

The Gestapo: The Myth and Reality of Hitler's Secret Police

Frank McDonough (Skyhorse Publishing, 2017), 293 pp., notes, glossary, sources, illustrations, and index.

Reviewed by David A. Foy

The very mention of the word “Gestapo” brings immediately to the minds of most people nightmarish images of sadistic butchers working for a criminal organization that prided itself on its ability to expertly and enthusiastically engage in genocide within Germany and occupied Europe before and during World War II. British historian and author Frank McDonough has written *The Gestapo* to refute that false impression, to provide what he calls a “fresh interpretation”—some would call it a “revisionist” view—of how the Geheime Staatspolizei operated, primarily within Germany from 1933 to 1945. As he states categorically, “The assumption that Gestapo officers arrested individuals, interrogated them brutally, then sent them to a concentration camp, is a myth.” (54) He also refers to his book as an example of “history from below,” written from the standpoint of individuals affected, rather than the traditional approach of “history from above,” focused on the organization. McDonough’s book is derived from research into a group of Gestapo records that amazingly survived the war: 73,000 records from the Dusseldorf region of Germany that document the interactions between the Gestapo and the German populace.

It is important to remember, McDonough posits, that the Gestapo began as nothing more than a police department, whose detectives followed strict protocols and were even issued an instruction manual for the conduct of investigations, arrests, and interrogations. He assesses that the Gestapo left most German citizens alone, because they were determined to be no threat to the state; furthermore, the vast majority of even those Germans who were investigated was usually released. It was not only a question of proclivities and authorities, it was a matter of numbers—McDonough claims that at no time in its history did the Gestapo ever have more than 16,000 active, full-time officers to monitor 66 million people, making it impossible to live up to their reputation of being omnipotent and omnipresent. His research also enables him to “bin” the victims of Gestapo abuse and torture into specific categories—religious dissidents, Communists, “social outcasts,” and Jews. The mature Gestapo recruited

ordinary officers from either working-class or lower-class backgrounds, many of whom had left school at age 16 with no formal qualifications. By the late 1930s, those who were “up-and-comers” tended to be young, well-educated, middle class individuals, many of whom had law degrees or doctorates. Those German males who procured coveted posts in the political police/Gestapo were selected for their police training and experience, not their Nazi Party membership or status, and only a minority of Gestapo officers were ever Party members. Most who did join the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (Nazi Party)) did so simply to keep their jobs, the only way to enjoy a lucrative pension in retirement.

In his opening chapter, McDonough discusses the origins and rapid development of the Gestapo, from a Prussian political police force in 1932, led by World War I fighter pilot ace Hermann Göring, to what was by 1936 a secret state police force for all Germany. McDonough credits Göring, along with Rudolf Diels, Heinrich Himmler, and Reinhard Heydrich, with the creation of the Gestapo.

The year 1933 proved to be a watershed for the development of the Gestapo—the Reichstag fire of February, likely set by mentally handicapped Dutch communist Marinus van der Lubbe, prompted the declaration of the Gestapo as the secret state police in Prussia by April. As Göring and Diels consolidated their gains and expanded their authorities in Prussia, Himmler and Heydrich competed with Sturmabteilung (SA) leader Ernst Rohm for control of the police in the other states of Germany. Rohm naively believed that Himmler’s Schutzstaffeln (SS) was subordinate to the SA, a conclusion McDonough accurately characterizes as “a grave tactical error.” (27)

Wrongly believing that Rohm intended to wage a coup, Göring, Himmler, and Heydrich murdered him during the 1 July 1934 “Night of the Long Knives,” a bloody purge of the SA by the SS. Heydrich used this non-existent threat to redefine the term “enemy of the

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state” and justify the continued existence of the Gestapo after 1934. Within two years, the Gestapo was recognized as the secret state police for all of Germany, and by the advent of World War II in 1939, the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) was the centralized security authority for the entire country, solidifying Himmler's victory.

Predictably, the tenets of the major religious faiths in Germany before and during World War II ultimately meant conflict with the Gestapo. The welcome news of the Concordat between the Papacy and the Third Reich deceived many Catholic bishops, who were reluctant to criticize Hitler's regime, at least until priests began being charged with currency smuggling and sexual abuse and once Hitler adopted the T4 program, the innocuous covername for a program of euthanasia. Among religious groups in Germany, the Gestapo particularly singled out Jehovah's Witnesses for persecution, as they were a small group with no defenders and were officially banned by 1935.

