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Catherine Epstein, *Model Nazi: Arthur Greiser and the Occupation of Western Poland*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010. Pp. xv, 451. ISBN 978-0-19-945641-1.

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Genocide defines our understanding of the Third Reich and the Second World War and investigations into the role of its perpetrators constitute an academic subfield in their own right. Since Hannah Arendt's famous ruminations on the "banality of evil,"¹ images of Nazi mass murderers have ranged from cruel psychopaths to soulless careerists, fanatical racists, rational technocrats, and "ordinary men."² But historical scholarship has failed to explain the complex motivations of these perpetrators. In her fascinating new book, Catherine Epstein (Amherst College) drives this point home by exploring the life of a man who stood at the epicenter of the National Socialist order in Eastern Europe but resists easy classification into conventional categories.

The "model Nazi," Arthur Greiser, was wartime governor of the Warthegau, the largest Polish territory annexed by Germany in 1939. Under his supervision, the region became a testing ground for experiments in demographic engineering and the industrialized mass murder of Europe's Jews. Yet, despite the crucial significance of the Warthegau for the study of German racial and occupation policy during the Second World War, Epstein's is the first scholarly biography of Greiser.

The narrative traces Greiser's life from childhood to his execution for war crimes in 1946, focusing on the Second World War. If not a typical perpetrator, Greiser was a typical Nazi satrap—an "oft-found combination of decency and cruelty, culture and barbarity, sentimentality and brutality" (9). Aggressive and paranoid, he was a master of the relentless political infighting so characteristic of the Third Reich, constantly seeking to expand his power while jealously guarding existing prerogatives. Reputed to be a man of strong personality (*Persönlichkeit*), he indulged in bombastic public displays of grandiloquence and an absurdly luxurious lifestyle. He also repeatedly demeaned local Poles and Jews with chilling racist invective, and ordered or allowed policies he knew would kill many of them. Much like his counterpart Hans Frank, head of the region known as the General Government in eastern Poland, Greiser fancied himself a feudal duke lordling it over an inferior native population.

Epstein contends that an ever-present fear of being perceived as insufficiently fanatical led Greiser to adopt the identity of a super-Nazi, a hardliner who would always push the envelope of ideological extremism. His Party membership number—166,635—attests that he was no *Alter Kämpfer* (old fighter), a veteran of the long struggle for power. Göring initially thought him too moderate, and he never achieved more than a distant relationship with Hitler. More critically, his façade of zeal masked personal demons: "Greiser's political dilemmas were exacerbated by his fragile personality. He was not the hard and tough man of Nazi stereotype. Instead, he was vulnerable to anxiety and depression" (111). The constant need to play the true Nazi combined with psychological insecurities shaped Greiser's behavior. However, before 1939 he gave little indication of the ruthless character his rule in the Warthegau was to assume.

The process of becoming a Nazi remains central to Epstein's analysis, and in this respect her arguments echo those of Peter Fritzsche.³ While his early years influenced the kind of Nazi Greiser became, they did not determine that he would become a Nazi. He fought in the First World War and belonged to the so-called Front Generation; though a conservative nationalist, he was not a hardcore right-winger. In 1919, he

1. See Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil (1963; rpt. NY: Penguin, 2006).

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

3. *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2008), with William Astore's review at *MiWSR* 2010.01.03 <www.miwsr.com/rd/1041.htm>.

chose the Freemasons instead of the *Freikorps*. He evinced no discernible racial prejudices when he worked with Jews and Poles during the Weimar period as the manager of a moderately successful import business in Danzig, the “Free City” immortalized in Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum*.⁴

Greiser showed a remarkable capacity for reinventing himself and falsifying his past. In the early 1930s, he “became a Nazi, in every sense of the word,” and “adopted Nazi tenets and categories to interpret his goals and strivings ... [and] refashioned his life—his attitudes, his politics, and his relationships—to fit his movement” (49). If he originally joined the NSDAP as an opportunist, he quickly became a true believer. He belied the image of perpetrators who could maintain discrete identities as both murderers and everyday individuals. Greiser’s politics seeped into his family life. He divorced his first wife, Ruth, because he thought her unsuitable for a Nazi big shot and framed the death of his son, Erhardt, as a heroic sacrifice for National Socialism in the eulogy he delivered on the eve of the Second World War. In short, Germany became his *raison d’être*, the focal point of an ultimately self-destructive personal crusade.

His service in the National Socialist Party radicalized Greiser’s worldview. As Senate President in Danzig during the prewar years, he first squared off with his archrival, the local *Gauleiter* Albert Forster. His time in this hotbed of Nazi political intrigue taught him that, in the chaotic, dog-eat-dog institutional structure of the Third Reich, radicalism often brought advancement: “Greiser went through a political schooling; he graduated as a hyper-nationalist, an inveterate schemer, and a tough political opponent” (84). Whereas he played the moderate to Forster’s radical in 1930s Danzig, they reversed roles during the war. Just to the north of the Warthegau, Forster reigned over the enlarged district of Danzig-West Prussia, where anti-Polish persecution was less extreme (though he had no qualms about shipping local Jews to their deaths). Greiser and Forster clashed again and again over methods of governance. Forster had Hitler’s ear; Greiser did not. His tenuous political status and super-Nazi persona explain why, unlike the majority of the regional Party bosses, he actively cooperated with Himmler and the SS.

