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“The Death Dealer”

Amid the horrific legacy of war, death camps and the emotional scarring that today contributes to the intrinsic identity of Jews across the world, generations have grown up with the conception of the Nazis as the archetype of unmitigated evil.

The post-war confessions of Rudolf Höss, who, as commandant of Auschwitz, supervised the mass killing of Jews, however, invite readers to re-examine the role of evil as part of the historical commentary on the SS. In Höss’s memoir, *The Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*, written in a Polish prison between October 1946 and April 1947, Höss makes no attempt to conceal his crimes. Placing them in the context of careerism and the values of military service, Höss posits that he and other soldiers are in many respects not dissimilar from us. Rather, his actions belong to the current of duty to country, self-sacrifice and obedience that remains an intrinsic, yet problematic, part of military culture in armies including our own.

Höss contends that embedded in his role as an administrator of the death camp is a devotion to duty and country, an unwavering commitment to carrying out orders as given.

Höss’s inflated sense of duty to the Nazis is traced back to his first experience in the German army during the First World War, when the young Höss, following a family tradition of military service set forth by his father and grandfather, left home and joined a German regiment. As a combat soldier, fighting British forces on the Ottoman front line, Höss received the concept of duty, first informed as a military value. The impact of seeing comrades killed by machine gun fire, their lives sacrificed for the nation; and, for the

first time, repressing the emotional consequences of killing for the fatherland were crucial. Collectively, these experiences nurtured a code of duty, obedience and patriotism, equating the core values of an ideal soldier with survival, but also a sense of belonging and purpose.

These military values cast the mold of Höss's involvement with the Nazi party. Himmler's invitation, years after the war, to join the SS and administer what Nazi managers hoped would become "the largest human killing center in all of history," was an opportunity to reclaim the feeling of purpose made void by the absence of the responsibility of military service.¹ Becoming "again a soldier" in this organization was to re-join the military culture introduced during Höss's formative years on the Ottoman front.² It was an irresistible call, an inescapable obligation which transcended both personal will and emotion, enabling Höss to dismiss the moral and psychological conflict of killing.

Höss's descriptions of the crimes which defined the daily administration of Auschwitz are horrendous; but it is not his intention to excuse them. Instead, Höss's memoir is the attempt to account for how a sane man is able to function psychologically in the face of unprecedented horrors, but also the unimaginable responsibility and obedience which military duty demands of soldiers. Arguing against evil as a prerequisite for killing, Höss offers an opportunity to gain a better understanding of our own soldiers, asked to die and kill for duty and the good of the nation.

¹ Höss, Rudolf. *The Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*. (New York: Prometheus Books, 1992), 153.

² *Ibid.*, 60.

Bibliography

Höss, Rudolf. *The Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz*.
(New York: Prometheus Books, 1992), 153.