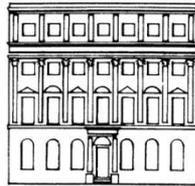


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'Only doing my duty': Defining Perpetrators in Relation to State-Sanctioned Violence

Conference Report

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'Only doing my duty': Defining Perpetrators in Relation to State-Sanctioned Violence. Conference organized by the UCL research group 'Reverberations of the Second World War in Germany and Europe' (Mary Fulbrook, Stephanie Bird, Julia Wagner, and Christiane Wienand) in co-operation with the German Historical Institute London. Held at the GHIL, 9–10 Oct. 2014.

This interdisciplinary workshop set out to investigate what is meant by the term 'perpetrator' in the context of state-sanctioned violence. Mainly drawing on examples taken from the period of the Third Reich and the Holocaust, but moving away from studies primarily concerned with circumstances and motives, the workshop examined the issue of perpetration and its legacies with particular regard to questions of ethics and morality, individual agency and social mobilization, strategies and patterns of self-representation, and intergenerational transmission. The contributions thereby problematized the conceptions of guilt and responsibility of historical actors themselves over time as well as of those (historians, writers, and members of later generations) who are led to engage with evidence of the violence later on.

Providing a short and provocative introduction, Mary Fulbrook (London) drew attention to the risks and attractions of particular understandings of the phenomenon of perpetration. These included the fallacy of motives which simplifies the mechanisms of mass murder by assimilating them to those at work in individually motivated acts (that is, a particular brand of anti-Semitism), selective demonization which allows for the rehabilitation of large numbers, and the temptation of blanket guilt. Instead, Fulbrook advocated a focus on 'the prosaic significance of the system' to help explain both the degree of mobilization at the time and the possibility of later 'defractions of guilt'.

The first session, entitled 'What is a Perpetrator? Interpretations and Self-Understandings', began with a short presentation of film clips by the UK-based documentary filmmaker Luke Holland (Ditchling). He was followed by literary scholar Tim Beasley-Murray (London) who, referring to two French novels, Emmanuel Carrère's *L'Adversaire* and Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, raised the issue of

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empathic identification with the perpetrator. Beasley-Murray argued that by exploring violence and evil we are, in fact, led to face our own proximity to it. This challenges the widely held assumption that what is disturbing about evil is its inhumanity; rather, he argued, it is its humanity that bothers us. Returning to the specific case of state-sanctioned violence, he then stressed the role of the law and emphasized the significance of the difference between subjective and objective violence as put forward by Slavoj Žižek.

The third speaker in this session, the sociologist Iris Wachsmuth (Berlin), explored female participation in the crimes of the Third Reich. She offered a definition of female perpetrators as individuals who 'arbitrarily damaged and impaired the dignity of others in various ways'. On this basis, Wachsmuth has worked with the biographies of a wide range of women in terms of age, status, and occupation, including wives and partners of high-ranking Nazis as well as direct offenders, and analysed how they legitimized their actions retrospectively. Drawing on selected excerpts, Wachsmuth pointed to the diverse and contingent nature of these narratives and shifts in their discourse over time.

The final speaker in this session, the historian Imke Hansen (Uppsala), presented extracts from interviews with survivors of forced labour and concentration camps from Ukraine and Belarus dealing with the issue of local collaboration with the violence sanctioned by the occupational regime. While in some instances members of the local police were described as helpless and vulnerable individuals, in others they appeared to be benefiting from considerable room for manoeuvre, which could be used for either malevolent or benevolent ends. Hansen concluded that taking the perspective of the victims offers a complex picture and raises the question as to whether or not to regard collaboration as perpetration.

