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Is the Gestapo Everywhere? The Origins of the Modern Perception of the Secret Police of the Third Reich

The attempted genocide of European Jews committed by the National Socialist-controlled Germany in the 1930s and 40s has left scholars with more questions than could ever be answered definitively. A persisting question in the mind of anyone studying the Holocaust has to be “How could this happen?” How could the mechanized killing of millions of people happen in a modernized country in the twentieth century? Surely, whoever is to blame for these atrocities, this black spot on the human race is unlike you and me. Blame must be placed on something grand and evil. This type of thinking makes it possible to blame an overpowering government. The Secret Police of Germany during this time, also known as the Gestapo, was one of the groups that was put on trial and allocated blame for the Holocaust after World War II. A common perception of the Gestapo up to the present day is that it was a wide-reaching group, with an officer on every street corner and a tap on every phone; that a conversation was scarcely held without the Gestapo knowing about it. This image of the Gestapo, however, is a myth. Uncovering the origins of this myth is important because without understanding how these concepts were and are promoted we fail to learn one of the many lessons of the Holocaust. Inadequately placing blame for the horrors of the Third Reich leads down a dangerous path.

One would have to have more than a casual knowledge of the Gestapo to know anything different from the common portrayal. A variety of factors have led to this perception being built up in people’s minds. For instance, pre-war descriptions of the Gestapo aggrandized its abilities. Postwar historical writings focused on other aspects of the Gestapo that promoted its presence as being large and frightening. Furthermore, postwar images of overpowering governments became even more culturally relevant with the release of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Scholars have written about the Gestapo since the end of the Third Reich. There are a number of important histories that have been written that help us understand how the Gestapo has been perceived. According to Eric A. Johnson, the historiography of the "Nazi Terror" has progressed through three stages.¹ Works written during the first stage displayed the Gestapo as an elite organization, highly influential in an all-powerful and all-knowing police state. For instance, Edward Crankshaw's 1956 work, *Gestapo: Instrument of Tyranny* puts the Gestapo on the grand scale of all Nazi war crimes, saying in its final chapter that it is impossible to separate the crimes of the Gestapo from other Nazi agencies such as the S.S. and S.D.² The next stage of scholarship portrayed the German people as the victims in a very resistant Germany. It is only in the past twenty years that historians have begun to see the Gestapo as a smaller, but still quite guilty, body. Contemporary historians focus on how heavily the Gestapo relied upon tips from German citizens rather than their own intelligence-gathering agents to implicate criminals and opponents to the government.

The violence of the Nazi state from the time it took control of Germany in 1933 until its demise at the end of World War II is extremely well documented and indisputable. The brutality of many groups within the Third Reich is beyond debate. Millions of Jews and other political opponents were imprisoned and murdered in a variety of ways. Through the use of gassing, mobile killing squads, neglect, and deliberate starvation, Nazi Germany cemented itself as the most brutal regime in modern history. The Gestapo played an important role in this process of genocide. From the beginning they arrested opponents of Hitler and legally persecuted Jews. The Gestapo would oversee the transport of Jews to the ghettos, all the while treating them in an inhumane manner.³ Most of these deported Jews were eventually murdered.⁴ This is certainly not a group without guilt.

The goal of this paper, however, is to establish the various origins of modern perceptions of the Gestapo. There were many different areas in which the Gestapo was active. This group was charged with the protection of Hitler's ideological policies within Germany. This meant locating enemies of the Reich and either imprisoning them or eliminating them. The Gestapo targeted Jews, Communists, deviants and any others who were critical of the regime.⁵ They enforced social policies such as those set up by the Nuremberg Laws of 1935. These laws prohibited Jews from

marrying non-Jewish citizens as well as banning sexual intercourse between Jews and non-Jewish citizens.⁶ The Gestapo was also involved in various instances of violence involving prisoners of war.⁷ This paper will focus on the perception of the Gestapo as an extremely large, forceful group that was very present in the lives of an unwilling German population.

Recent works have focused on the use by the Gestapo of denouncement from ordinary German citizens. It has been established that the Gestapo relied on the German people to give information about their neighbors in order to determine who would be arrested or deported to a concentration camp.⁸ It has been said that eighty percent of Gestapo investigations began because of a denouncement.⁹ A case study of the Krefeld Gestapo yielded similar results. It stated that only twenty percent of the investigations against Jews began due to information gathered by the Gestapo without the aid of a civilian denouncement.¹⁰ *Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent?* by Klaus Michael Mallmann and Gerhard Paul also provides empirical evidence in its case against the Gestapo's supposed intrusion in German society. It concludes that while major cities such as Berlin had a Gestapo office with capable manpower, offices at the local level were understaffed.¹¹

