatment of ordinary Germans was the consequence of the Nazi regime’s need for popular support. It required the cooperation of the majority in order to successfully terrorize its selected enemies. For the “overwhelming majority” of Germans, this cooperation was not difficult since they supported at least some aspects of Nazi ideology and in return, they could listen to foreign radio broadcasts knowing they would not be arrested. In fact, 75% of ordinary Germans never feared being arrested during the

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8 Johnson, p. 25.
10 Johnson, p. 20.
11 Johnson, p. 48.
12 Johnson, p. 15.
13 Johnson, p. 254.
Third Reich and most were not aware of anyone who had been arrested.\textsuperscript{14} The relationship between ordinary Germans and the Gestapo was transactional, as the former went about their everyday lives in exchange for obedience and cooperation.

In his monograph, Johnson is cautious to also re-examine the revisionist scholarship, asserting that it is in danger of overestimating the role of German denunciations in the exercise of Nazi terror and of underestimating the Gestapo’s terror for both the state’s enemies and ordinary Germans.\textsuperscript{15} His cautiousness brings attention to the importance of defining the segments of the German population, as otherwise the severe terror experienced by the Jewish population and other selected groups is diminished. He notes the Gestapo was not simply ‘reactive,’\textsuperscript{16} but that its “sadistic brutality”\textsuperscript{17} was largely reserved for the Jewish population. This state terror was extended to the whole population at the war’s end when thousands of German citizens were brought to death after the assassination attempt on Hitler.\textsuperscript{18} However, these deaths comprised only a small percentage of the total deaths during the Third Reich.\textsuperscript{19}

To emphasize that the majority of ordinary Germans did not live in a state of terror, Johnson uses the allies’ aerial bombardments as a point of comparison for the level of terror they experienced. His sources reveal that more Germans experienced direct terror from the bombardments than from the Gestapo.\textsuperscript{20} The perceptions of the interviewed Germans and the statistics found in the archives are complementary. A minority of ordinary Germans feared arrest by the

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\textsuperscript{14} Johnson, p. 261. \\
\textsuperscript{15} Johnson, p. 19. \\
\textsuperscript{16} Johnson, p. 353. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Johnson, p. 346. \\
\textsuperscript{18} Johnson, p. 346. \\
\textsuperscript{19} Johnson, p. 350. \\
\textsuperscript{20} Johnson, p. 306.
\end{flushleft}
Gestapo or were investigated, despite a majority committing infractions of the law.\textsuperscript{21} They were not convinced by the state’s propaganda of terror because neither themselves nor people they knew were arrested.\textsuperscript{22} Even with denunciations from other ordinary Germans, the majority were not punished during Nazi rule.\textsuperscript{23} From his findings, Johnson claims that the level of Nazi police terror people experienced depended on such demographic factors as political and ethnic affiliations and socioeconomic conditions. Furthermore, ordinary Germans were not complicit out of fear, but rather they found certain elements of Nazi ideology appealing.\textsuperscript{24}

In \textit{Backing Hitler}, Gellately draws upon evidence from the Third Reich’s daily press, diaries and testimonies of German citizens, and Gestapo case files from the end of the war to formulate his claim that ordinary Germans consented to Hitler’s dictatorship while maintaining a significant degree of human agency. His argument extends German complicity to German support, maintaining that the ordinary Germans were not submissive to the Nazis, but rather the Nazis preyed upon their phobias and beliefs.\textsuperscript{25} Gellately takes the revisionist scholarship a step further than Johnson by placing more responsibility on ordinary Germans for the execution of the Holocaust. It was not fear that secured Nazi rule, but rather support. Anti-Semitic sentiment grew among ordinary Germans from 1933 onwards,\textsuperscript{26} and the harsher tactics of the Nazi police reserved for the Jews were more popular than not.\textsuperscript{27} Gellately agrees with Johnson that Nazi terror

