

Replik zur Besprechung von Thomas Sandkühler über F. Brayard: Auschwitz, enquête sur un complot nazi

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Von Brayard, Florent 03.03.2014

It is somewhat rare for a critique to claim to have refuted a work so comprehensively that ultimately ‘almost nothing’ remains of it. This is nevertheless what Thomas Sandkühler believes to have accomplished by the end of his review of my book “*Auschwitz, enquête sur un complot nazi*”^[1] for the most widely consulted platform on German history *H-Soz-Kult*. His review is peculiar in another sense: the general features of my argument are more or less accurately summarized; for a reason which escapes me, however, its details are almost always misrepresented. Yet it is these distorted details on which the refutation is based. I will address some of these distortions.

My book apparently forwards, according to Sandkühler, ‘problematic theses’ to further marked ‘apologetic tendencies’. Much hinges for Sandkühler on my citation of the polemical booklet of the crackpot pamphleteer Theodor Kaufman made use of by the Nazis, and above all Goebbels, in their propaganda. In “*Germany Must Perish*”^[2], Kaufman proposed, amongst other things, the sterilization of the German people. By citing him, I thereby skirt ‘dangerously close to the propaganda of the extreme right’ [sic]. Sandkühler here entirely distorts my argument. I never wrote, as he would have it, that the ‘American Jew Theodor Kaufman was a source of inspiration for Nazi leaders’ [re-sic!]. It is evident for all and very clear in my narration that the idea, developed by Himmler at the start of 1941^[3], of sterilizing all Jews in Europe emerges before the publication of this pamphlet in March of 1941 and its discovery in Germany in July 1941.

I have an entirely different purpose in mind in my use of this source. I argue following the example of a number of historians that the ‘extermination of the Jew’ was, within the public sphere, a slogan without precise meaning since Hitler refrained from outlining directly what this ‘extermination’ entailed^[4]. Yet contrary to my predecessors I take seriously the fact that, inversely, Hitler, Goebbels or others explicitly and very regularly, often in connection to Kaufman, considered what the ‘extermination of the German people’ might entail in the case of the defeat of Germany: massive sterilization, reduction to slavery, the liquidation of the elites, deportation, the rape of women, acculturation and so on. From this I concluded that, in the public sphere, which is to say in the speeches of those from the highest echelons of the Nazi party and in its propaganda, the notion of the extermination of a people does not automatically refer to murder; rather to methods of gradual extinction which supposed the survival at least in the short term of the people in question.^[5] Is it so scandalous to propose this analysis? Are we bound by political exigencies to such an extent that we must deprive ourselves of citing pertinent sources while trying to understand what, for the average German in 1942, the ‘extermination’ of the ‘Jewish people’ might have meant?

Indeed I would be the source of another scandalous statement by suggesting that the discourse of the "Reichssicherheitshauptamt" (RSHA) presenting deportation as a ‘putting to work in the East’ of the Jews might have been taken literally by a certain

number of civil coordinators. In this respect, the distorted analysis which Sandkühler makes of my consideration of the report of Pohl, the “Wirtschaft- und Verwaltungshauptamt” (WVHA) head, of a meeting with Speer in September 1942 is illuminating. The goal of my demonstration was to show that this document in itself does not allow us to come to any conclusions concerning the level of frankness in the dialogue between the two men. Had they spoken of murder or simply ‘migration to the East’ as was written in the report?[6] To establish the contents of this meeting one would have to appeal to other sources, and this is exactly what Sandkühler does in his review, while imagining that my objective was to exonerate Speer. Manifestly this was not the case, since I wrote that ‘it was clearly either during an interview with Pohl in September 1942, or with Himmler at another time, that the Minister of Armaments was made aware of the true meaning of the program [7]’; that is to say, made aware of the intention of mass murder. It was therefore at such a moment that the secret concerning the murder of the Jews deported from the West was discovered within the Ministry of Armaments, and not one year later as Sandkühler interpreted me, once more wrongly, as stating.

The problem of knowing the implicit meaning, not only for the writer of the letter but also for its recipient, of expressions such as ‘migration to the East’, cannot in general and on principle be resolved. We must seek out the forms of interaction which enable us to reconstruct the thought processes of those actors faced with the policy of camouflage employed by the security services. As soon as we consider the problem in these terms, or in other words as soon as we no longer take it for granted that all these people knew how to read between the lines as well as we do decades later, we are confronted with what one might call anomalies; that is to say, facts which are not in keeping with the traditional narration of the ‘final solution of the Jewish question’. Yet of course we can also decide, in similar fashion to Thomas Sandkühler, that in the interests of a memorially correct *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* we pretend not to see such anomalies.