It is not difficult to imagine that the general public would think of the Gestapo as omnipresent. From the beginning they have been portrayed as being exactly that. *The New York Times* ran an article on February 17, 1936 that portrayed the Gestapo as an omniscient group. This article lays out many of the modern perceptions of the Gestapo. After stating a few conventions of living under a dictatorship, the article elaborates:

The reason for these particular conventions is the Gestapo, the all-pervasive secret State police, which rarely appears in public prints but is ever-present in the mind of almost everybody in Germany, high or low, native or foreign, in office or out of it, and which prides itself on the fact that it is dreaded by all those 'with a bad conscience.'¹²

This portion of the article is almost a glowing review of the Gestapo. It proceeds to use flattering language calling it a "fear-inspiring group."¹³ The term that most speaks to the theme of this paper is "all-pervasive." To be all-pervasive something must be very present in all aspects of German life. Pervasive is an

interesting choice of words as it implies an unwanted presence. Foul odors can be pervasive. Corruption can be pervasive. Joy and good sportsmanship are never described as "pervasive." The article also presents the idea that no one is safe from the long arm of the Gestapo, no matter your class or political standing. A *Chicago Tribune* article from 1938 goes as far as to say that, "the people realize they are powerless, that they can do nothing against the Gestapo."¹⁴ A pre-war review of the book *The Brown Network* in *The New York Times* highlights some frightening Gestapo tactics: "They break into houses, tamper with the mails, violate bank secrecy and pose as foreign police officers."¹⁵ While the book under review deals exclusively with foreign espionage, the reviewer makes broad statements about what Gestapo agents do. Even before the war, all of these seeds were continuously planted in the minds of the public.

It is at least mentioned in every article that the Gestapo is the *secret* state police, as stated in their name. Some articles mention that they are rarely written about in German newspapers,¹⁶ but that was not the case in the United States. During the rise of the Third Reich, Americans saw what Europeans and German society had to be scared of in their daily newspapers. Tales of kidnappings and espionage riddled the newspaper page. For instance, on June 6, 1935, a *New York Times* article told the story of Josef Lampersberger under the title "Terror Silences Émigré Freed by German Police." After being kidnapped and returned, Lampersberger refused to say what happened to him at the hands of the Gestapo out of fear of being returned to his captors.¹⁷ Short articles about alleged Gestapo agents being imprisoned as spies began appearing.¹⁸ The Gestapo was credited with being behind the best "spy system" in the world in a 1938 *New York Times* article. The article presented the testimony of a former President of the Berlin Police. The article describes the great competency of the German foreign espionage services and asserts that America is in danger.¹⁹ So, according to the article, not only were Europeans lives at risk from the Gestapo, now Americans reading at home had a reason to fear Nazi terror.

The legal power that the Gestapo had, if and when they chose to exercise it, also promotes this popular picture. The legal system within the Gestapo was unchecked. It had power that ordinary courts did not have and was not subject to any sort of review process.²⁰ This boundless power can instill in the minds of the public that the organization was larger than it was. Why would a

police force with such a small officer to citizen ratio have such extreme capability? Nazi Germany's government was a large and confusing mix of departments with varying degrees of authority. Each department could be seen as just following orders from another department but at other times seem to answer to no one. Crankshaw's 1956 history claims that the confusion present in Nazi Germany was intentional.²¹ This may have played a role in popular perception, as it was difficult, especially immediately after the war, to separate the crimes of the Gestapo from other organizations such as the S.S.

Someone reading American newspapers after the war might also find it difficult to appropriately place blame. A postwar example of how it might be difficult to separate the blame from one organization to the other concerns the case of Josef Meisinger. A November 16, 1945 article in *The New York Times* proclaims that the 'Butcher of Warsaw' had been transported after arrest to California. The article mentions multiple times that he was a former leader of the Gestapo.²² The crimes he was being held for were in connection with the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto and the deaths of thousands of residents. These connections to such brutality paint a picture of an extremely powerful organization. At the postwar trials at Nuremberg, the Gestapo was put on trial as a "criminal organization" along with the S.S., S.A., S.D., and the Nazi high command. An outcome of this trial was not only the sentencing of individuals involved with certain crimes but banning these organizations from ever existing again.²³

The common view of the Gestapo was also promoted in 1960's scholarly works such as *The Gestapo: A History of Horror* by Jacques Delarue. He titled one of his chapters "The Gestapo is Everywhere."²⁴ In this chapter he lays out exactly the persisting impression of the Gestapo: they secretly installed monitoring equipment in the homes of many Germans and no one was safe from the spying and eavesdropping of Gestapo henchmen.