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\textsuperscript{21} Johnson, p. 321.  
\textsuperscript{22} Johnson, p. 324.  
\textsuperscript{23} Johnson, p. 363.  
\textsuperscript{24} Johnson, p. 359.  
\textsuperscript{25} Gellately, p. vii.  
\textsuperscript{26} Gellately, p. 4.  
\textsuperscript{27} Gellately, p. 259.
was “highly selective,” 28 asserting that ordinary Germans were not the victims of these terror tactics. He further notes that the level of terror exerted by the Gestapo on ordinary Germans themselves depended upon their participation in other social groups and their levels of resistance. 29

Gellately extends Johnson’s arguments of ordinary Germans experiencing limits on personal freedom during the Third Reich and of Nazi terror extending to ordinary Germans during the later war years. He claims that “police justice” 30 in Nazi Germany was implemented at the expense of many citizens’ previous rights. However, Gellately is also careful to explain that this harshness did not necessarily translate to terror over the ordinary Germans. Ordinary Germans felt it was worth sacrificing some of their legal rights in order to fight crime 31 because they knew they were not the true targets of the terror. A public threat existed in the press, but ordinary Germans understood that the Nazi regime’s success depended upon their collaboration. In consequence, they would not be punished if they continued to commit minor infractions of the law. 32 However, Gellately also argues that the perception of Nazi terror among ordinary Germans should not be overlooked. He believes that even if the circulated stories of the Gestapo were not personally confirmed, they still radiated terror and this perception of terror was meaningful. 33

Gellately’s research focuses on denunciations during Nazi rule, and he maintains that the Gestapo was more reactive than active regarding ordinary Germans during the Third Reich. 34 As evidenced by the sheer number of denunciations, and by over 90% of their cases resulting from

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28 Gellately, p. 2.
29 Gellately, p. 236.
30 Gellately, p. 35.
31 Gellately, p. 44.
32 Gellately, p. 186.
33 Gellately, p. 201.
34 Gellately, p. 191.
denunciations,⁴⁵ ordinary Germans had more reason to fear their neighbors than the Gestapo.⁴⁶ This raises the question of whether ordinary Germans experienced more pressure from the top or from the side. However, the issue of denunciations shows Gellately’s, at times, conflicting findings. He posits that denunciations were exercises of citizenship and that the sheer number made is proof itself that ordinary Germans had agency under the Nazis.⁴⁷ At the same time, he argues that although Nazi state terror was not exerted to the extent as once thought, it was not “unimportant.”⁴⁸ Underestimating the state’s terror could have dire consequences on historians’ understandings of the terror experienced by targeted groups.

To answer the question of “how much and what forms of terror did [non-Jewish Germans] experience,”⁴⁹ Johnson and Reuband conducted surveys of and interviews with non-Jewish Germans who lived in Cologne, Krefeld, Dresden, or Berlin during the Third Reich. Through this oral, anecdotal history, Johnson and Reuband found that the majority of respondents had positive feelings regarding National Socialism, but not because of its anti-Semitic policies.⁵⁰ Rather, their everyday lives were not impacted by Nazi terror since they were not perceived as a threat. In consequence, they did not have to be coerced into remaining silent about the mass murder of the Jews.⁵¹ Johnson and Reuband further note how the non-Jewish population was more cautious than fearful, as most of them did not have any specific experiences with Nazi terror, less than 2% of them faced punishment when questioned,⁵² and the overwhelming

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³⁵ Gellately, p. 191.
³⁶ Gellately, p. 188.
³⁷ Gellately, p. 261.
³⁸ Gellately, p. 203.
³⁹ Johnson and Reuband, p. XIV.
⁴⁰ Johnson and Reuband, p. 344.
⁴¹ Johnson and Reuband, p. XVI.
⁴² Johnson and Reuband, p. 348.
majority of them did not know any German who was accused of illegal action.\textsuperscript{43} In \textit{What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life In Nazi Germany}, the combination of the archival, statistical, anecdotal, and oral sources reveal that the Gestapo was less comprehensive than once thought and that citizen denunciations supplied the majority of information for the Gestapo.\textsuperscript{44}

