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The Frankfurt School at War

The Marxists Who Explained the Nazis to Washington

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Secret Reports on Nazi Germany: The Frankfurt School Contribution to the War Effort

BY FRANZ NEUMANN, HERBERT MARCUSE, AND OTTO KIRCHHEIMER. EDITED BY RAFFAELE LAUDANI. Princeton University Press, 2013, 704 pp. \$45.00.

War makes for strange bedfellows. Among the oddest pairings that World War II produced was the bringing together of William “Wild Bill” Donovan, head of the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS)—a precursor to the CIA—and a group of German Jewish Marxists he hired to help the United States understand the Nazis.

Donovan was a decorated veteran of World War I and a Wall Street lawyer linked to the Republican Party. In 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt tapped him to create the United States’ first dedicated nonmilitary intelligence organization. At that time, many in

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the foreign policy establishment saw intelligence and espionage as somewhat undignified, even unimportant. So Donovan cast a wide net, recruiting not only diplomats and professional spies but also film directors, mobsters, scholars, athletes, and journalists.

Even in that diverse group, Franz Neumann stood out. Neumann, a Marxist lawyer and political scientist, had fled Germany when the Nazis came to power in 1933. He arrived in the United States a few years later, where he was hailed as an expert on Nazi Germany after the 1942 publication of his book *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism*, which depicted Nazism as a combination of pathological, monopolistic capitalism and brutal totalitarianism. Neumann’s work brought him to the attention of Donovan, who was eager to mobilize relevant expertise regardless of its bearer’s political views.

Donovan put Neumann in charge of the Research and Analysis Branch of the OSS, studying Nazi-ruled central Europe. Neumann was soon joined by the philosopher Herbert Marcuse and the legal scholar Otto Kirchheimer, his colleagues at the left-wing Institute for Social Research, which had been founded in Frankfurt in 1923 but had moved to Columbia University after the Nazis came to power. What came to be known as the Frankfurt School combined an unorthodox brand of Marxism with an interdisciplinary approach to research that stressed the pivotal roles played by culture, law, politics, and psychology in buttressing injustice. Its members always disdained the more rigid leftist thinking that had claimed Marx’s mantle in the Soviet Union and elsewhere.

Despite the vast political and cultural gap separating Donovan from Neumann and his team, the spymaster trusted the radicals with the vital security task of providing advice about the Nazis. In the words of John Herz, another young refugee assigned to Neumann's office (and later a major figure in postwar international relations theory), "It was as though the left-Hegelian World Spirit had briefly descended on the Central European Department of the oss."

The result of this unusual collaboration was a series of fascinating reports prepared for U.S. policymakers on topics ranging from anti-Semitism and the Nazi political economy to the impact of air raids on civilian morale and the best way to prosecute war criminals. Despite their backgrounds in such abstract fields as jurisprudence, philosophy, and political theory, the Frankfurt School thinkers turned out to be shrewd and down-to-earth political analysts. Yet their reports also point to the limits of wartime policy advising, the difficulty of applying theory to practice, and the sobering reality that even astute prognosticators are likely to remain imprisoned in the political past.

BACK TO SCHOOL

Much of this story has already been told, but this new volume—ably assembled by Raffaele Laudani, a young Italian historian based at the University of Bologna—conveniently collects a substantial chunk of the original documents penned by Neumann and his research team. Although German translations of some of this oss material have been published before, this is the first time that an Anglophone audience can read the documents without having to

visit a U.S. National Archives facility in Maryland.

Neither lifeless bureaucratic memos nor jargon-ridden academic tomes, the reports still make for good reading. To be sure—bearing in mind, of course, the luxury of hindsight—Neumann and his colleagues sometimes got things wrong. They never really understood the true depth of Nazi anti-Semitism, seeing it less as a political pathology than as a way for the Nazi regime to test new repressive strategies on one group before employing them on others. Relying on Neumann's *Behemoth*, which depicted modern capitalism as Nazism's main basis, they argued that the revitalization of German democracy depended on a socialist overhaul of the country's economy, failing to anticipate the possibility of a fresh recalibration of capitalism with liberal democracy, along the lines that emerged after the war in the Federal Republic of Germany and elsewhere.

But they also got many things right. Their assessment of political and social conditions during Nazism's final years has been substantially corroborated by a great deal of more recent scholarship. The group's criticisms of U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau's plan to dismantle modern industrial Germany, foolishly endorsed by Roosevelt and forced on a skeptical Winston Churchill, might have played some role in President Harry Truman's eventual decision to abandon it. In one of his reports, Kirchheimer presciently identified the legal difficulties that would ultimately face the United States when it came time to punish war criminals and expunge Germany of Nazi influence. Although he and his colleagues ultimately were disappointed by the Nuremberg trials

and by what Herz later bitterly described as “the fiasco of denazification,” both of which they deemed insufficiently far-reaching, their OSS reports nevertheless provided much of the theoretical basis for the U.S. approach to postwar justice in Germany.

