The Gestapo: Control Through Fear

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The word Gestapo conjures up images of arrests, strange disappearances, beatings, concentration camps and above all fear. From 1933 until 1945, the Gestapo established and enforced a reputation of terror among the German population. This reputation helped the Gestapo to effectively carry out Nazi policies against the Jews and other "enemies" of the regime, as well as keeping the rest of the German society in line. The Gestapo will be remembered as one of the most feared groups in the Nazi regime because of the terror it inflicted on German society. Despite this world view, a topic of interest for historians is whether or not the techniques used by the Gestapo has any real impact on society? That is to say, did ordinary Germans change their behavior in order to not run afoul of the Gestapo? After considering various studies, it appears that historians largely agree that these techniques, especially that of denunciation, here defined as the act of one individual reporting another's actions to the Gestapo, succeeded for a brief time in fundamentally changing the way in which ordinary Germans behaved.

In order to begin to control the population, the Gestapo had to first establish a fearful reputation, consisting of controlling the population through fear rather than through civil obedience to law enforcement. The Gestapo, initially a small police unit, grew in power after the absorption of the SA and SS into one large police unit in 1933[1] It became the official strong arm of the regime after the Reichstag Fire in February of that year. The Emergency Decrees that followed gave the police system in Germany the power to circumvent the civil liberties of

[1] Edward Crankshaw, *Gestapo: Instrument of Tyranny* (London: Putnam, 1956; reprint, London: Greenhill Books, 1990), 16 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

German citizens.[2] By 1936, the Gestapo became nationalized and soon developed into the instrument through which Hitler could now begin to attack opposition to his regime. After any threat was crushed or repressed, Hitler could then use the Gestapo against both the German and Jewish population. The Gestapo functioned both inside and outside the law because of the 1936 Gestapo Laws. As a result they became nearly independent of the regime's administrative offices and instead acted "as the instrument of the Führer's authority." [3] With the powers that both the Reichstag Fire Emergency Decrees and the Gestapo Laws gave to the Gestapo, the group was free to begin building its reputation and crushing opposing groups.

The Gestapo began attacking the first opposition groups as early as the spring of 1933. These first groups included the Communists, the trade unions, and other left wing groups. Those involved or associated with these groups became the targets of the infant Nazi Secret Police system. Essentially, the Gestapo rounded up these individuals and a few became the first to be sent to what became known as the concentration camps. These early attacks on political opposition to the regime built up the reputation of the Gestapo. Although Robert Gellately, in *The Gestapo and German Society*, claimed that the Gestapo played a minor role in these round-ups, he did mention the effect of them on the general public. The result usually consisted of making the public think twice before speaking out against the regime, for fear that they may get arrested next.[4]

The early acts of the SA and the Gestapo were designed, in part, as a demonstration not only of their own growing power, but that of the regime as well. The Gestapo, through their increasingly relentless pursuit of "dissidents," made it clear to the public that to speak against the regime in any capacity meant that anyone could be the next to disappear into the night. The Gestapo used secretive arrests in order to create an aura of uncertainty within a community. In doing so, they introduced

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[2] Robert Gellately, *Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy, 1933-1945 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 40.*

[3] Gellately, *Gestapo*, 42.

[4] Gellately, *Gestapo*, 38-40.

the idea that only total compliance with the regime was acceptable: "In the absence of enthusiasm, silence, compliance or apathetic accommodation was to be preferred."[5] Word about the treatment of those taken secretly into protective custody by the Gestapo affected the public by demonstrating that not cooperating with the regime could threaten one's safety. The German population began conforming to Nazi policies when the disappearances became more than random incidents.

Scholars continue to debate just what kinds of treatment those arrested endured. Charges range from absolute sadism to merely implied threats of harm. Edward Crankshaw, in *Gestapo: Instrument of Tyranny*, maintained that the Gestapo knew no other way "than to kill or torture."[6] He asserted that after each arrest, the victims initially underwent verbal or mental abuse, then physical abuse, and finally were shipped off to a concentration camp where they usually died.[7] Crankshaw builds his entire study around the assumption that the Gestapo was nothing but a large killing machine used by the Nazis to crush any opposition and later to round up the Jewish population. While asserting this claim, Crankshaw exposed the flaw in his theory. He admits that no one can truly know exactly what happened to each victim once they were taken by the Gestapo because of the lack of documentary evidence needed to confirm that torture did indeed take place. Although the records that Crankshaw examined, primarily oral testimonies given by those few who managed to survive their ordeals, make for a convincing argument, their accounts may not accurately represent the experiences of the whole.

