The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps (review)

Mark Spoerer

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Michael T. Allen. *The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xii + 377 pp. ISBN 0-8078-2677-4, $39.95.

The debate on compensation of former forced and slave laborers that raged in the years from 1998 to 2001 has sparked new interest in the topic. Now we can consult the monograph under review, which is written by a scholar who has been working for years on the subject. This book summarizes his main findings and, for the first time in the English language gives a comprehensive account of the SS's (*Schutzstaffel*) economic activities.

Many books deal with this topic in the German language, most recently Jan Erik Schulte's monograph *Zwangsarbeit und Vernichtung: Das Wirtschaftsimperium der SS* (2001), which was published a few months before Allen's. Comparing the two books leads to interesting results. Both describe the efforts of the SS to give an economic foundation to the power and near-monopoly they had over policing. In the 1930s the SS founded businesses in order to keep a grip on concentration camp inmates, who were coerced into working in them. When the war began the SS quickly realized that it could strengthen its power base by becoming a business concern of its own. As masters of the concentration camps, the SS had tens of thousands—later hundreds of thousands—of inmates at its disposal. Moreover, because the SS also controlled the German police, it sent thousands of foreign civilian workers to the concentration camps, even for petty offences against the tight Nazi laws. But the project failed totally.

Private industry was very reluctant to cooperate with the SS, as it (rightly) feared that the SS was becoming a competitor that would not hesitate to make use of its extraordinary executive powers. The SS failed to get the sophisticated machinery it longed for, and its camp guards were not capable of switching from rough-handling overseers of the prisoners into efficiency-orientated foremen. Rather than building up production capacity in the camps, the SS soon found itself in the thankless position of having to provide inmates to private businesses. This was not how Heinrich Himmler, the Reich's top policeman, and Oswald Pohl, his obedient executive for the SS's economic affairs, had imagined their economic empire. One SS executive, however, managed to become one of the most important top managers for armaments, below armaments minister (and Adolf Hitler's dearest architect) Albert Speer: toward the end of the war, SS general Hans Kammler, head of the SS construction corps, controlled not only the most important subterranean displacement projects of

the German industry, but also the production of the notorious V-weapons (cruise missiles and rockets) and of jets. Schulte interprets this outpacing of Pohl by his formal subordinate Kammler as a symptom of the SS's descent toward the end of the war, whereas Allen identifies it as the SS's zenith.

Allen's account of the story is especially original because he mixes it with insights from organizational theory, especially the concept of corporate culture (pp. 260, 279). Allen ably displays what spirit held the SS's top men together. Although technical or organizational capabilities were useful, but neither necessary nor sufficient for a career in the SS economic bureaucracy, ideological consensus was essential. Not all SS managers were ardent National Socialists, but they shared a common belief in German superiority and in the people's community (*Volksgemeinschaft*), and they strongly opposed liberalism, capitalism, and, *horribile dictu*, individualism.

Allen places his story in various additional contexts. He argues against Zygmunt Baumann's hypothesis, which draws a straight line from the Enlightenment to the horrors of the Holocaust. Rather, for Allen, modernity is a quite arbitrary concept that every political group may fill with their perspective of society's future. This is precisely what the SS men did. In their view a Germanicized Eastern Europe populated by Aryan settlers was modern. None of their ideals resembled those of the Enlightenment. The more able among them, like Kammler, used means that were rational—that is, efficient for fulfilling a certain goal. But they were modern only in the framework of what the Nazis held to be modernity.

Another myth against which Allen fights is that the polycratic nature of the Nazi bureaucracy was responsible for its failure. Rather, Allen argues, the loose and often unclear structure of the organizational responsibilities enabled energetic managers to network with kindred souls and to form coalitions that did away with less able institutions. This is, of course, not a new hypothesis, but the description of the SS economic bureaucracy presented here offers strong supporting evidence. This book is thoroughly researched, well written, and, as some in the field will soon find out, provocative. It merits both wide and close attention.

Mark Spoerer
University of Hohenheim, Stuttgart