Postwar scholarly work and newspaper articles coincided with the release of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The popular perception of the Gestapo bears a striking resemblance to the "Thought Police" in George Orwell's 1949 novel. The "Thought Police" are the secret police of the totalitarian government. They are in charge of locating political enemies and controlling the mass population's social actions as well as their thoughts. Their deception is unparalleled.²⁵ Orwell's novel is a sharp political and social commentary at a very relevant time. The world of *Nineteen Eighty-*

Four is controlled and stifled by three large governments. It shows that humanity and culture may disappear if we allow ourselves to fall under the control of massive totalitarian states. Free thought is in danger of being wiped out through legislation. Social regulations and the implementation of a new language that removes words such as "liberty" threaten the advancement of the human race. The term "doublethink," which originated in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, can be applied to many practices of the Nazi regime. According to the novel, "doublethink" is to hold contradicting beliefs yet believe both of them, or "to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies."²⁶

The novel has found a way to permeate popular Western culture. It has been adapted into film or television many times as well as referred to in music and other books since its publication. Terms and characters from the book have found their way into common speech. "Big Brother" is a prime example. Its use in the English language is usually in the context of a large central government watching you and keeping tabs on what you say and do. The Third Reich is certainly seen as an "Orwellian" government. Nazi Germany is the closest example that the world has to a modern totalitarian government like the one in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The concept of the Gestapo being extremely pervasive that has grown out of these various sources may have deflected blame from the German public in the years after the war. Making Oceania of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* synonymous with the Third Reich would relieve some of their guilt in the entire situation. As opposed to being compliant, denouncing their community members, and playing along with the Gestapo, the German people can be seen as victims of an overpowering police state. This specifically relates to the second stage of scholarship on "Nazi Terror." If the German people were victims and not denouncers for the second stage as well, that gives the "Gestapo agent on every street corner and in every alleyway" myth more time to develop in the minds of the American public.

The Orwellian view of National Socialism is certainly present in modern American society. This perception has most likely been built up in the minds of the general public because of the immediate writings on the Gestapo after the war. Furthermore, the similarities of the popular image of the Gestapo to the "Thought Police" are too plentiful to ignore. Orwell's book must have affected if not the minds of the general public than the world in

which they lived. Recent academics have proven, however, that there was not enough manpower to have the type of blanketing effects that are popularly thought of with the Gestapo. They also assert that the Gestapo relied heavily on civilians denouncing their neighbors or providing anonymous tips and not on their own intelligence gathering skills. It is only in the last few decades that a clear statement has been made about how Gestapo investigations began. This conjures many more questions to add to the seemingly endless questions that were created by the Holocaust. This is a trade-off in much of Holocaust scholarship: answer one question while raising two in its place. The German population was more compliant than the popular perception would lead one to believe, but what does that say about humanity and the greater theme of victimhood during the Third Reich?

Notes

- 1 Eric A. Johnson, *Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews, and Ordinary Germans* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 10.
- 2 Edward Crankshaw, *Gestapo: Instrument of Tyranny* (London: Greenhill Books, 1956), 228.
- 3 Johnson, *Nazi Terror*, 398.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 405.
- 5 *Encyclopedia of Intelligence & Counterintelligence*, "Gestapo," (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharp, 2005).
- 6 *Chambers Dictionary of World History*, "Nuremburg Laws," (London: Chambers Harrap, 2005).
- 7 *Encyclopedia of Intelligence & Counterintelligence*, "Gestapo."
- 8 Laurence Rees, *The Nazis: A Warning From History*, (New York: The New Press, 1997), 64.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Johnson. *Nazi Terror*, 150.
- 11 David F. Crew, *Nazism and German Society, 1933-1945* (New York, Rutledge: 1994), 174.
- 12 Otto D. Tolischus, "Reich Puts Curbs on Secret Police," *New York Times*, February 17, 1936.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 John Dickson, "Concentration Camp: A Picture of What Happens," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 15, 1938.
- 15 Emil Lengyel, "The Nazi Spy System at Work All Over the World," *New York Times*, March 29, 1936.
- 16 Tolischus, "Reich Puts Curbs."
- 17 "Terror Silences Emigre Freed by German Police," *New York Times*, June 6,

1935.

- 18 "Saarois Imprisoned as a Spy," *New York Times*, November 15, 1935.
- 19 "Reich Spy System Seen as the Best," *New York Times*, June 22, 1938.
- 20 *Encyclopedia of Intelligence & Counterintelligence*, "Gestapo."
- 21 Crankshaw, *Instrument*, 228.
- 22 "'The Butcher of Warsaw' Arrives in California," *New York Times*, November 16, 1945.
- 23 *Germany and the Americas: Culture, Politics, and History*, "Nuremberg Trials." (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005).
- 24 Jacques Delarue, *The Gestapo: A History of Horror* (New York: Morrow, 1964), 86.
- 25 George Orwell. *Nineteen Eighty-Four. A Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949).
- 26 Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, part 1, chapter 3.