Robert Gellately contradicted Crankshaw's theories on this subject. In his book, Gellately included torture as a method used by the Gestapo in order to control the population. He mentioned that several of those who had been repeatedly arrested by the Gestapo committed suicide to avoid yet another arrest. Gellately also described some of the other methods the Gestapo used in order to extract confessions. These include blackmail,

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[5] Gellately, *Gestapo*, 39.
[6] Crankshaw, 126.
[7] Crankshaw, 126-31.

entrapment, intimidation, and extortion, to name a few. Despite these statements, Gellately asserted that many Gestapo offices served merely as paper-pushing centers or as collection houses for the extensive files gathered on individuals. He maintained that the Gestapo retained their control over the populace not by reputation alone, but by instilling enough fear about having suspicion aroused that few dared to question the regime. Gellately also noted that the Gestapo was not a large group as is sometimes stated, instead they relied on the population as their main source of information.

As a result, many Germans felt pressured to accommodate the regime – no matter what circumstance they found themselves in. This fear often caused one individual to denounce another in order to turn suspicion away from their own actions. An example of this comes out of Bernt Engelmann's memoirs, when a man caught reading a "seditious" newspaper places the blame on another man for supposedly obtaining the paper in the first place. He had the choice "to risk being caught . . . or to denounce the other man. He chose the lesser of two evils."[8] Engelmann decried the fact that society had changed so radically that an individual could turn in a possibly innocent man in order to deflect suspicion from himself. All of this occurred in response to the terror that the Gestapo held over Germans.

Gellately evaluated behavioral changes in individuals to support his theory that Gestapo practices inspired significant social cooperation with the regime. To support this, he noted changes in some individuals' behavior when dealing with Jewish friends, relatives or co-workers. Gellately stated that some individuals slowly curtailed their encounters with Jews while others simply ceased all contact. Many of these relationships had been going on for years and with the arrival of the Gestapo and their reputation for ruthlessness, many of these relationships came to abrupt ends, often without explanation from the Germans involved. Other ordinary Germans chose to commit suicide rather than have to decide between ending such relationships or risking harassment or imprisonment at the hands

[8] Bernt Engelmann, *In Hitler's Germany: Daily Life in the Third Reich*, trans. Krishna Winston (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 41.

of the Gestapo. Fear of being sent to the concentration camps also forced people to change their behaviors. The camps were designed by the regime as "the ubiquitous threat hanging over every German . . . the very name was intended to cast a spell over every German, to stifle every movement of opposition."[9] Crankshaw also argued that the use of the camps was largely used to terrify the German population by stating that the Gestapo began to send people to the camps as a routine occurrence.

As early as 1933, the Gestapo deported some of the political prisoners arrested to concentration camps. The camps, at this time, were not yet the final destination for the Jews. The previously mentioned Reichstag Decrees and Gestapo Laws gave the police force further privileges and an open invitation to send "social deviants" or political prisoners to the camps for forced labor. Deportation of the Jews started as early as 1941. The Gestapo became largely responsible for the deportations of the Jews and other prisoners to the camps, and did so without being responsible to the law:

> The authority to issue warrants for preventive arrest, and consign men to concentration camps placed a murderous weapon in the hands of the Gestapo . . . [no one] was unable to prevent a man from suddenly disappearing behind the barbed wire of the concentration camps.[10]

Many of those arrested by the Gestapo early in its existence, as well as some Jews before the mass deportations began went to the camps because someone had denounced them.

The Gestapo used the effective technique of denunciation to further control the population. The threat of being reported to the Gestapo came from every section of the populace, providing the Gestapo with the overall appearance of total domination. The few records that survived the destruction of Gestapo offices show that the Gestapo received thousands of letters, or other forms of communication, reporting on the

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[9] Heinz Hohne, *The Order of the Death's Head*, trans. Richard Barry (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970), 201.

