

## Network of Terror: The Nazi Concentration Camps

Karin Orth, *Das System der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager: Eine politische Organisationsgeschichte*, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999, 396 pp.

Karin Orth, *Die Konzentrationslager-SS: Sozialstrukturelle Analysen und biographische Studien*, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2000, 335 pp.

Reviewed by  
Christian Gerlach

In the spring of 1945, the world was shocked by the published photographs that had been taken in Bergen-Belsen and other camps during the war. Today we know that about two million people were killed in the Nazi concentration camps, which were a central instrument of the persecution and terror that characterized the Nazi regime. Auschwitz, more than any other camp, however, has come to symbolize the concentration-camp system—and, to a great extent, has become synonymous with the Holocaust itself.

Although an impressive amount of books and articles has been published on the subject of the concentration camps over the last few decades, a new, noteworthy wave of research has recently appeared in various countries and particularly in Germany. Some of the results of this research, which, in many respects, indicate a more complex picture than before, were included in the two volumes following an international conference in Weimar in November 1995.<sup>1</sup> From the Ph.D. dissertation of Karin Orth – one of the co-editors of these volumes – two books have emerged: one about the concentration-camp system; and one about a circle of about 300 leading SS officers within the camps, the “concentration camp SS.” These books offer new views on the concentration camps and raise new questions as well.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Herbert, Karin Orth and Christoph Dieckmann, eds., *Die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager: Entwicklung und Struktur* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Karin Orth is at present *wissenschaftliche Assistentin* in the history department of the University of Freiburg, Germany.

Orth, whose two books are based on documents from twenty-nine archives, has done an enormous amount of work in integrating information from mountains of books and articles. This was necessary in order to re-delineate the “system” of the concentration camps from the history of various individual camps, as well as to reconstruct the biographies of the key personnel. Orth’s synthesis of this material is extremely careful and successful. She is trying to argue in a most empirical manner, and her style is – although she is a good writer – as exact, even strict, as possible.

The history of the concentration camps is one of relentless horror, crime, and pain; however, according to Orth, the functions changed over the years. This was a result of the changes made by the top SS officer in charge of the camp system and changes with regard to the main victim groups. From 1933/34, the period of the “early camps,” and during their “centralization” in 1934/35, the top priority of the camps under the supervision of Theodor Eicke was the terror against the Nazis’ German political enemies and a very brutal form of their “education.” Many of the incarcerated were released after some time.

From 1936 on, the most important target was “racial prevention” and “purification” of German society. Many of the victims were criminals and so-called “asocials.” New and bigger camps were constructed, and the number of prisoners rose from 3,500 to 21,000. The idea of educating the camp inmates, who, from a biological-racist perspective, were considered as having been born with defects, lost some importance. The number of Jews in the camps increased in November 1938, after the nationwide pogrom, but remained limited when many of them were released.

With the onset of World War II, a new period, with Richard Glücks at the head of the camp system, began. People from the occupied territories, where many new camps were established, soon became the majority of the prisoners: especially Poles, Czechs, and Jews. The camps were transformed into a part of the German-occupation terror and into places of organized, direct mass murder. In early 1942, there were about 80,000 prisoners (*System*, p. 165). From 1941/42 to 1945, under the auspices of Oswald Pohl, chief of the WVHA (Economic and Administration Head Office of the SS), the use of the camp

inmates as slave labor became increasingly important (in 1942 it had only had an experimental scope). This fact contributed to far higher death rates among the prisoners. According to Orth, the slave labor mainly served the interests of German industry; the importance of the SS's own economic activities, she maintains, has sometimes been overestimated in recent decades.

From late 1943 on, the number of Jews held permanently in the concentration camps increased again. For the first time, except for a short period in late 1938/early 1939, they constituted a high percentage of the prisoners. In every period of change in the camps' purposes, there was also a modified institutional structure, as well as a change in the top SS staff (*Konzentrationslager-SS*, p. 79).

