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Secrets and Revelations: The German Foreign Ministry and the Final Solution

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One of the most demanding challenges facing post-war, post-1945 Germany was coping with the Nazi past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*). Of the three heirs of the Third Reich—the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic, and Austria—only the first seems to have done its job earnestly and thoroughly. However, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is a never-ending process, not simply a onetime event. It is also a most painful process. When it comes to the question of individual or institutional responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich, great difficulties emerge.

In the two decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disappearance of the German Democratic Republic, several impassioned discussions have taken place in united Germany that demonstrated the extent to which challenging the question of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* still remains—the Goldhagen debate concerning German eliminatory antisemitism; the Wehrmacht [German army] exhibition debate about the involvement of the German army in Nazi crimes, and finally, the Martin Walser debate focusing on the question of Auschwitz as an instrument of moral pressure (*Moralkeule*) against the Germans. These debates moved spirits and minds and were not confined to the narrow circle of politically engaged historians. Indeed, many Germans are still easily irritated when the question of the involvement of allegedly respectable persons, groups, or organizations in Nazi crimes arises. The debate currently gripping German society began about two months ago, when an international committee of experts on the history of the German Foreign Ministry

published its findings in a 900-page book entitled “The Ministry and the Past” (*Das Amt und die Vergangenheit*).

In 2004, then-Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, of the Green Party (Die Grünen), was confronted for the first time with the Nazi past of the ministry over which he had responsibility. That challenge arose when the internal newsletter of the ministry published an obituary for the deceased diplomat Franz Nüsslein (1909-2003), a man sentenced to a prison term in Czechoslovakia for the crimes he committed in that country before 1945. Fischer reacted to the protest of a former secretary in the ministry only a year later, when the time came to publish another obituary for a diplomat with a Nazi past, Franz Krapf (1911-2004). Fischer became convinced that the time had come for a thorough reevaluation of the wartime history of his ministry and convened an international committee of five historians, three Germans, one American and one Israeli (this writer), to delve into the history of the ministry during the Third Reich and since the foundation of the Federal Republic, when brown diplomats reentered the service.

As in the case of the Wehrmacht, the German Foreign Ministry (*Auswärtiges Amt* or AA) was able to uphold the reputation of a respectable institution, one which was even a stronghold of resistance against the Nazi regime, despite compelling evidence to the contrary. Indeed, two ministers of foreign affairs of the Third Reich, Baron Konstantin von Neurath (1873–1956) and Joachim von Ribbentrop (1893–1946), were convicted for their crimes by the Nuremberg international court in 1946. Von Ribbentrop was sentenced to hang, and several high-ranking diplomats, including *Staatssekretär* Ernst von Weizsäcker (1882–1951), were convicted for their crimes in the so-called *Wilhelmstrassenprozess* 1947–48.

Myths, however, can take on a life of their own and are often impervious to facts. Against the trend of historical research in general, the blame for the rise to power of the Nazis is usually still assigned to Hitler and the riff-raff that associated with him. The radicalization of Nazi policies once the party was in power is generally attributed to Hitler’s henchmen and the SA; the persecution of the Reich’s enemies to the SS and the Gestapo, and war crimes on the Waffen SS. Thus, the Wehrmacht remained a bastion of respectability; in much the same way as the Foreign Ministry did. In the collective memory of the Federal Republic, German diplomats continued to be seen as genteel and respectable and were relatively untainted—a situation that persisted for more than sixty years after the end of the war. To professional historians this may seem paradoxical, especially since historical research, the educational system, historical exhibitions, and other public activities had basically been leading society in another direction.

The Independent Research Committee on the History of the Foreign Ministry [*Die Unabhängige Historikerkommission – Auswärtiges Amt*] commenced its work in 2006. First, a comprehensive database with the archival documentation was created. Then the five committee members divided the work among themselves, with each one heading a research group dealing with one of the five main chapters of the report. After less than four years' work, the task was accomplished and presented in book form to the current minister of foreign affairs, Guido Westerwelle, of the Liberal Party (FDP).

The findings were not unexpected, and certainly from the point of view of the well-informed historian, contained no great surprises: From the very start, i.e., from February 1933, the *Auswärtiges Amt* was *the* Foreign Ministry of the Third Reich, not only *in* the Third Reich. Only one ambassador, Germany's representative in Washington, Friedrich Wilhelm von Prittwitz (1884-1955), resigned on ideological grounds. The few diplomats of Jewish origin (who were not necessarily practicing Jews or connected to the Jewish community) were forced to retire. The existing staff not only served the new regime and helped ward off the negative reactions to its policies abroad, but many also ingratiated themselves by joining the Nazi party or the SS or recruiting new people who were party members. During the war, this allegiance to the regime led to close cooperation of the Foreign Ministry with the SS, the police and other institutions in subduing occupied countries and participating in the racial policies culminating in the Holocaust. The research concentrated on the contribution of individual persons to the service of the Third Reich, without ignoring the few cases of dissidence and resistance. Not only were the activities of *Referat D III* of the ministry (which was in charge of the so-called Jewish question) carefully scrutinized; the committee also highlighted the actions of individual German diplomats all over the world to determine the ways in which they contributed to the destruction of European Jewry by proposing various modes of operation, or even by coordinating the deportations to the East.