[10] Hohne, 201.

actions of individuals. While the level of denunciation fluctuated throughout the years of Nazi domination, it remained a vital technique for the Gestapo until just before the end of the war.

The Jews of Germany were most affected by these reports. Denunciations against Jews increased dramatically after the Nuremberg Laws of 1935. These laws were designed to prevent Jews from remaining active individuals in German society, as well as to further dehumanize the Jews in the eyes of that society. After the Laws were enacted, the Gestapo began to collect information in order to create files on the relationships that Jews had with ordinary Germans. According to Gellately, the destruction of such relationships was vital to getting the population to accept the new anti-Semitic policies.

The town of Eisenach is a prime example of using such tactics against the Jewish population. John Connelly, in "The Uses of *Volkgemeinschaft*," pointed out that considering the small numbers of Jews in the city, the denunciation rate appears quite high. "The records reflect the intense determination . . . to dissociate themselves from Jewish neighbors . . . and] that even a trace of contact with Jews could be made to seem suspect."[11] Lower Franconia and Wurzburg were also areas that serve as examples of many incidents of accusations against the Jewish population. According to Gellately, these areas were unique because of the sudden increase in denunciations and thus the apparent increase in support for the regime after the Nuremberg Laws took effect. These regions did not initially welcome the Nazi takeover but suddenly erupted with support once the regime initiated its anti-Semitic campaigns. Connelly also argued that many of the denunciations involved German citizens as well. He maintained that Germans in Eisenach threatened other Germans, and even Nazi officials, with false accusations against them, in order to get what they wanted done. An example of this was when Eisenach district leader, Hermann Kohler, intervened in an apartment eviction dispute between two German families. In the

[11] John Connelly, "The Uses of *Volkgemeinschaft*: Letters to the NSDAP Kreisleitung Eisenach, 1939-1940." *Journal of Modern History* 68 (Dec. 1996): 927.

dispute, the potential evictee wrote to Kohler expecting assistance from him against the eviction, and threatened to report Kohler to his superiors if no help arrived sooner. The issue was settled soon after Kohler received the letter and Connelly suggested that the issue and others like it were settled quickly in order to maintain the appearance of the regime's control over society.[12]

As mentioned, non-Jews were victims of denunciations, as well as being the accusers themselves. In many of the cases, most scholars agree that some measure of personal revenge or personal gain was involved.[13] The denunciations against the non-Jewish segment of the German population usually resulted in many of them being thrown out because of lack of credibility of the informer. Despite the number of accusations regarded as false, the technique remained largely successful. "Denunciations from the population were responsible for more cases than all police, state, or Nazi Party authorities put together."[14] Considering the high rate of denunciation between non-Jews in Germany, the reason for this occurrence needs to be addressed.

As noted earlier, many of the denunciations were committed as acts of personal gain or personal revenge. Connelly and Gellately confirmed this with their research, pointing out to various surviving Gestapo files which indicate that people accused their neighbors to gain rights to an apartment, settle a domestic dispute or show party loyalty, among other motives. Gellately stated that Germans denounced Jews more for personal revenge, rather than to support the regime's anti-Semitic policies. Connelly asserted that Germans denounced other Germans more for personal gains, such as apartments.

Another obvious motive would be the anti-Semitic tendencies that ran throughout Germany during the height of the denunciations. Also, fear is another motive behind ordinary Germans accusing each other. As Bernt Engelmann specifically

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[12] Connelly, 928-29.

[13] Connelly, 929-30.

[14] Robert Gellately, "Denunciations in Twentieth Century Germany" Aspects of Self-Policing in the Third Reich and the German Democratic Republic." *Journal of Modern History* 68 (Dec. 1996): 937.

stated in his memoirs, *In Hitler's Germany*, many of those who accused others did it not out of malice or self-interest but because:

> The main thing was that each individual knew or at least suspected how brutally and ruthlessly the regime dealt with anyone who refused to be 'brought into line' or disobeyed any of the thousands of regulations and prohibitions. That's how a small minority succeeded in holding the great majority in check.[15]

