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We live, increasingly, in a surveillance state. We are not the first to do so. Surveillance states are as old as humankind. It is rather the degree of sophistication of that surveillance that sets us apart.

Ours is, also increasingly, a police state, and we witness and ever more episodes of brutal police actions against civilians – often innocent civilians – in our cities and towns, and not only against minorities. Even children are arrested for farcical reasons. “To protect and to serve” seems to have become more of “to harass and frighten.”

This brings me to my topic of discussion today, [The Gestapo: Power and Terror in the Third Reich](#), by Carsten Dams and Michael Stolle, to be published on June 1 by Oxford University Press. This is, as you will see, a very timely book, and for a variety of reasons.

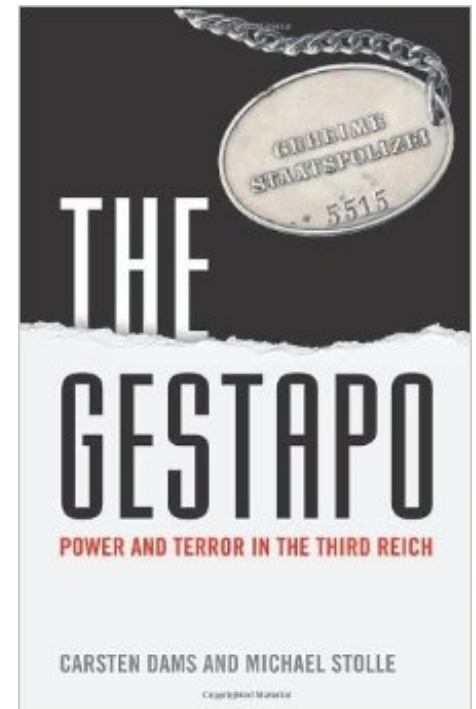
I am not comparing our own law enforcement agencies to the Gestapo, but we have to realize that things are not as they used to be. Governments have always been about control, even when its power originally derives from us. But that control is becoming less and less out of our control, and despite our wishes, less a part of a social contract and less dependent on our tacit approval. One need only look at the Occupy Movement to see where People stand in relation to the government, even with a democratic administration in the White House. Governments should be, if not afraid, then at least cognizant of the will of the people, but the people are also increasingly afraid of the government. This fear is often hyperbolic, particularly when coming from the right, but most people worry about surveillance and police brutality.

Germans were certainly afraid of theirs during the Twelve Year Reich. Carsten Dams and Michael Stolle have produced a high informative and well-written (and organized) introduction to the feared Gestapo. The authors avow that their book is “not intended to provide a comprehensive account, shedding light on all aspects of the subject” but rather to provide a “concise overview, underpinned by the authors’ own research and the now considerable number of scholarly studies.”

They have succeeded admirably in this, and I would add their book to Christian Ingrao’s [Believe & Destroy: Intellectuals in the SS War Machine](#) (2013) and David B. Dennis’ [Inhumanities: Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture](#) (not least because today’s conservatives are also re-interpreting Western culture for political ends), as a must-read, if highly unofficial, trilogy, providing a up-to-date and scholarly examination of National Socialism’s role in culture and society. Together, they serve as a cautionary tale for our time. What has happened before can happen again.

This book takes the reader through the foundation of the Gestapo and it’s early years, moving on to its organizational development. If you enjoy the Berlin Noir genre of fiction, you will find this all very interesting. On a more serious note, in the discussion on the Gestapo as part of a Völkisch (ethnic nationalist) police force, you will see how ridiculous are arguments that Jews and others (including gays) were not really persecuted in the Reich.

In the discussion on the Gestapo’s self-understanding and ideology, you will understand how others could so easily and readily be persecuted, because the Gestapo saw itself as the “doctor to the German national body.” The Gestapo understood itself using biological metaphors like this, which is eerily similar to language coming from the



extreme right today. That is another myth and authors dispel: the enemies of the Nazi regime were of the political left. Four years of persecution took care of the KPD (Communist Party) and SPD (Social Democratic Party). When the war began in September 1939, 4,000 political opponents of the Nazi regime went right to waiting concentration camps. Office IVA of the RSHA (Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Main Security Office) dealt with communism, Marxism, and reaction. Office IVA3 dealt with liberalism and immigrants.

No, Virginia, the National Socialist Party was all right wing, right down to its ethnic nationalist racist roots.