It is a great achievement that Orth gives much more weight to the war period, when the number of prisoners and victims was expanding, than to the pre-war years. Three-quarters of her book about the concentration-camp system refer to wartime, and one-third is only about the years 1944-45 (when there were up to 700,000 prisoners), including sixty pages on the death marches. The death marches have recently become one important focus of international research about the camps, as documented by major contributions in the last volume of this journal.<sup>3</sup> Orth is persuasive in arguing that the last year of the camp system, when hundreds of sub-camps near industrial plants were established, is to be seen as a separate phase. This subject is presently attracting the attention of many researchers. However, Orth's periodization differs substantially from some other analyses and slightly from the one of Martin Broszat.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from their institutional history, the main point of the debates about the camps is, of course, the mass murders. It is clear that violence, torture, and murder were part of the system from the beginning. However, the main victim groups, scope, and character of the killings changed more than once, too.

---

<sup>3</sup> See the articles by Daniel Blatman, Eleonore Lappin, Zvi Erez, and Joachim Neander in *Yad Vashem Studies* 28 (2000), pp. 155-310.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Orth, *System*, p. 21, and Martin Broszat, "The Concentration Camps 1933-1945," in Hans Buchheim, et al., *Anatomy of the SS State* (London: Collins, 1968), pp. 397-497. For the sub-camps of 1944/45, see also vol. 15 (2000) of the *Dachauer Hefte*.

Orth analyzes in detail how mass murder and forced labor were – not accidentally – introduced almost parallel in 1941/42 (*System*, pp. 113-221).

The first systematic mass killings, as defined by Orth, began in April 1941, and lasted until 1943: “Aktion 14f13,” the killing of between 10,000 and 20,000 allegedly or really sick and weak prisoners, was the continuation of the “euthanasia” mass murders. These were the first selections in the camps, and Orth points to the fact that they were devolved upon the SS in the camps from the initially responsible “euthanasia” doctors (*System*, p. 121). The next major group of victims were at least 34,000 – but probably significantly more – “commissars” and POWs of the Red Army in the months from September 1941 on. In a chapter with the most horrible content, Orth makes a major contribution to our knowledge about German killing experiments in late 1941 and early 1942, arguing that, within the concentration camps, these “experiments” were mainly linked to the “Aktion 14f13” – murders (*System*, pp. 131-141).

Orth only briefly discusses the deportations of more than one million Jews and their immediate extermination in the gas chambers of Auschwitz and to Majdanek, because most of these people never actually became prisoners of a concentration camp.<sup>5</sup> Instead, she pays very much attention to the selections of Jewish and non-Jewish camp prisoners from 1942 on. This includes those camps which she calls “*Sterbelager*” (camps for dying) of early 1945, such as Bergen-Belsen, and the systematic mass murders particularly of Jews preceding and during the evacuations of camps (*System*, pp. 260-269, 276-336).

Orth’s term “*Sterbelager*” refers to the creation of horribly overcrowded, large camps, sub-camps, or camp areas where mostly weak or sick prisoners, receiving hardly any supplies or medical treatment, were doomed to die by the thousands. The author tries to give a differentiated analysis of the relations between forced labor and extermination in the camps, stating that ideological purposes and the use of the camps for “interests of power politics”

---

<sup>5</sup> The death camps in Chełmno, Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka are not covered by Orth’s studies. They were not considered concentration camps, which were defined as camps under the administration of the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps (*Inspektion der Konzentrationslager*).

(*machtpolitische Interessen*) – for example, the plans of the SS to gain economic influence – were not conflicting. There was no major contradiction, because, according to Orth, the ideology related to the Jews while the power politics was concerned with the non-Jews (*System*, p. 350, and pp. 341-342, respectively, as only one example).

Yet this seems too simple, even evasive. The fact was that only among the Hungarian Jews alone more than 100,000 could survive in concentration camps and sub-camps, whereas there was an immense death rate among Soviet POWs in 1941/42, and other groups, such as in Mauthausen, as Orth herself explains more than once. The many changes in persecution policies that determined life-and-death situations, as well as the differing conditions of “life” and work in the camps, also affected Jewish prisoners. Thus, tens of thousands of Jews could survive at the same time that mass extermination at Auschwitz continued. Survivors’ testimonies often confront us with the fact that such decisions could be so surprising (or their background so complicated and unbelievable) that no logical explanation could be found.