The effectiveness of denunciation as a technique appears to stem from the overriding fear of what would happen once the Gestapo arrested the offender. Gellately referred to this fear in, *Gestapo and German Society,* when he reasoned that the fear of being accused led to the lack of public discourse on the increasingly radical nature of the anti-Semitic policies of the Nazis.[16]

While fear controlled many Germans' lives, it did not dissuade every member of society from defying the policies of the Nazis. Despite the level of compliance from Germans during the Nazi regime, a fair number went out of their way not to conform to the policies. Many instances of resistance are found in response to the anti-Semitic regulations. The resistance to these policies ranged from ignoring the boycott of Jewish businesses, to keeping Jews as employees, and to helping Jews escape from Germany. Little thought to personal risk often accompanied such acts of open resistance to the regime.

Some scholars disagree on the extent to which Germans went against the regime. Robert Gellately, in *Gestapo and German Society,* claimed that any opposition was limited to small acts and overall did not have a large effect on the rest of the population, which offered collaboration to the Gestapo through denunciations and accommodation to the policies.[17] Others, such as Engelmann and Nathan Stolzfus, argued that

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[15] Engelmann, 38-41.
[16] Gellately, *Gestapo,* 214.
[17] Ibid.

active opposition against the regime was indeed widespread and effective. Engelmann himself was a resistance worker who helped Jews to escape during the war, and refers to others, who to his knowledge, also participated in hiding or assisting Jews to escape. Nathan Stolzfus devoted his entire study, *Resistance of the Heart*, to the extent of opposition among those who had married Jewish partners. Stolzfus argued that those who intermarried with Jews, both before and after Hitler's rise to power, offered some of the most effective resistance to the regime. The heart of the study is the most important example of this form of opposition, The Rosenstrasse Protest of March 1-6, 1943. During a round up of intermarried Jewish men and their children, the wives of these men staged a protest to get their men released from the Gestapo detention centers. Over the next several days, the largest public protest against Nazi policies grew loud. In the end, Gestapo officials were forced to free those arrested in order to stop the protest. "Mass protest erupted, without organization, because the regime attacked an important tradition [family] . . . the protesters were communicating dissent about the core of Nazi ideology and might soon be raising questions."[18] While the Rosenstrasse Protest marks the only known public protest against the regime, Stolzfus points out that the fact that many German women and men continued to marry Jews, even after the Nuremberg Laws, shows that such attempts at resistance were not rare occurrences.

The Gestapo started to lose control of the populace sometime in the beginning months of 1944, although there are some instances that occurred as early as 1943. More and more acts of non-compliance began to occur as people began to tire of war. The longer the war dragged on, the more the population began to completely ignore the regime's radical policies concerning race. This is evident in the severe drop in accusations in Lower Franconia and Wurzburg, according to Gellately. In this region, the drop in accusations against Jews or Germans helping Jews began in 1944, and is attributed to the

[18] Nathan Stolzfus, *Resistance of the Heart: Intermarriage and the Rosenstrasse Protest in Nazi Germany*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1996), 245.

realization of the populace that the war was grinding to a halt and that the Allies might inflict severe repercussions on the region for their persecution of the Jews.

The decline in denunciations and the increase in non-compliance incidents did not diminish the ruthlessness of the Gestapo. According to Gellately, substantial evidence exists that the Gestapo became even more violent towards policy breakers: "for its part, the Gestapo attempted to enforce policy until the bitter end . . . at the very end, all kinds of people were simply shot out of hand, left in ditches or hanging."[19] From this episode, it is clear that the Gestapo continued to try and maintain order until the very end.

It has been nearly sixty years since the end of World War II, and the word Gestapo still carries an ominous threat. While the group no longer exists, its legacy lives on through the actions of secret police units all over the world. Today, acts of human rights violations are often compared to the actions that the Gestapo assisted the Nazi regime in carrying out. The way in which the Gestapo helped to change individuals' behavior is still astonishing, but given the terror that they instilled, it can be understood. The psychological impact that the Gestapo had on German society is what made them so effective as a police unit, even if only for a short while. Denunciations certainly played a role in making the Gestapo so feared and effective. Without the denunciations, the regime may not have had the control over the population that it did. Domination was the ultimate goal for both the Nazi regime and the Gestapo and through fear that goal, for a time, became a reality.

[19] Gellately, *Gestapo*, 247.