
It is facile to believe that facts speak for themselves. Generally facts are produced to make a point or to buttress an argument, especially when it comes to historical research and analysis. In this case we are faced with a great deal of solid historical research on the Nazi Party in pre-war London and virtually no analysis. All in all this whole book gives the appearance of a lengthy memo for MI5, British home intelligence. At the time, when Britain was faced with the threat of war, this would have been very useful, if only for the many names and exact whereabouts of people who might serve as a fifth column in the event of an invasion. Instead of a bibliography the authors have attached an appendix which lists some 350 Party members: names, addresses, date of birth, occupation, length of stay in Britain, Party membership number and date of joining, internment, yes or no. This information has been gathered from the Berlin Document Centre, now part of the German Federal Archives, where all files on Party members are stored.

Today most of this kind of information, for instance on the various Party headquarters, is perfectly useless unless it can be demonstrated that all these activities described in tedious detail served a political purpose or sinister plot beyond the aims mentioned in the Party’s official charter, that is, to found and organize a political home for German Nazis abroad under the umbrella of the Auslandsorganisation der NSDAP (AO) headed by Ernst Bohle. The ordinary reader might be thrilled to learn about real-life Nazis getting up to mischief in pre-war London. However, this does not satisfy the professional historian who might, for instance, want to know whether the British Landesgruppe of the Nazi party figured prominently in any way, for instance, within the institutional infighting of the various Nazi organizations, or in the context of Anglo-German relations during the period of appeasement. However, notwithstanding the wealth of police intelligence, the reader cannot help feeling that the Nazis in pre-war London constituted but a quantité négligeable from whatever point of view one looks at them. Figures are perhaps most revealing: the small number of Party members, sympathizers, and opportunists
(approximately 1,000–1,500) in relation to the vast majority of German citizens (approximately 20,000 before Reichskristallnacht in 1938) or British nationals of German origin. By 1940 this figure had swollen to some 70,000, the great majority of them refugees (approximately 55,000) from Nazi Germany who, of course, did not wish to have anything to do with the Nazi Party in Britain. By that time Party members had left the country or were interned for the rest of the war. Nor did the British government seem to have been greatly concerned about another fascist fringe of foreign nationals as long as they did not meddle with British politics or seek to collaborate with the British Union of Fascists. In this respect the Nazi Party in Britain went out of its way not to give offence, in accordance with orders from Hamburg (AO headquarters) and Berlin. Occasional questions in Parliament or newspaper articles insinuating a threat to national security did not cause the government any headaches except for one aspect: allegations of harassment of decent German citizens by proselytizing Nazi fanatics. Nor are there any indications that Hitler or Ribbentrop had any ambitious plans for the Nazi Party in Britain. Their embassy in London can have left them in no doubt as to the political insignificance of this group of loyalists. Their interest was primarily a negative one: to keep them out of trouble in their guest country. Because of the book’s exclusive focus on Nazi club life in London, the reader learns nothing about Hitler’s plans for England, a subject on which there is a substantial amount of historical literature. This would have put the main subject of the book into proper perspective.

The authors should at least be given credit for having exhausted the source material on their chosen subject. Readers of this review are therefore entitled to a summary of the contents, which will give them an idea of what it is all about. The book starts off with Hans Wilhelm Thost, the first correspondent of the Völkischer Beobachter, the Nazi Party daily, establishing himself in London at the end of 1930, shortly after the spectacular Nazi electoral victory. ‘Whether he could become a mediator between the two nations’, the authors tell us, ‘depended on the tone of his articles’ (p. 19). However, although they reproduce his correspondence with Alfred Rosenberg, the paper’s chief editor, not one single article is traced or analysed. In fact, we do not learn anything about London in the 1930s as viewed by German ex-pats, whatever their political affiliation. A year later Thost rose to become the first leader of the newly established London Ortsgruppe
of the NSDAP, the main event of this year being a week-long visit by Rosenberg. The following year Thost was reprimanded by his boss for giving a lecture to the Anglo-German Club in Oxford. German representatives, he was told, should refrain from spreading the Nazi gospel in Britain: publicity should be avoided like the plague for fear of alienating British authorities. Berlin knew perfectly well that the longed-for friendship with Britain could only be jeopardized by Nazi zealots in London. However, this aspect is not pursued by the authors. Instead the appointment of a new leader, Otto Bene, and the frustrating search for permanent headquarters are given full coverage (chs. 3 and 4), as are his activities in rallying the faithful to the cause by organizing dances, church fêtes, and the like. One circular letter detailing dates and places of meetings is reproduced in full length and provides ample evidence of the pathetic innocence and irrelevance of the London Nazis. At one of these meetings Bene told his parishioners ‘that it is strictly forbidden for any Nazi to discuss or to participate in English politics and particularly they were not to fraternise with members of Fascist organisations here such as the British Fascists’ (p. 19).