Most revealing, though, is the general advice that frames the Frankfurters’ message to U.S. policymakers: the Allies needed to stop viewing Nazi Germany through old lenses molded during World War I. Only if the United States grasped how contemporary realities broke with familiar historical precedents could it win the peace and lay the groundwork for a new German democracy. Neumann and his team excoriated U.S. policymakers for relying on anachronistic wartime images of Germany as “Prussian” and dominated by a military elite, as though the country were still ruled by the Kaiser. Backward-looking propaganda might gin up public support for the war in the Allied countries, but it falsified the realities of the Nazi power structure.

The Frankfurt School thinkers also feared that by mistaking the Germany of 1945 for the Germany of 1918, the Allies would fail to appreciate the ways in which the Nazis had made it unlikely that ordinary Germans would accept the kind of humiliating surrender they had suffered at the end of World War I. As Marcuse wrote in a report in September 1943, “The system of National Socialism has been devised for the very purpose of making a repetition of 1918 impossible.” The Frankfurters argued that the Nazis’ radical anti-Semitism was an attempt to guarantee the complicity of the broadest possible swath of the populace in Nazi crimes. With their hands dripping with blood,

most Germans would likely see no real choice but to fight to the death against the Allies. Even if some evidence coming out of Germany suggested that wartime morale was low, the Nazis were doing everything possible to make sure that ordinary Germans had every incentive to stay the course.

SEEING 1945, THINKING 1918

Curiously, the Frankfurters occasionally failed to heed their own warnings about the perils of relying on misleading historical analogies. The most obvious example is their inability to foresee the possibility that a new and relatively robust German democracy—built on a foundation of regulated capitalism combined with a generous welfare state—could arise after the war. The Frankfurt scholars also worried incessantly about a possible replay of the crises of 1918, when the victorious Allies forced an unpopular peace on a new parliamentary German government dominated by moderate Social Democrats, making them easy targets for antidemocratic groups. In order to maintain order and neutralize the uprisings inspired partly by the Bolsheviks, the Social Democrats cut a series of deals and turned to traditional forces in the army and the reactionary paramilitary *Freikorps* to put an end to the unrest. The result was not only deep divisions on the political left that eased the way for Nazism but also a political system in which the bureaucracy and the military remained in the stranglehold of groups hostile to democracy and social reform. As Neumann argued in *Behemoth*, this cancerous antidemocratic “antistate” within the Weimar Republic eventually helped kill it off in 1933.

Yet despite their own warnings about relying on images of 1918, the Frankfurters succumbed to the same error by failing to acknowledge Nazism's total decimation of civil society. Germany in 1945 witnessed none of the social upheavals that shook the country after World War I. The Frankfurt intellectuals' Marxist faith in working-class resistance and militancy kept them from fully grasping the extent of Hitler's successful obliteration of even the barest rudiments of political opposition.

The preoccupation with 1918 also explains the Frankfurters' views about how best to end the war and promote German democracy. Their reports exude anxiety about the prospect that the Nazis might successfully exploit divisions between the Allies and so prevent Germany's total military defeat. Such a short-circuiting of the war, they argued, would prove counterproductive since it would lead to a replay of Germany's last defeat: powerful antidemocratic groups would remain in place. If the Americans and the British made a separate peace with groups within the German military willing to depose Hitler, it would only be a matter of time before the country's familiar political pathologies resurfaced. As Marcuse warned, such a deal might even play out to the Russians' advantage, since the West would lose any credibility with a German populace likely to demand radical political and social change, as it had in 1918.

The key to uprooting Nazism's foundations, the Frankfurters argued, was Allied military and political unity. Only the Allies' combined muscle could smash the pillars of Nazi power—and German militarism—once and for all. To help Germany make a clean start

this time around, the Allies would need to fully occupy the country and round up the elites responsible for the crimes of the Third Reich. The Nazi Party would have to be banned and its leaders tried and imprisoned. Should the jails prove already full, Kirchheimer recommended, the Nazis could be temporarily housed in their own former concentration camps. Meanwhile, the Allies would also have to rid the bureaucracy of all authoritarian influences. Since big business not only used Nazi slave labor but had actively supported the regime and its imperialist policies, top industrialists should also be subject to strict denazification. As for the military elites directly involved in war crimes, they should face tribunals. And Germany, the Frankfurters urged, should never again be permitted to develop into a military power.

Whatever the virtues of their specific proposals, only some of which were ever partially implemented, the Frankfurters at least identified a perennial challenge facing occupiers after the defeat of a dictatorship: How can a foreign military government help dismantle authoritarianism and promote democracy without usurping those tasks properly left to indigenous democratic groups? Neumann's team wanted an Allied military government to clean the political slate, allowing German democrats to create a new order. Not surprisingly, the reports show that the Frankfurt analysts struggled to figure out how this could best be accomplished. Firmly committed to the Marxist thesis that modern capitalism constituted a root cause of Nazism, they wanted the Allies to prepare the way for the nationalization of German heavy industry. Yet the reports also suggest that the Frankfurt School advisers were not quite sure

about who should pursue this nationalization or when it was best to do so.