Johnson and Reuband dispel the claim that the actions of non-Jewish Germans were influenced by the perception of Nazi terror. The archival evidence paints a clear picture of the Gestapo having limited human resources.\textsuperscript{45} The non-Jewish Germans knew from personal experiences that their illegal actions were unlikely to result in punishment because the Nazi regime relied on their passivity, if not their cooperation and collaboration.\textsuperscript{46} In consequence, Johnson and Reuband maintain that the perception of fear among non-Jewish Germans was minimal at most, and does not adequately account for their complicity in the Third Reich. However, Johnson and Reuband are less willing than other revisionist historians to claim that non-Jewish Germans went about their everyday lives under Nazi rule.

In contrast to Gellately, Johnson and Reuband do not characterize ordinary Germans as having been open to the politics of the time. They do not define this population as having been fearful, but instead characterize ordinary Germans as having been cautious. They suggest non-Jewish Germans fell between free and cautious on the free-fear spectrum. Non-Jewish Germans

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{43} Johnson and Reuband, p. 348.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Johnson and Reuband, p. 350.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Johnson and Reuband, p. 352.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Gellately, p. 391.
\end{itemize}
were careful in their public words and actions.\footnote{Johnson and Reuband, p. 359.} This cautiousness may help to explain the supposed limited spread of information on the mass murder of the Jews during the Holocaust for risk of being punished by the Gestapo or denounced by their neighbors.\footnote{Johnson and Reuband, p. 381.}

Evidence of the cautious actions taken by the non-Jewish Germans helps to formulate Johnson’s and Reuband’s assertion that these Germans focused on their private spheres,\footnote{Johnson and Reuband, p. 397.} keeping their heads down during the Nazi regime and thus being less aware of the events of the Holocaust than argued in Johnson’s and Gellately’s monographs. As long as they were at least complicit to the system, they could go about their everyday lives, and even commit minor infractions of the law, without being fearful of the rumored Nazi terror.\footnote{Johnson and Reuband, p. 398.} The non-Jewish respondents’ answers may differ in this account from the two monographs because of shame that they were not fearful and yet did nothing to help the Jews during the Holocaust.

Proponents of revisionism, such as Johnson, Gellately, and Reuband, are right to argue that ordinary Germans had agency during the Third Reich and therefore should assume greater responsibility in the execution of the Holocaust than previous scholarship suggests.\footnote{Johnson, p. 14.} Historians have an obligation to Holocaust victims to accurately assess whether ordinary Germans’ inactions during the Holocaust can be accounted for by fear, or whether these Germans should assume greater responsibility and guilt because they did not have the excuse of fear. The three historians all argue that extreme terror was displayed by the Gestapo during the Third Reich, but that it was largely limited to the Jews and other oppositional parties. However, they take different stances on the levels of human agency experienced by non-Jewish, i.e. ordinary, Germans.
Both Gellately and Johnson make the convincing argument that ordinary Germans demonstrated a relatively high level of human agency and chose to support the Nazis. Therefore, they were not terrorized into complicity.

Johnson’s argument of the perception of Nazi terror among ordinary Germans resulting in complicity to the regime is credible. Johnson’s and Reuband’s claim that the actions of non-Jewish Germans cannot be accounted for by Nazi terror, but that the population was nevertheless cautious, is also credible. However, Gellately offers a better explanation of German complicity to and silence of the Holocaust. Gellately asserts that even though the perception of Nazi terror among ordinary Germans was impactful, this population maintained a relatively high level of human agency, as demonstrated by denunciations and their manipulation of the Nazi regime to their own benefits. They chose to ignore the terror exerted on the Jews because the terror did not impact them directly. They also chose to denounce their neighbors and Jews. It was therefore the support, rather than the fear, of ordinary Germans that secured the Third Reich and the Holocaust. As the revisionist scholarship suggests, ordinary Germans assume greater guilt of the Holocaust because they had the agency, without the fear, to act, but did not.
Bibliography

