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Christian Ingrao, *Believe and Destroy: Intellectuals in the SS War Machine*. Trans. Andrew Brown. New York: Polity, 2013. Pp. xiv, 399. ISBN 978-0-7456-6026-4.

Review by Larry A. Grant, The Citadel (lagrant@sc.rr.com).

In the decades since the Second World War, social scientists and historians have opened several new fields of investigation—genocide studies, specialized Holocaust studies, perpetrator studies, and research into mass violence. Their goal is to explore why people are capable of killing even members of their own communities in large numbers with little remorse. In *Believe and Destroy*,<sup>1</sup> Christian Ingrao (Centre national de la recherche scientifique)<sup>2</sup> has made a significant addition to this body of scholarship.

The book is a study of “eighty university graduates, economists, lawyers, linguists, philosophers, historians and geographers ... within the repressive organizations of the Third Reich, especially the Security Service (SD [Sicherheitsdienst]) of the SS [Schutzstaffel]. Most of them were ... involved in the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews of East Europe...” (vii). It is organized in three parts: the first, “The young men of Germany,” devotes three chapters to the early years and education of Ingrao’s subjects from the First World War roughly through Adolf Hitler’s appointment as chancellor of Germany (January 1933). In the second section, “Joining the Nazis: a commitment,” three chapters examine how the men transitioned from students or activists (or both) to party members or associates (not all formally joined the party initially) as the National Socialists were establishing control of Germany and rearming for war in 1933–39. The final section, “Nazism and violence: the culmination, 1939–1945,” consists of five chapters—more than half the book—on the activities of the eighty individuals during World War II.

*Believe and Destroy* complements and expands on the work of, for example, James Waller,<sup>3</sup> Daniel Goldhagen,<sup>4</sup> and Christopher R. Browning,<sup>5</sup> who tell the stories of the ordinary men who joined in mass killings even though nothing in their prewar backgrounds indicated any particular murderous tendencies. As Browning writes, “The men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 were from the lower orders of German society. They had experienced neither social nor geographic mobility. Very few were economically independent. Except for apprenticeship or vocational training, virtually none had any education after leaving *Volksschule* (terminal secondary school) at age fourteen or fifteen.... [By 1942], a surprisingly high percentage had become Party members,” and, like Ingrao’s group, “all went through their formative period in the pre-Nazi era.... [They] would not seem to have been a very promising group from which to recruit mass murderers on behalf of the Nazi vision of a racial utopia free of Jews.”<sup>6</sup> This last sentence surely seems to most people to be even more applicable to a group of intellectuals.

Ingrao’s detailed study convincingly shows that the social spectrum of perpetrators extended beyond common men to include the literati—“They were handsome, brilliant, clever and cultivated” (vii). Like Browning’s subjects, Ingrao’s group came of age in Weimar Germany, when they learned to fear the fatherland’s encirclement by enemies bent on its destruction, a narrative legitimized by society and the state and “handed down to children and adolescents in primary and secondary schools” (8). Unlike Browning’s po-

1. French ed. *Croire et détruire* (Paris: Fayard, 2010), based on, “Les intellectuels du service de renseignement de la SS, 1900–1945” (diss. Amiens 2001).

2. A specialist in the study of war and conflict, genocide, fascism, and nationalism in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European east, he has previously served as director of the Institut de l’histoire du temps présent. His earlier work includes *The SS Dirlewanger Brigade: The History of the Black Hunters* [2006], trans. Phoebe Green (NY: Skyhorse, 2011).

3. *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*, 2nd ed. (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2007).

4. *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (NY: Knopf, 1996).

5. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (NY: HarperCollins, 1992).

6. *Ibid.* 48.

licemen, after their secondary education, Ingrao's "future SS intellectuals entered university and were faced with the need for [the] geographical mobility" (17) required by the structure of German higher education; they came into "contact with non-German populations and with the controversial borders that emerged from the treaties after 1918" (22) and were exposed to a *völkisch* ideology that played on previously cultivated fears for Germany's future existence.