However, this did not prevent the British press from insinuating that the London Ortsgruppe was ‘a center of espionage and subversion’ (p. 29). Instead of exploding this myth the authors list every such alarming news item and give the impression that ‘the reality was much more subtle’ (p. 29), thus suggesting that the reader had better be on his guard. Two whole chapters are then devoted to the expulsion of Thost and Bene. Thost was involved in an encounter which could be construed as espionage and a pretext for getting rid of an unsavoury Nazi journalist. As for Bene, the Foreign Office refused to acknowledge the promotion of a Nazi Party official to Consul-General. Eventually he was transferred to this position in Milan. The transition from Party official to civil servant was the best thing that could happen to any Nazi: it would entitle him to a pension after the war. The following chapters deal with the Gleichschaltung of the German news agencies, and the infiltration by Party and SS members of the embassy (especially during Ribbentrop’s tenure as ambassador), business, and labour. These efforts were only partly successful: business people had the best standing in London and DAF (German Labour Front) officials apparently the worst because they tended to put German domestic servants under pres-
sure not to work for Jewish families, or to enlist them as informers. A chapter on the German Protestant parishes in Britain has nothing new to report on Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s time in London, except that most of his colleagues joined the Nazi Party (as they did, incidentally, in Germany) and yet supported his struggle for autonomy. The chapter on the British Union of Fascists is of interest only inasmuch as the authors dispute the claim by Oswald Mosley’s biographer that he was not under the control of foreign powers,1 that is, the Italians and Germans. Mosley received financial aid from Mussolini, so they claim, and modelled himself more and more on the Nazis, who welcomed him in Germany while distancing themselves from his party in Britain. A chapter entitled ‘Nazi Influence over the British Legion’ suggests that British veterans were in the pocket of Nazi Germany. Far from it. It is true to say that Hitler tried to use veterans’ organizations in France and Britain to pose as a champion of peace. However, it is quite obvious from this chapter that British veterans were not duped by the show of propaganda when visiting Germany; their loyalty to king and country was never in doubt.

The most interesting chapter, one which would certainly justify an article in a scholarly journal, presents the whole debate between various government departments, notably the Foreign Office and the Home Office, on whether it was advisable to ban all Nazi organizations in Britain. A growing number of refugees were seeking asylum in the UK and, if possible, British nationality. There was agreement among officials that the latter would not be granted to foreigners affiliated to the Nazi Party or a fascist party. When the topic was first brought up in the summer of 1936, officials of all departments concerned wished to take MI5’s advice and kindly ask the German and Italian embassies to dismantle ‘their party organisations in this country, the presence of which is considered unusual and undesired here’ (p. 182). The most outspoken advocate of drastic action was Sir Robert Vansittart who did not much care for appeasement. However, cabinet ministers were reluctant to follow suit and the matter was allowed to drift for more than a year. With the attempt to incorporate Bene into the embassy staff as Consul-General, and with the arrival of the Nazi stalwart Joachim von Ribbentrop as German ambassador, the situation grew worse and less easy to handle. Nor was the new

prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, keen to tackle this problem. A ban on all Nazi organizations in Britain could ‘now create a first-class storm’ (p. 186), particularly following a big conference in Stuttgart, the centre for German Volkstum abroad, where prominent speakers protested the political innocence of Germans living in foreign countries. Since the British government was reluctant to take action for fear of antagonizing Berlin, it was up to the Home Office and MI5 to identify undesirable foreigners and make sure that they left the country. Journalists with dubious credentials and Nazi agents who were caught in acts of intimidation towards fellow countrymen were the first targets for expulsion. It is to the credit of British officials that they felt the need to protect ordinary Germans such as domestic servants from the political zealots of their own country. In their final chapter the authors have to admit that no case for serious espionage by German agents could be made. After all, most cases of espionage ‘prior to the war involved British subjects, not members of the Nazi party in Britain’ (p. 248). Even before a state of war was declared on 3 September, some 880 undesirable Germans had been rounded up and interned; others managed to slip out of the country. The declaration of war solved a long-debated question in a matter of hours.

Admittedly, history books are not written just for the satisfaction of professional historians. The authors may have banked on the consuming interest of the British public in Nazis, new and old, as any news editor will know, and their penchant for fact and fiction regarding espionage and treason might have furnished an additional stimulus for undertaking this piece of hard work. No doubt it provides ample background material for future fiction of this kind. Yet the reviewer finds the claim that ‘Neither the history of London nor the history of Nazism will look quite the same again’ (dust jacket) a good candidate for the Guinness Book of hyperboles.

LOTHAR KETTENACKER was Deputy Director of the German Historical Institute London from 1975 to 2004. His most recent book is Germany since 1945 (1997). Currently he is completing a study of German reunification.