The most systematically persecuted political group in Nazi Germany proved to be the Communists. The Reichstag fire provided the pretext for a crackdown, and 10,000 Communists were arrested that night. Some tragically fled to the Soviet Union, where they became victims of Stalin rather than Hitler; ironically, even after the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, German Communists remained supporters of the Soviet Union. The bottom line was that by the late 1930s, most German Communists resigned themselves to the Nazis as a fact of life, just another form of oppression the bourgeoisie waged against the proletariat.

Also falling victim to the Gestapo's depredations were all those categorized as “social outsiders”—specifically, habitual criminals, homosexuals, sex offenders, prostitutes, juvenile delinquents, members of street gangs, Gypsies, and even the long-term unemployed. The most-hardened habitual criminals—the “three strikes and you're out” equivalents—could find themselves in a concentration camp; 20,000 did, and most died, according to McDonough. In the most extreme cases of sexual misconduct, the state resorted to sterilization in a last-ditch effort to salvage these individuals as members of the “National Community.” Between 1933 and 1945, McDonough estimates that the state involuntarily sterilized more than 350,000 Germans.

Although not the primary target of the Gestapo, at least not initially, German Jews also fell victim to the secret police service. The author partially attributes the stage-by-stage persecution of the Jews in Germany to the economic success of German Jews, which prompted resentment from the rest of the populace. The 1935 Nuremberg Laws motivated many Jews to leave Germany, while those remaining faced increased persecution by the Gestapo, especially for “race defilement,” the legal definition of Aryan-Jewish sexual relations. But worse was to follow, especially in the wake of the November 1938 murder of a minor German consular official, Ernst vom Rath, by a German-Jewish teenager and refugee incensed at learning that his parents had been deported from Germany to Poland. The response to the murder was a nationwide Jewish pogrom known as Kristallnacht (“The Night of Broken Glass”), in which the windows of Jewish-owned shops were smashed, prompting more Jews to leave the Fatherland. In September 1941, when German Jews were forced to begin wearing the yellow Star of David with the word Jude (Jew) in black in the middle, most non-Jewish Germans applauded. Beginning the next month and continuing until the summer of 1942, the Gestapo organized wholesale deportations of German Jews. As McDonough puts it, “It is hard to understand the consequences of a tidal wave in the hours of darkness.” (211)

Although McDonough argues effectively that the Gestapo, at least in the pre-war period and the early days of the war, generally operated in accordance with the law, he also points out in an interesting chapter how the Gestapo always investigated denunciations of individuals by the public. He claims that 26 percent of all Gestapo cases began with a denunciation of, usually, a neighbor or family member. While few such cases resulted even in imprisonment, much less death, the advent of war predictably brought less tolerance of dissent, especially in the wake of the February 1943 German defeat at Stalingrad. Many such denunciations were “self-inflicted,” resulting from “loose lips” freed either by alcohol or unrestrained rage and frustration.

The final chapter of *The Gestapo* discusses the bringing of the Gestapo before the bar of justice during the postwar period, from 1945 until the mid-1960s. McDonough highlights the “sub-trial” of the Gestapo at Nuremberg, where a German defense attorney vigorously denied the charge that the Gestapo was a criminal organization, because it was acting in accordance with the

law at the time rather than violating it. The attorney also refuted the idea that the Gestapo was all-powerful or filled with rabid Nazi Party members. Although the Nuremberg tribunal rejected such statements out of hand, a paucity of surviving documentation made prosecutions difficult and rare, and leniency was the usual result of denazification court trials as well.

McDonough concludes his book on the depressing note that in postwar Germany, many former Nazis had prominent positions and the vast majority of former high-ranking Gestapo officials with law degrees were able to return to their law practices without having to worry about looking over their shoulders.

The Gestapo is a welcome restoration of balance to history's view of the Gestapo and provides much new information. It is well-documented, and the author's familiarity with archival sources and the historiography of the Gestapo is evident. It is a readable volume, with a nice selection of photographs, although the addition of maps would be helpful. By the same token, however, readers

need to be aware of what they're getting into—*The Gestapo* reads more like a quantitative, scientific study than a flowing historical narrative. Particularly vexing is the author's penchant for including a personal account and then, once the reader is hooked on the details, abruptly ending the discussion with the phrase "ultimate fate unknown," perhaps understandable but also avoidable.

Readers who seek a more traditional history may be more satisfied reading other books or at least supplementing *The Gestapo* with such, although the number of books focused on just the Gestapo is limited—Carsten Dams's 2014 volume *The Gestapo: Power and Terror in the Third Reich* seems to suffer from some of the same criticisms as McDonough's, and Jacques Delarue's *The Gestapo: A History of Horror* is extremely dated and colored by the author's background as a French Resistance member captured by the Germans. Nevertheless, *The Gestapo* is worth the read, especially for its "revisionist" view that the Gestapo was not inherently evil but prostituted to serve other causes than law enforcement.