Their own leftist political agenda meshed, or so the Frankfurt scholars conveniently hoped, with the imperatives of wartime power politics. The Allied unity that the Frankfurters argued for would require that any joint postwar military government “embrace elements from both Anglo-American and Soviet social structure and practice,” as Neumann argued in a revealing September 1944 memo. Assuming that the alliance would survive the war’s conclusion, he advised Donovan that a stable military government could rest only on reform ideas fusing Anglo-American democracy with socialist economics. Power politics demanded what he and his Frankfurt School compatriots had always desired: a democratic socialist Germany. This assessment quickly proved mistaken, not least because of the explosive divisions between the West and the Soviets that soon emerged. As the increasingly frustrated Frankfurt scholars quickly grasped, their leftist vision was destined to have little impact on postwar U.S. policy or the remaking of Germany.

THE SECRET SHARER

The Frankfurt School’s role in wartime intelligence had almost been forgotten when, in the 1990s, the U.S. government declassified Soviet intelligence cables intercepted and deciphered in the 1940s by the United States and the United Kingdom as part of the so-called Venona Project. Some of the cables suggest that Neumann, operating under the code name “Ruff,” had passed along U.S. government secrets to Soviet agents. Although Laudani mentions the controversy, he seems reluctant to discuss it, as have

been many others sympathetic to the Frankfurt School.

Laudani’s caution is understandable yet unfortunate. Neumann was a life-long social democrat whose writings evince neither sympathy for Soviet communism nor any whiff of the fellow-traveling commonplace among radicals during the 1930s and 1940s. During the Cold War, he spoke out against Soviet tyranny in East Germany, helping establish the Free University of Berlin as a bulwark against the Sovietization of intellectual life in Germany’s great metropolis. Alarmed by the specter of a separate peace between the Soviets and the Germany military no less than the possibility of one between the West and right-wing elites, his oss intelligence reports exhibit no affinity for Soviet communism.

So why then might Neumann have shared secret documents with the Soviets? The oss reports point to one possible explanation. The most interesting materials he passed to the Soviets speak directly to a concern that also surfaces in the Frankfurters’ oss contributions: that the wartime alliance could prematurely fall apart, and antidemocratic groups in Germany might finesse a deal with the West that prevented Germany’s total defeat and again left the pillars of German authoritarianism basically unharmed. “Ruff” shared secret oss reports about a May 1944 meeting in Switzerland between an oss official, Allen Dulles (who would later head the CIA), and a retired German general who told Dulles that the German military might overthrow Hitler and clear occupied western Europe of German troops as part of a deal with the Allies in which Germany would be permitted to continue

waging war against the Soviet Union. Ironically, Soviet intelligence mistakenly classified the report from “Ruff” as disinformation. The meeting did in fact take place, but despite Neumann’s apparent efforts to warn the Soviets, they ignored him.

To judge from the Venona cables and Neumann’s work for the oss, it appears that Neumann engaged in espionage not as a result of naiveté or illusions about Soviet communism but because he believed that only Allied unity and Soviet participation in bringing the war to a successful close could save democracy in Germany while leaving open some chance of radical social reform. Of course, given what soon happened wherever Stalin’s armies arrived, this view now inevitably seems misguided.

THEORY HEADS

Today, the Frankfurt School is widely associated with hostility to empiricism and even to science. On university campuses, its aficionados are typically found in literature and cultural studies departments, but not in economics, law, or political science. It is true that the most prominent Frankfurt School figures, the social philosopher Theodor Adorno and the cultural critic Walter Benjamin, had little patience for the sort of hard-headed research featured in the oss reports. But the publication of those reports should serve as a reminder of the Frankfurt School’s neglected face, as represented by the enigmatic Neumann and his oss colleagues, for whom rigorous empirical inquiry always constituted a core component of what they called the “critical theory of society.”

Their work for the oss also highlights the prospects, as well as the perils, of

any attempt to harness such research to government policymaking. Stepping directly into the political arena, the Frankfurters were forced to take risks generally spared those who remain safely cloistered in the academy. For his part, Donovan also gambled by tapping a group of foreign-born radicals to handle an important job for U.S. intelligence.

The Frankfurt thinkers’ own ideological and political preferences sometimes got in the way of providing sound policy advice. And in Neumann’s case, those preferences led to an unfortunate interlude with Soviet agents. Yet as the philosopher Raymond Geuss points out in his foreword to the book, present-day policymaking is plagued by “intellectual conformism,” and Geuss is right to worry about how intellectual standards for government analysis have sunk. It is worth wondering how many high-level officials in today’s Washington would bother to listen to scholarly advice drawn from outside the political and intellectual mainstream. 🌐