Not surprisingly, the chapter dealing with the Nuremberg Trials and the fate of the diplomats after the war illustrates the shortcomings of the Allies in addressing the crimes of the Third Reich. Even more disturbing is the history of the Foreign Ministry since its revival in the Federal Republic in 1951. The percentage of officials who had belonged to the Nazi party was even greater than the percentage of Nazi party members during the Nazi period. On the other hand, an important opposition figure who had systematically leaked information to the Americans in the last years of the war, Fritz Kolbe (1900–71), was not readmitted to the Foreign Ministry and was actually considered a traitor. The research reveals how a special unit of the revived ministry warned diplomats with a Nazi provenance of potential legal action awaiting them in countries to which they might be posted. Serving in Arab countries became a kind of life insurance: Werner von Barga (1898–1975),

the German ambassador to Belgium during the war who was responsible for the deportation of Jews in Belgium to the East, became ambassador to Baghdad. Not only the conservative Adenauer administration but even the administration of the Social-Democrat Willy Brandt in the 1960s demonstrated leniency toward diplomats with a Nazi past.

Such diplomats did not have to reenter the ministry in order to personify continuity. But one example is the case of Ernst Achenbach (1909–91). As a diplomat at the German Embassy in Paris, Achenbach was involved in the Final Solution. In post-war Germany he embarked on a career in politics, joining the Liberal Party, and acting as its expert on foreign policy. In that capacity, he was instrumental in stalling (as late as the mid-1970s) the process of signing a treaty with France that would enable Nazi criminals to be brought to justice. To be sure, the committee report also examined the process by which there was a gradual departure from the Nazi past, including the training of new recruits to serve in the ministry. Yet the fact that at the beginning of the third millennium, and without any question, obituaries of former Nazi diplomats continued to be published and their photos continued to hang on the walls of German embassies was proof enough of the need to reexamine the whole question.

The initial reactions of the German political elite and the German press following the publication of the book, in the last week of October 2010, were encouraging. It turned out that many facts known to historians concerning the participation of the Foreign Ministry in Nazi crimes—in the Holocaust especially—surprised and disturbed the public. The initial approval and acclamation did not last long. Very soon a well-organized counterattack began. It was a joint effort by a coalition of frustrated historians, who did not participate in the committee's work, former diplomats interested in whitewashing their guild, and guardians of German respectability, all bent on delegitimizing the work of the committee and disqualifying its findings.

The critics did not have to devise new tactics—they used the same ones employed by those who attacked the Wehrmacht exhibition, namely, the characterization of inevitable inaccuracies as blunders that allegedly compromised the credibility of the entire book. In this case it was much harder to find factual inaccuracies—the researchers who carried out the project were, after all, among the leading authorities on the subject. So what they did was to publically proclaim that the information published was “already known for a long time now” or to misquote the research and thus create the impression of unfounded, biased, even absurd findings.

From the beginning it was the press that directed public attention to one specific document—a form signed by Franz Rademacher (1906–73), a Foreign Ministry expert on Jewish questions and an ardent Nazi, seeking reimbursement for travelling expenses incurred on a journey to Belgrade in October 1941. In such forms civil servants are required specify the nature of the trip. Rademacher, good bureaucrat that he was, noted the reason for his visit as follows: “Liquidation of Jews in Belgrade.” Commenting on Rademacher’s rationale for his reimbursement, Foreign Minister Westerwelle observed: “How terrible that the killing of Jews became a civil servant’s regular activity (*Amtsbandlung*) in the Foreign Ministry.”

The most vocal critic of the committee was Rainer Blasius, a former ministry official and now an editor of the conservative daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Blasius was only too happy to inform his readers at length that this document was known already as far back as 1952 when Rademacher was put on trial (he escaped to Syria while out on bail). What he failed, or refused, to grasp was the fact that not only had nobody attempted to convince the readers that the document was unknown—after all most of the Foreign Ministry documents were found by the occupation forces, used during the Nuremberg trials and thanks to these circumstances were published long ago—but that this very document was now being used to demonstrate that the whole Foreign Ministry apparatus knew about the destruction of Jews and was participating in it. That is why this document left such a shocking impression on the German reader of 2010 and on the minister of foreign affairs.

