

The Problem of Nazi Identity and Representation after 1945

Processing Defeat

A new phase in the representation of Nazi characters began at the end of the Second World War. The collapse of the Third Reich necessitated an ideological reorientation among Nazis and Nazi supporters. The memoir of the former Commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höß (1900–1947), written in 1946 and published as *Kommandant in Auschwitz: autobiographische Aufzeichnungen* (1958), is a striking example of an individual's refusal to revise his views to fit the new reality.¹ Similar to Heinrich Himmler in his diary, Höß rationalized his entire career in a self-glorifying self-portrait. He provides a chronicle of the death camp of Auschwitz that is exemplary of his intransigence, even though his career and life of privilege had ended.² Less prominent authors with Nazi affiliations were usually careful not to disclose their involvement with the defeated regime and avoided references to Nazi personalities in their writing. Exile authors holding on to the notion of a “better” Germany and the distinction between Germans and Nazis configured redeemable Nazi figures, contrasting them with base fanatics. Some authors who had grown up in Nazi Germany exhibited divided loyalties, as evidenced by their ambiguous characterizations of low-ranking Nazi characters while condemning the Nazi leadership.

This final chapter examines texts that follow the three basic options available at the end of the war: intransigence and denial, silence and moving ahead, or confronting and processing the past. Death camp commandant Rudolf Höß's memoir is paradigmatic of the attitude of denial that many former Nazis displayed at the Nuremberg Trials and later Nazi trials. In contrast, journalist Marta Hillers implies in her memoir an eagerness to leave the past behind and go on with her life. Young Ingeborg Bachmann, who grew up in a Nazi-friendly environment in small-town Austria, learned from a British soldier the truth about National Socialism and embarked upon a life-long journey of critical fact-finding and self-reflection.

1 Höß, *Auschwitz*, 5.

2 Witte and Tyas, *Himmler's Diary 1945*.

The Memoir of Auschwitz Commandant Rudolf Höß

By May of 1945, Germans understood that the victorious Allies would not tolerate continued expressions of allegiance to the Third Reich. Only the most fanatical or least-informed individuals refused to acknowledge the new reality. The major defendants at the Nuremberg Trials held by the Allies after the Second World War were among the unrepentant. The most notorious Nazi leaders, including Hitler, Göbbels, and Himmler, had committed suicide or, like Hitler's successor Martin Bormann, had fled the country. Göring, the Commander of the German Air Force (*Luftwaffe*), eventually killed himself after trying to play a star role at the trial. Rudolf Hess, Hitler's former secretary, his architect Albert Speer, and Baldur von Schirach, among others, served sentences in Spandau prison. Having remained in the public eye, they had little choice but to disavow the legality of the Allied military tribunal, declaring Allied judges unqualified to rule on acts committed during the Third Reich.

The autobiographical notes of the former Commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Franz Ferdinand Höß, cover the years 1900–1947.³ The self-characterization in the memoir reads like a case study of the stereotypical Nazi male. There are obvious parallels in the trajectory of Höß's self-narrative and Hitler's personal account in *Mein Kampf*. Both authors tell from-rags-to-riches stories and style themselves as self-made men. Höß, the son of a civil servant, appears to have resorted to intransigence early in life as a survival tool in his oppressive birth-family. While still a teenager, he ran away from home and enlisted in the military to serve in the First World War. Thereafter, he joined a *Freikorps*, spent some time in jail, and eventually signed up for the Death Head ss in charge of the concentration camp system. He achieved the rank of an *ss Obersturmbannführer* (lieutenant colonel) and served as the Commandant of Auschwitz from 1940 to 1943. In a supervisory position, he helped to coordinate the deportation of the Jews of Hungary. After the German surrender, he assumed a false identity, was captured by the British, and made a witness statement at the Nuremberg Trial. In 1946–47, he stood trial in Cracow and was executed by hanging in Auschwitz in 1947. While awaiting his execution, he wrote the extensive report about his life and career which will be discussed here.

Steven Paskuly, editor of the English translation of Höß's memoir titled *Death Dealer*, writes that Höß, by his own admission, had been the "greatest mass murderer of all time," and apparently took pride in having been in charge of the operations of Auschwitz-Birkenau.⁴ Höß obviously did not grasp the

3 Citations are to Höß, *Auschwitz*. Translations follow Paskuly, *Death Dealer* (trans. Andrew Pollinger).

4 Paskuly, 19.