He gives us a clear example of such a strategy in raising the case of Wilhelm Stuckart, who plays an important role in my argument. The anomaly in this case is the following: Stuckart, who had participated ex officio at the conference of Wannsee, argued several weeks later against the assimilation of the Mischlinge to the Jews, on the grounds that these mixed German Jews, possessing a particular power by virtue of their German blood, if submitted to the same fate as the Jews, might ‘give birth to individuals on the enemy side who could put to the service of the enemy and therefore against the German blood, the superior qualities inherited from this blood’[8]. This was the argument in favour of the sterilization of those of mixed heritage, and of confining such mixed populations to German territory, that Stuckart sent to certain participants of Wannsee. Yet it would make no sense for Stuckart to produce such an argument if he had been informed at or before Wannsee or even after that all German Jews sent to the East would be put to death and therefore that the *Mischlinge*, promised the same fate, would face the same end. Indeed Stuckart repeats his argument in September 1942 in a personal letter addressed to Himmler.[9]

Sandkühler seeks to lay bare my reasoning in order to refute it, citing a document which, according to him, establishes that Stuckart was fully apprised of the genocidal

program. Not wanting to undertake the 'work of an executioner', as it is put in this document, the secretary of State proposed sterilization. Sandkühler's response is problematic from several perspectives. A first problem resides in the fact that neither, he nor the historians who make use of it before him [10], have ever taken sufficient time to assess the veracity of this very curious source, of private origin and entered very late into the *Bundesarchiv*. I do not have the time here to expose all the internal and external inconsistencies of this document. Yet I do believe that it is highly precipitous to see in it, following Sandkühler, definitive proof that the decision to murder the Jews had been taken and communicated to the highest echelons of the administration before Wannsee.

With regards to external inconsistencies, I will mention only that I find stupefying that on being informed during the month of December 1941 of the planned murder of the deported German Jews, as my German colleague believes, Stuckart might continue to reason as if those of mixed race who were deported, and promised the same fate as their Jewish relatives, would be a source of lasting harm for Germany, as he insisted twice in 1942 without ever being refuted. My colleague does not take the time to explain this entirely illogical behavior. Yet perhaps after all he considers that the Nazis were as people so strange that, in order to convince others, they chose to employ incoherent and counter-productive arguments.

The truth is that Thomas Sandkühler, faced with such anomalies, prefers to turn a blind eye rather than produce a coherent narrative capable of integrating them. I cite a certain number of other similar anomalies, drawn from the journal of Goebbels and the archives of the minister of Foreign Affairs, which seem to me to be equally powerful. They all date evidently from the period following the conference of Wannsee, this moment when, as Sandkühler and other historians would have it, the decision to murder the Jews had already been taken and was widely known.[11] If Sandkühler is right concerning the reconstruction of the chronology of the decision making process of Hitler, it will be necessary then for him or others to explain why the different leaders acted as if ignorant of what they should have already known. Inversely, if he is not capable of producing such a narrative, he will have to reconsider, as I have done myself, the traditional interpretation of Wannsee according to which the project of total murder was explicitly discussed within the state apparatus. He will then come to notice that, while this historiographical tradition concerning the decision making process is long, dating back to the Nuremberg trials, it is also more than a little fragile in terms of its documentary support.

A rigorous examination of the documents available shows that 1. at the turning point of 1941-1942, the fate of the German and western European Jews was not thus yet bound to systematic murder, neither from the perspective of the RSHA nor the other administrative branches of the Nazi government (it was evidently otherwise for the *Ostjuden* in Poland and the USSR whose physical extermination had already been decided and the plans for which were common knowledge); 2. The rare policing plans dating from this time of which we have knowledge assume the survival of the Jews deported from the West at least until the following spring or the following summer – and without doubt, in my opinion, further in the future; 3. Deported German and Western European Jews were indeed for several months not assassinated but concentrated in ghettos; 4. It was necessary to wait until April 1942 for a policy

decision concerning total murder to be taken and June for a decision on the setting in motion of the 'final solution of the Jewish question' within one year.