On these foundations, Ingrao notes, the SS intellectuals of the SD produced by German universities "formed an ideal group for giving [the investigation of Nazism's adversaries] the stamp of objectivity while setting up an academic science fully committed to the Nazi revolution" (95). With German diligence, they created racist justifications for the actions of the "ordinary men" who manned the extermination programs in eastern Europe.

The underlying question here is not why or how certain individuals came to exhibit such monstrous behaviors, but whether evil is an intrinsic part of the human makeup. Some scholars have tried to answer this question by means of scientific assessments of the evidence left by the Nazi experience. Psychiatrist Douglas M. Kelley, in evaluating high-ranking Nazi prisoners like Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring for their mental fitness to stand trial at the Nuremberg tribunal,<sup>7</sup> reached the unsettling conclusion that the rise of the Nazi regime was not the result of the beliefs and actions of a few insane leaders and that any society, even the United States, might create a similarly murderous regime. This was not a popular position to take in 1947.<sup>8</sup>

The questions raised in *Believe and Destroy* recall the controversial research of American psychologist Stanley Milgram in the early 1960s. Milgram, in a famous experiment, attempted to measure the limits of obedience to authority by otherwise ethical individuals. Aware of the excuses given by defendants at Nuremberg to explain their behavior—"just following orders"—Milgram devised an experiment whose subjects were ordered by authority figures to carry out instructions that would cause injury to others. Forced to choose between administering (what they believed were) lethal electrical shocks to others or disobeying orders, very few subjects showed much reluctance to inflict pain on others, even when being begged to stop. That is, Milgram found, normal people will behave atrociously under orders. Others, however, have rejected his conclusions, unwilling to accept that a capacity for amoral behavior might be an inherent human attribute.

Interestingly, all the characteristics exhibited by Ingrao's group of eighty can be identified in other proponents of mass violence movements, for example, members of the al-Qaeda or Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist organizations.<sup>9</sup> The terrorists have often been painted as poor, disadvantaged individuals fighting against real or perceived oppression. But this portrait has been debunked by, for instance, CIA psychiatrist Marc Sageman,<sup>10</sup> who has demonstrated that, like Ingrao's SS men, many leaders of terrorist organizations were educated and came from comfortable, even privileged backgrounds. Many spoke several languages and showed no sign of mental disorders or prior rabid ideological commitments.

*Believe and Destroy* is a dense, thoroughly researched book that does not make for easy reading. Dissertations written for specialists do not always transform well into books for a wider readership. And, too, in this case, the English translation may not present Ingrao's thoughts as coherently as the French original. The book would also benefit greatly from a more carefully prepared index and a more complete glossary.<sup>11</sup>

The dissonance in Ingrao's subtitle, "*Intellectuals in the SS War Machine*," stays with the reader. How could any civilized, well-educated person have associated himself with so repellent an organization as the

7. See 22 *Cells in Nuremberg: A Psychiatrist Examines the Nazi Criminals* (NY: Greenberg, 1947).

8. G.M. Gilbert argued strongly against such a conclusion in *Nuremberg Diary* (NY: Farrar Straus, 1947).

9. The parallels extend to images of perpetrators and their victims: the cover of Ingrao's book shows an executioner—one of the German intellectuals—pointing a pistol at the back of the head of a kneeling man; all too familiar present-day news stories feature a gun- or knife-wielding terrorist killer posing behind a kneeling prisoner.

10. See his *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: U Penn Pr, 2004).

11. E.g., the term *Gegnerforschung* (the study of opponents), used more than once in the text, gets a single *incorrect* page reference in the index and does not appear at all in the glossary.

SS? For all their insights into that question, neither Christian Ingrao nor other historians have been able to provide any comforting answer. If intellectuals, learned men of letters, people skilled in thought and reason, can willingly participate in mass murder and terrorism, what protects the people of any society, however progressive, from doing the same? The evidence gathered in *Believe and Destroy* suggests that nothing does.