Nevertheless, Hitler certainly chose Greiser to run the territory for good reason. He had grown up in Posen (Poznań), a locus of nationality conflict during the days of the Kaisers. The town lay within Germany’s borders before the First World War, within Poland’s afterward, and right in the heart of the newly created Warthegau in 1939. Greiser was a Nazi from a borderland area rife with ethnic tensions between Germans and Slavs. He could, therefore, be expected to enact violent nationality policies in the boundlessly racist spirit of National Socialism. Though his sincere and visceral hatred of Poles did not develop until his conversion to Nazism, Greiser crafted a pedigree for himself in 1939 as a lifelong nationalist activist fighting on the frontier. While he had not in fact grown up despising Poles, his birthplace fit a commonly accepted trope of National Socialist lore: as a “child of the East,” he took a vengefully brutal stance toward the local population throughout the war. Indeed, Greiser’s anti-Polish animus distinguished him from other Nazi leaders: nowhere outside the Warthegau in occupied Europe could one find such a vast and bewildering panoply of initiatives meant to immiserate, denationalize, and destroy a people.

The Warthegau served as a model in a dual sense. Although Nazi functionaries in other territories adopted many of Greiser’s brutal policies, he surpassed them in attempting to fulfill Hitler’s mandate to transform conquered Slavic territory into a paradigm of economic productivity and ethnically purified German space. He obsessively pursued the Nazi Germanization policy, “a many-sided project that would include the reconstruction of the region, the immediate removal of all Polish and Jewish influence, and the transformation of the population through ethnic cleansing and genocide” (130). In the Warthegau, Greiser envisioned great architectural and infrastructural feats while his subordinates deported, enslaved, or shot thousands of Poles, enforced strict ethnic segregation, and sought to eradicate Polish language and culture from the public sphere. In addition, he also “used radical racial policies to accumulate additional personal powers and to strengthen his radical Nazi credentials” (193). Whether ideological fervor or pragmatic careerism motivated him, his Germanization project was consistently murderous.

4. Newly translated into English by Breon Mitchell (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2009; orig. 1959); a film adaptation, dir. Volker Schlöndorff, appeared in 1979 (Argos Films).

Greiser's role in the Holocaust bolsters Epstein's impressions: "the fact that Greiser immediately radicalized measures against Jews on arrival in the Warthegau shows his commitment to Nazi ideology. It also suggests that he now viewed anti-Semitism as an important arena in which he could remake his reputation" (168). While in Danzig, Greiser had been remarkably evenhanded in dealing with the local Jewish community, feeling it would be unwise to stir up foreign recrimination over an international city run by the League of Nations. Other evidence also indicates a lack of anti-Semitic inclination before 1939. Once he was ruler of the Warthegau, however, Jews problematized his ambitious Germanization program by their very presence. In the fall of 1941, the Łódź ghetto already contained hundreds of thousands of impoverished and emaciated Polish Jews, and Hitler expected Greiser to house thousands more of their German brethren awaiting deportation from the Reich.

Although Greiser voiced typical Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda, his desire to murder Jews was probably not the result of long-held ideological views about the Jewish "enemy." Rather, Greiser made his decision at a particular time, in a particular situation. The heated circumstances of war and occupation. The closed atmosphere of high-level consultations. The terrible housing shortage brought on by resettlement. The lack of any real solution to demographic "problems." The financial pressures of the ghetto. The desire to profile himself with Himmler and Hitler.... Finally, his calculations may have reflected his insecurities about his place in the Nazi regime; he wanted to prove that he was a true Nazi (186).

To maintain his persona as a hard-line National Socialist and alleviate the local "Jewish question" (*Judenfrage*), Greiser initiated the first systematic policy for murdering Jews in stationary gas chambers at Chelmno in collaboration with the SS and personnel from the T4 euthanasia program—"an excellent example of a mid-level Nazi official who shaped the Final Solution in his territory and, in the process, more generally radicalized murderous policy toward Jews in Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe" (182). Here too, the Warthegau proved a model *Gau*.

Epstein draws on an impressive array of personal papers, correspondence, and government documents to depict Greiser's personality and his position in the context of Hitler's empire. Her control of such primary sources as well as an extensive secondary literature enables her to debunk the myths of Greiser's self-fabricated past as well as inaccuracies in the work of postwar historians. Her prose is at times playful, at times profound, and almost always compelling. She contributes an innovative interpretation of Nazi racial policy by her close attention to the role of borderland ethnic tensions in producing men like Greiser and inspiring their genocidal designs. She does a great service to the field with her astute breakdown of the normative models commonly used to explain how Germans became National Socialism's executioners. Without rejecting previous interpretations, Epstein shows why these perpetrators defy neat classification. After all, Greiser became a "model Nazi" precisely because he distinguished himself from the typical power-brokers of the Third Reich.