We should be clear on what is at stake in this focus on Wannsee: or to be more exact, on the end of the year 1941 when the general decision of Hitler, determining in its sweep the fate of German and Western Jews, was to have been taken and made public within the state apparatus. If this traditional interpretation is correct, my book is therefore a perfect example of an initial error of interpretation leading to a chain of subsequent errors. I would therefore lack the subtlety of mind required for understanding the deeper significance of the apparent anomalies on which I set such great store. The alternative is that this interpretation is not correct, and the totality of my questions are therefore pertinent – and legitimate. Pertinent and legitimate since there is no indication that, between Wannsee and the discourse of Posen on October 1943, the murder of all Jews was evoked during the course of inter-ministerial meetings, or in the speeches of Hitler or Himmler before the large assembly where the highest representatives of the Party and State were gathered, or through an order circulating outside of the RSHA and WVHA. Indeed, when at Posen, before the elites of the Party and the State, Himmler bluntly announced the murder of all the Jews of Europe, he concluded by saying: 'you have now been made aware'.^[12]Now?

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Notes :

[1] Thomas Sandkühler: Rezension zu: Brayard, Florent: Auschwitz, enquête sur un complot nazi. Paris 2012, in: H-Soz-u-Kult, 24.01.2013, <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2013-1-054>>.

[2] Theodore N. Kaufman, Germany must perish, Newark, Argyle Press 1941.

[3] Brayard, Auschwitz, p. 38. See also Florent Brayard, La "solution finale de la question juive". La technique, le temps et les catégories de la décision, Paris, Fayard, 2004, p. 11-13, p. 322-323 and "To What Extend Was the "Final Solution" Planned ?", Yad Vashem Studies, (2008), 36, p. 78-79.

[4] See for example the reflections of David Bankier in "Signaling the Final Solution to the German People", in David Bankier and Israel Gutman [ed.], Nazi Europe and the Final Solution, Jérusalem, Yad Vashem 2003, especially from p. 32.

[5] Florent Brayard, Auschwitz..., op. cit., see chapter 4, "Le concept d'"extermination" dans la sphère publique", especially from p. 157.

[6] The entirety of Pohl's report, dated the 16th September 1942, can be accessed via the following link:

<<http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/holoprelude/pohl.html>> (03.02.2014). See also Florian Freund, Bertrand Perz, Karl Stuhlpfarrer "Der Bau des Vernichtungslagers Auschwitz-Birkenau", in: Zeitgeschichte, 20 (1993), 5/6, p. 187-214.

[7] Brayard, Auschwitz, p. 396.

[8] Letter of Stuckart dated the 16th March 1942, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amt, Berlin, R 100.857, especially from page 15. Partial reproduction in Kurt Pätzold et Erika Schwarz, Tagesordnung : Judenmord. Die Wannsee-Konferenz am 20. Januar 1942, Berlin, Metropol 1998, p. 121-123.

[9] Letter of Stuckart to Himmler, September 1942, reproduced in Walter Strauß, "Das Reichsministerium des Innern und die Judengesetzgebung (Dokumentation)", in Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 9 (1961), p. 298-301, <http://www.ifz-muenchen.de/heftarchiv/1961_3_4_strau%C3%9F.pdf> (02.03.2014).

[10] Wilhelm Lenz, "Die Handakten von Bernhard Lösener, "Rassereferent" im Reichsministerium des Innern", in Archiv und Geschichte 57 (2000) ; Christopher Browning, in collaboration with Jürgen Matthäus, Les Origines de la solution finale. L'évolution de la politique antijuive des nazis. Septembre 1939-mars 1942, Paris, Belles lettres 2007, p. 427. Michael Mayer, Staaten als Täter. Ministerialbürokratie und „Judenpolitik“ in NS-Deutschland und Vichy-Frankreich. Ein Vergleich, München, Oldenbourg 2011, p. 221-222 ; Hans-Christian Jasch, Staatssekretär Wilhelm Stuckart und die Judenpolitik. Der Mythos von der sauberen Verwaltung, München, Oldenbourg 2012.

[11] An exemplary resource on the historiography of Wannsee is Norbert Kampe and Peter Klein (ed.), Die Wannsee-Konferenz am 20. Januar 1942. Dokumente, Forschungsstand, Kontroversen, Köln, Böhlau 2013.

[12] Bradley F. Smith and Agnes F. Peterson (Hrsg.), Heinrich Himmler. Geheimreden 1933-1945, Frankfurt am Main, Propyläen Verlag 1974, S. 169.