Yet there is another aspect concerning the use of documents that were already known that calls for further attention: Every now and again collective memory needs to be refreshed. Myths survive because memory fails or becomes selective. The fact that the Rademacher document became so prominent in public discussion in October 2010 proves that since the early 1950s it had disappeared from collective memory and public consciousness. Even the fact that it was mentioned in a groundbreaking book by the American historian Christopher Browning (1978), and in another by a former foreign ministry official, Hans-Jürgen Döscher (1987), who focused on the complicity of the ministry in the Holocaust, did not help to engrave it into the collective German memory. The following anecdote demonstrates just how easy it is to eradicate even such a horrendous item from public consciousness.

Less than a year ago, on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, the popular German history magazine *Geo Epoche* published a volume dealing with the years 1939–42. On page 184, the managing editor of the journal presented himself to the readers as a historian haunted by the history of the war and the co-editor of a recent book on the history of the Jews in Germany.

He mentioned the fact that during the Nazi era his own grandfather has been “a senior civil servant in the Foreign Ministry, subordinate to *Unterstaatssekretär* Martin Luther (1895–1945), one of the participants in the Wannsee conference.” The name of the managing editor is Cay Rademacher. Obviously, he bears no responsibility for his grandfather’s crimes, but of course one may assume that as an historian he knew exactly what his grandfather did before 1945. Presumably he counted on the ignorance of his readers. This should be kept in mind by those who read Blasius’ complaint against the rediscovery of the Rademacher document. The impression is unavoidable that the complaint against using documents already known to historians is, at least for some critics, an indirect expression of protest against the very fact that these forgotten memories have come alive again.

This impression fits into the general frame of criticism against the conclusions arrived at by the committee, namely that its members exaggerated the role of the Foreign Ministry in the criminal activities of the Third Reich. The critics are dissatisfied with the fact that opposition to Hitler or to Nazism became a marginal topic in the book, whereas the complicity in the Holocaust emerged as a central one. They also oppose the use of circumstantial evidence, as if the historian is bound by the rules of criminal procedure. It was not unexpected that this kind of criticism would emerge from the right wing of the political scene, but it was the reaction of a well-respected Social Democratic historian, Hans Mommsen, that gave this line of argument its legitimacy and even its alibi. Mommsen argued that the Holocaust had been placed in the forefront of the committee’s report. Another historian, Daniel Koerfer of the Free University in Berlin, himself the grandson of one of the few men who resisted the Nazi regime, drew attention to what he regarded as a deficiency of the book—namely, that the implementation of genocide “has become nearly an exclusive litmus test for the behavior of the Third Reich.” The fact that such an argument may be brought up in a public discussion in modern-day Germany is an alarming fact in itself.

More attention should have been paid to other aspects of the Foreign Ministry’s activity, claim the critics. This sounds like a legitimate argument if one ignores the subtext. In an unguarded moment, one of young historians who took part in the first phase of the project, a PhD student of Hans Mommsen, remarked during a discussion back in 2006: “It’s time to stop concentrating on the story of the Holocaust.” After the committee published its book—in which the Holocaust was discussed at length—the critics resorted to another argument: that the complicity of the Foreign Ministry was much exaggerated and that the findings were based on a distorted understanding of the documents.

Out of more than 300 pages dealing with the history of the Foreign Ministry before 1945, the main attack was directed against two short passages, the first one

focusing on a document dating from January 1939 and the other one on a decision taken on September 17, 1941.

Let us start with the January 1939 document. The respected weekly *Der Spiegel* joined the critics of the book with the following argument: The author of the chapter on the Holocaust [Moshe Zimmermann] insists that “already by the beginning of 1939 it ‘must have been clear’ to the German diplomats that their ministry aims at the ‘physical annihilation’ of the Jews. Especially since in his speech [January 30, 1939] Hitler threatened that in case of a world war ‘the Jewish race would be annihilated.’” *Der Spiegel* went on: “Assigning blame for taking the initiative at this point of time to solve the Jewish problem on a European scale on the Foreign Ministry is sheer nonsense.”

The document in question was a memorandum, written by Emil Schumburg (1898–1961), the Foreign Ministry *Judenreferent* and Rademacher’s predecessor, dated January 25, 1939—i.e., six days *before* the infamous Hitler speech, and sent to all (!) German embassies abroad: “The Jewish question as a factor of foreign policy in the year 1938.” There Schumburg describes the Jewish question as an illness of the national body that needs to be cured. The aim is the total emigration of the Jews from Germany, he says, but adds: “For Germany, too, the Jewish question will not come to an end even when the last Jew has left the country.” Therefore the aim should be “an international solution of the Jewish question.... Encouraging the antisemitic wave [abroad] must be a task of the German foreign policy.” In the book that the committee prepared, I quoted the document and added a commentary: This recommendation “could only be interpreted as the call of the Foreign Ministry to promote a ‘general solution’ by means of establishing a Jewish reservation or physical annihilation.” This text demonstrates, and in unambiguous fashion, that the Foreign Ministry took the initiative to propose a radical European, even global, solution of the “Jewish question” even before the Führer was able to make his statement on January 30, 1939. Critics who cannot accept this interpretation of the text must come up with an alternative explanation.