Who were the perpetrators of the Holocaust and other German mass crimes, and why did they carry them out? As a consequence of the Browning-Goldhagen debate, this question has been raised once again. One of the results is perhaps surprising: we don't know much about the motives. There is a great deal of general knowledge about National-Socialist ideology, yet it remains controversial as to what importance this ideology actually had for the perpetrators when they performed their misdeeds. So much has been written about the Holocaust, but there is a lack of contemporary documents concerning the motives of the perpetrators.

Much of the boom in “perpetrator studies” in recent years<sup>6</sup> resulted from an increased use of interrogations in postwar trials. However, Karin Orth does not belong to the group of scholars who believe that this material is a good source

---

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996); Ulrich Herbert, *Best: Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft* (Bonn: Dietz, 1996); Jens Banach, *Heydrichs Elite: Das Führungskorps der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD 1936-1945* (Paderborn et al.: Schöningh, 1998); vol. 16 of the *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus: Durchschnittstäter: Handeln und Motivation*, Christian Gerlach and Ahlrich Meyer, eds (Berlin: Schwarze Risse, 2000).

for indubitable information about the perpetrators' motives – mainly because the legal context prevents this. Since a perpetrator who would have confessed that he killed because of antisemitism, racial hatred, greed, and so on would have received the maximum penalty, a frank talk about motives can hardly be expected from the interrogations. Apart from these, there is a lack of other sources, including personal letters, and so doubts and uncertainties remain. According to Karin Orth, it would not be possible to write an individual biography about one of these men (perhaps with the exception of Höss, from whom there is relatively much material). As a result, the author is reluctant in her statements. For the sociological analysis, her sample consists of the commanders of the concentration camps and the camp's section heads who are considered the most important (the heads of the "political administration," administrative matters, labor affairs, and the commander's adjutants, chiefs of the guards, and *Schutzhaftlagerführer* [officers for "protective custody"]). Although doctors were important perpetrators in the camps, they are excluded; on the one hand, they have already been well researched, and, on the other hand, as academics, they belonged to a different social type than the rest.

The other SS officers mentioned before, constituted a rather exclusive group, with a certain fluctuation from one sort of position to the other and from camp to camp. Most of them belonged to the lower middle class, did not have a higher education, and had married within their social group. They were mostly born between 1897 and 1906. While only a few had fought in World War I, the issues of war, defeat, revolution, and counterrevolution had been important events during their youth; many, but not all, had belonged to the *Kriegsjugendgeneration*.<sup>7</sup> The usual pattern was that these men had engaged in political activities of the extreme right in the 1920s. Especially the later commanders of the camps could be considered to have been outsiders to the civil society that had predominated during the Weimar republic--as they were after 1945. Yet they were not outsiders with regard to their economic status: between 30 and 40 percent of the group analyzed by Orth had experienced unemployment at the beginning of the 1930s – no more than the average for

---

<sup>7</sup> *Kriegsjugendgeneration*: the generation who experienced war during their youth.

Germans (*Konzentrationslager-SS*, pp. 57-90). It should be added that the outsider role of these men was not typical of many other groups of perpetrators and those responsible for the Nazi crimes; for example, policemen, functionaries in the various administrations, army officers, and some intellectuals.<sup>8</sup>

In her biographical analyses, which focus on eleven concentration-camp commanders,<sup>9</sup> Orth stresses the importance of the milieu out of which the “concentration camp SS” acted. Instead of interpreting the concentration camps as a uniform, stone-like structure, as does German social scientist Wolfgang Sofsky,<sup>10</sup> they constitute for Orth a flexible, dynamic system of horror, dependent on a network of personal relations and experiences. From their “practical” and violent – as a rule, not theoretical – involvement in the extreme right over years, the men who represented the “concentration camp SS” drew general convictions about political and “racial” enemies of German society. Their education according to the “school of Dachau,” 1933-1935, taught them by verbal indoctrination and, more importantly, by experience that they had to become “hard,” especially hard enough to cause all “necessary” hardship for others. At the same time they learned that personal relations were decisive for their careers within the camp system (*Konzentrationslager-SS*, pp. 127-152).