The authors not only examine structure and history but look at the people employed by the Gestapo, from leadership on down and including those working for the Gestapo outside Germany, before moving on to the phases of persecution. It is clear that not only were Jews mass-murdered, but homosexuals and others were persecuted as well, contrary to lies spread by right-wing websites today and books like "The Pink Swastika." As the authors point out, there was a "special department in the Gestapo headquarters that dealt with homosexuality." It might come as a surprise to some that the Nazis took a special interest in church leaders covering up homosexuality and many priests were accused of "acts of indecency."

The Gestapo and the books by Ingrao and Dennis, complement each other well. When Dams and Stolle make the point in their chapter on the Gestapo in Europe that the leadership of the Einsatzgruppen and commandos was "largely composed of academics, many with doctoral degrees – mostly in law" one should turn immediately to Ingrao, who provides a detailed examination of this leadership, their education, and motivations.

You will also learn about the role of informants and denunciations.

In the news right now is how the New York City Police Department sees Muslims as part of a network of police informants. The New York Times reports,

The men, all Muslim immigrants, went through similar ordeals: Waiting in a New York station house cell or a lockup facility, expecting to be arraigned, only to be pulled aside and questioned by detectives. The queries were not about the charges against them, but about where they went to mosque and what their prayer habits were. Eventually, the detectives got to the point: Would they work for the police, eavesdropping in Muslim cafes and restaurants, or in mosques?

There was quite a stir a few years ago with regard to the discovery of Gestapo archives and the role of denunciations in the Third Reich. The authors feel this has been blown out of proportion, though the role they played is undeniable. As they say,

[I]f you consider denunciations to be nothing more than some members of the population openly showing their willingness to inform the official and semi-official authorities of activities that they consider unlawful or possibly hostile to the state, then you have to concede that denunciations can occur at any time in any state in democratic states as much as in pre-democratic or dictatorial systems.

Robert Gallately of Huron College, University of Western Ontario, [has written in his examination of the role of denunciations](#) in twentieth-century Germany that,

Denunciations were tolerated and produced on a greater scale in the Third Reich than (evidently) had been the case in German history until then, in part because the regime sought (like the GDR did later)

| to control and modify more areas of social life than ever before.

Given the Republican culture war agenda, this should be a caution for every liberal. Despite their protestations of big brother's interference in our lives, conservatives envision a federal government so intrusive that, while it ignores the financial irregularities of big corporations and their bought (Republican) politicians, it reaches into our very bedrooms.

The authors have done a superb job here of demonstrating that while Gestapo was a powerful, frightening organization, they were far from omniscient or omnipotent. They made mistakes. They failed to find Jews, and failed to uncover spies and opposition groups.

Finally, we see what happened to the Gestapo after the war, both the flight of their personnel and the persecution of those who were caught. The authors conclude that though the task of de-Nazification was done imperfectly, the "political cleansing was rather effective" where the Gestapo was concerned. Even so, most crimes remained unpunished and some Gestapo personnel went on to have successful careers in post-war Germany, especially those with the proper military or surveillance skill sets.

Best of all, perhaps, this book serves to de-mystify the Gestapo. We see them in movies, we read about them in books, but the real Gestapo has remained largely hidden from our view. If you want a peak behind the curtain, this book is a good place to start.

I like this Unlike I like this article 0 *I dislike this* Undislike This is not for me 0

The Gestapo: Power and Terror in the Third Reich – And Why This Book Matters was written by Hrafnkell Haraldsson for PoliticusUSA.

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About Hrafnkell Haraldsson (1,495 Posts)

Hrafnkell Haraldsson, a social liberal with leanings toward centrist politics has degrees in history and philosophy. His interests include, besides history and philosophy, human rights issues, freedom of choice, religion, and the precarious dichotomy of freedom of speech and intolerance. He brings a slightly different perspective to his writing, being that he is neither a follower of an Abrahamic faith nor an atheist but a polytheist, a modern-day Heathen who follows the customs and traditions of his Norse ancestors. He maintains his own blog, *A Heathen's Day*, which deals with Heathen and Pagan matters, and *Mos Maiorum* Foundation www.mosmaiorum.org, dedicated to ethnic religion. He has also contributed to *NewsJunkiePost*, *GodsOwnParty* and *Pagan+Politics*.
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