The second passage in the book that came under attack was the introduction to a detailed description of the role diplomats played in the Final Solution. This was contained in a chapter called “Operation Barbarossa and the Final Solution of the Jewish question”: “The leadership of the Foreign Ministry was directly involved in the decision concerning the Final Solution. The fate of the German Jews was sealed on September 17, 1941: On this very day a meeting between Hitler and von Ribbentrop took place, following Hitler’s instruction to expel the German Jews, now wearing the yellow star, to the East.” The average reader may be justified in his criticism against the seemingly apodictic nature of this passage, but not the

knowledgeable historian. Historians know that there is no protocol of the meeting between Hitler and von Ribbentrop or of the foreign minister's next meeting — with Heinrich Himmler — that same evening. But we do know the events leading up to the meetings and also their outcome. On September 18, 1941 Himmler informed Artur Greiser, *Gauleiter* [governor] of the Warthegau [formerly Polish territory that had been annexed to Germany], that Hitler had ordered the deportation of the Jews of the Reich to be carried out before the end of the year and demanded the allocation of living space for these Jews in the Warthegau. This was the start of a chain of events leading up to the mass shooting of local Jews evacuated from the ghettos in the East, and for a slow but sure end to German Jewry.

The background to von Ribbentrop's meetings on September 17, 1941 is well known to historians. The "Jewish expert" at the German Embassy in Paris, Carltheo Zeitschel (1893–1945), prepared (August 21, 1941) a memo for Otto Abetz, the German ambassador to France, for the forthcoming meeting with the foreign minister and the Führer in which he recommended the sterilization of all Jews, and another memo (August 22, 1941) in which he recommended the deportation of the Jews to the East. Abetz met Hitler on September 16, 1941, when other dignitaries of the Third Reich were also doing their utmost to convince Hitler that the time had come for the German Jews to be deported. It is the prerogative of the historian to use circumstantial evidence when documents are missing or have been destroyed, and in this case it is quite clear that the Foreign Ministry was involved in the decisive step in the chain of event that led to the Final Solution on a European scale and the radicalization of the "solution."

Even many amateur historians of the Holocaust know that the term "Final Solution" was actually used long before the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942, though it received its most radical interpretation only shortly after this meeting. When on June 24, 1940 Reinhard Heydrich, then chief of the security police and SD, approached von Ribbentrop to take part in deliberations about "the Final Solution of the Jewish problem," he did not yet mean their total extermination by gas. But the important element in this chain of events is the intention—the people involved in the decision-making process, including the men from the Foreign Ministry, must have, or should have, understood the implications of such deliberations, and their probable outcome. They were in principle ready to accept deportation, ghettoization, and eventually gas chambers and mass murder as the means of what they used to call the Final Solution. The fact that they did not know all the details cannot exculpate them or exonerate them morally.

This technique of finding extenuating circumstances, in fact the tactic of *Verbarmlosung* [rendering harmless], was used by the critics also on other occasions. The authors of the report are accused of being "arrogant by the merit of their late

birth," i.e., they use moral criteria without considering the "question of the lack of freedom to act [*Handlungsspielräume*] under a dictator." But this is the prescription for total absolutism. What the researcher and the reader may agree upon instead is that the persons in question should have employed a critical thought process from the outset, before their freedom to act was abrogated—that they should have avoided "just serving their masters." This might have stopped the radicalization at an early stage. "Beware of the beginnings" is, after all, the most important lesson that the history of the Third Reich may teach us. But those officials did not, and later, of course, it was too late to prevent the more radical measures when they were introduced.

Let there be no mistake. The Historical Committee did not intend to assign the primary responsibility for the Holocaust on the Foreign Ministry instead of on the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA) and its accessories. However, the committee was convinced that the ministry was not merely a marginal player in implementing the Final Solution. Prof. Koerfer's suggestion that the committee "took revenge instead of looking for reconciliation," is utterly absurd. Koerfer and those who subscribe to his views seem to believe in, and propagate, the antisemitic notion of a merciless Judaism, grounded in the supposed difference between the Old Testament ("an eye for an eye") and the New Testament ("turning the other cheek").

This hair-raising line of argument was also advanced by the old Waffen SS hero, Rudolph von Ribbentrop. The son of the Nazi foreign minister, he called upon the committee members to revise their statement about September 17, 1941 because no proof was supplied "that von Ribbentrop and Hitler were personally responsible for the Final Solution."