The second session, entitled 'Representations and Transmissions', opened with a presentation by the historian Felix Römer (GHIL). Drawing on extracts from the secretly recorded conversations of German prisoners of war in American captivity at Fort Hunt from 1943 to 1945, Römer showed that despite a general absence of remorse and widespread acceptance of the rationale for the crimes committed, there was a notion of 'too much violence' and even a degree of revulsion regarding the methods applied in the Holocaust. This was expressed in the language of shame and morality or silenced

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altogether. In conclusion, Römer argued that a conception of perpetration did exist under the Nazis, and that both the 'myth of the clean *Wehrmacht*' and the silence regarding the Holocaust can be shown to have emerged before 1945. These can be understood as ways of coming to terms with the violence.

The literary scholar Stephanie Bird (London) focused on Jonathan Littell's novel *The Kindly Ones* and its main character, Max Aue, a Nazi official involved in mass murder during the war. Bird drew attention to specific aspects of the narrative, such as Aue's incestuous relationship with his sister and his somatic disturbance, as well as formal aspects of the text, such as the tragic structures running through it. She thereby highlighted the moral complexity of a narrative in which genocide is presented as 'a necessary duty' and National Socialism as 'living law', and yet Aue is at once clearly traumatized and primarily guided by his desire. In conclusion, then, Bird argued that though the novel may be read as a fictional attempt to call a mass murderer to justice, by challenging the ethically privileged status of trauma, the novel also disrupts our comfort as readers and abolishes any fantasy of justice we might have.

Based on her research into the fates of former members of the NSB (the National Socialist Movement in the Netherlands) and their families, the historian Ismee Tames (Amsterdam) challenged the widespread assumption that in the Netherlands after the Second World War, society was clearly split between those who were 'right' and those who were 'wrong', and Dutch collaborators and their children were treated like second-class citizens. She pointed out that the issue of collaboration attracted, at times, significant public attention and, in some cases, lasting respect. Some former members of the NSB did not distance themselves from their past, feeling they had done nothing wrong. Many others, in turn, underwent actual conversions (religious or other) and developed stories of integration linked to a new set of moral values. Finally, although members of the second generation do, indeed, convey stories of victimhood and exclusion, in practice, they constitute one of the most respected groups in the Netherlands today.

For the last paper in this session, the scholar of religious studies Katharina von Kellebach (Maryland) drew on her exploration of selected exchanges between prison chaplains and former Nazi perpetrators in captivity after the war. Kellenbach identified the religious parable of the prodigal, obedient, and lost sons and the trope

of the 'father's house' as a model of redemption and conversion for former perpetrators. Although many of those whose letters she examined did not confess, remained in denial of their guilt, and continued to feel they had only done their duty, for Kellenbach, these sources nevertheless give insight into the religious rituals thought to provide purification for society. In conclusion, she put forward her own preference for a 'composting' rather than a 'cleansing' model for dealing with a poisonous and contaminated past.

The final session, 'Family Histories', brought together Jens-Jürgen Ventzki (Zell am See), the son of the National Socialist wartime mayor of Litzmannstadt, and Naomi Tadmor (Lancaster), the child of survivors from the same city of Łódź in Poland, whose family survived by leaving for Mandate Palestine during the war. Each of the speakers presented an account of their family's history and reflected on their own engagement with this past. In relation to their memorialization activities over the last two decades, both emphasized the importance of seeking knowledge rather than reconciliation, which only serves the perpetrators, and welcomed the open attitude of the younger generation in Poland today to this difficult history.

Over the course of the day, the appropriateness of the use of the term perpetrator – rather than, for instance, persecutor or collaborator – under different circumstances and in different settings was repeatedly questioned, raising awareness of the need for a careful, critical, and nuanced use of terminology. The contentious issue of the possible overlap of victimhood and perpetration was also mentioned. In their different ways, the various contributions and the discussions that ensued exposed the importance of combining a focus on individual acts and motives with a consideration of wider practices, processes, and the results of violence perpetrated. Therein lies the key to understanding the complexity and diversity of the legacies but also to the possibility for comparison across cases. Indeed, as the Argentinian film shown on the eve of the workshop and the frequent references made to it in the discussion the following day showed, it may be worth thinking about what a wider perspective across time and space could bring to bear on the topic of perpetrators and the issue of perpetration.

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