Many of them lived in the area of the camps, thus having their “work,” many friends, and, in many cases, their families close to them there; in brief, most of their social contacts remained in place. Indeed, they formed another camp community, living at the “inner front.” Many of them, as is well known, had also had experience at the “external” front, when they were systematically drawn to Waffen-SS “death’s-head” units at the fighting fronts or to committing atrocities in the rear areas. For Orth, much of their “readiness to kill” in the camps emerged from their role in the group (not only division of labor), their daily routine, a system of rewards (as promotions), and a relatively high

---

<sup>8</sup> See also Gerlach and Meyer, *Durchschnittstäter*.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Baer, Friedrich Hartjenstein, Johannes Hassebroek, Rudolf Höss, Paul Werner Hoppe, Josef Kramer, Arthur Liebehenschel, Max Pauly, Hermann Pister, Fritz Suhren, and Martin Weiss.

<sup>10</sup> Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

degree of autonomy, combined with their general belief that certain enemies were to be killed. “Unreflectedly” (*unhinterfragt*) and “reflex-like,” they converted the “extermination policies of the SS” into reality, acting out of a “racist and antisemitic consensus” (*Konzentrationslager-SS*, pp. 202-203). Orth argues that the concentration-camp leaders and leading staff were “intellectually not able, nor did they even feel the need, to think about their motives.”<sup>11</sup> They were “men of action, not of (written) words” (p. 17). For Orth, this also partly explains why there is this well-known lack of written sources about these perpetrators – it was virtually impossible that they would reflect upon, let alone record, their deeds.

This is, however, debatable. Do Höss’s memoirs support the view that he did not reflect on his actions?<sup>12</sup> Orth herself points in detail to the justification strategies of the many concentration-camp leaders brought to trial after the war. Of course, they underlined that they had only been tools in the hands of others, but, on the other hand, many still emphasized their “idealism” and nationalism (*Konzentrationslager-SS*, pp. 277-289).

Future research will have to clarify two points in this respect: first, how far the leading SS staff in the concentration camps reflected about their actions, if at all; and, second, if Orth’s thesis can be confirmed, which would also corroborate Orth’s skepticism about the possibility of finding out the exact killing motives of these SS officers, it has to be asked whether their unreflected action was typical of other German perpetrators from other social background as well, or whether the “concentration camp SS” was perhaps a very special group – something which Orth does not discuss in detail. From functionaries in the various civil and army administrations, with their tendency to an attempt at “policy-making” in their respective positions, however, a more intentional approach can be expected.

---

<sup>11</sup> They were “*weder intellektuell in der Lage, noch sahen sie überhaupt die Notwendigkeit, über ihre Beweggründe zu reflektieren*” (*Konzentrationslager-SS*, p. 299). Despite some similarities, Orth’s argument goes considerably beyond the conclusions of Tom Segev, *Die Soldaten des Bösen: Zur Geschichte der SS-Kommandanten* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1992), pp. 261-265 (English edition: *Soldiers of Evil* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987]).

<sup>12</sup> Rudolf Höss, *Kommandant in Auschwitz*, Martin Broszat, ed. (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1963). This question seems especially justified because Höss was a section head of the Inspectorate of the Concentration Camps in 1943/44.



Nonetheless, Karin Orth provides us with an excellent and differentiated comprehensive study of the concentration-camp system. It condenses the most recent state of debate on the topic and includes fundamental research on the system's leading staff. Her work helps us to understand the cohesion of the camps' organism and some of the reasons why so many people died there. Like so many German works, these books, too, are not written from the perspective of the victims; however, at its core, this research of the perpetrators is dedicated to the victims' memory.

**Source: *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. 29, 2001, pp. 423-433**