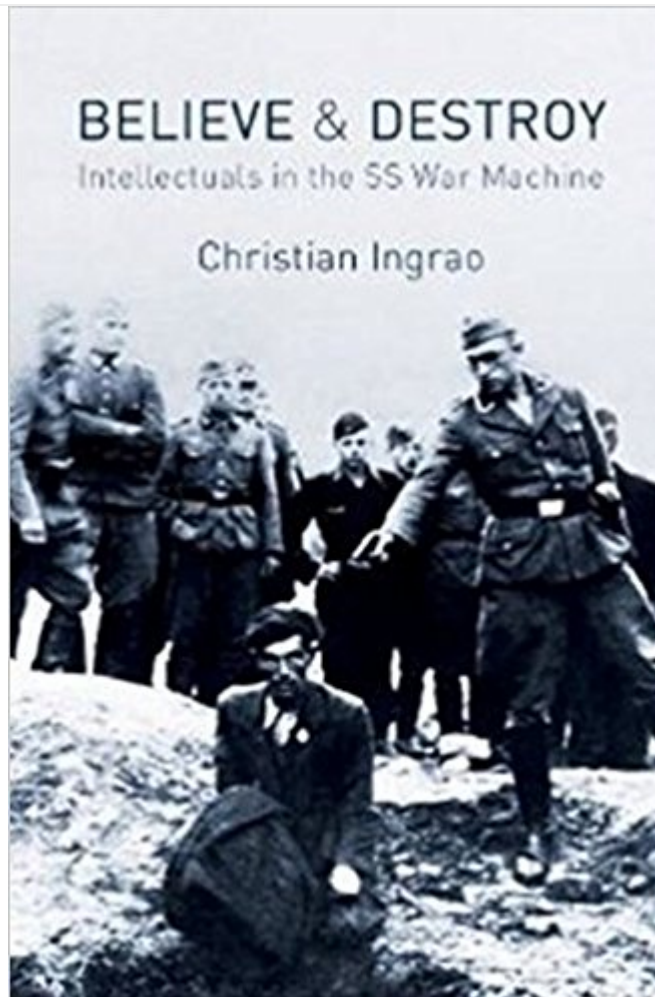


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Believe & Destroy: Intellectuals and the SS War Machine



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Reviewed Work(s)

Believe & Destroy: Intellectuals and the SS War Machine. By Christian Ingrao (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013). Pp. 399. Hardcover, \$29.95.

With his innovative book *An Uncompromising Generation: The Nazi Leadership of the Reich Security Main Office*, historian Michael Wildt was among the most successful to use the method of “collective biography” to examine an entire cohort of Nazi perpetrators. Wildt examined the highly educated group of men who organized and ran the Reich Security Main Office, asking what motivated this group of academics and lawyers to become radical Nazis. Christian Ingrao’s *Believe & Destroy: Intellectuals and the SS War Machine* builds on this approach by examining the academics and lawyers who filled the elite ranks of the *Schutzstaffel* (SS). Like Wildt, Ingrao explores why this group of sophisticated men embraced Nazism, planned, and carried out Nazi atrocities during World War II.

Ingrao’s book is organized neatly into three parts. In part one Ingrao examines how these future SS men experienced Germany’s defeat in World War I. Part two takes the reader from the rise of Nazism to the end of the Second World War, detailing why these men turned to Nazism and, ultimately, why they were so willing to implement Nazi policies during the war. Finally, in part three, Ingrao investigates how these SS intellectuals confronted defeat again and how they challenged the judicial actions taken against them by the victorious Allies.

In part one Ingrao carefully argues that the experience of Germany’s defeat in World War I exerted a tremendous influence on the intellectual and emotional development of these men. Even though none of Ingrao’s SS men were old enough to experience combat for themselves, Ingrao argues that they still “were mobilized in the sense that they were the object of a specific discourse that provided them with an explanation of the war, its meaning and their enemies” (8). According to Ingrao this “mobilization” of children and the apocalyptic nature of World War I caused many of his subjects to view war in absolute terms, resulting in an “us vs. them” mentality and in a belief that the very existence of the

German nation was at stake. Ingrao's most revealing illustration of this point is Werner Best, a former deputy leader of the Reich Security Main Office. Ingrao examines Best's 1965 autobiography and demonstrates that Best believed "the issues at stake in this combat were vital, since it was a matter of fighting off a French army hell-bent on annihilating Germany" (15). This mentality, forged in the aftermath of World War I, stayed with men like Best as they waged their war in the East years later.

With the Nazi rise to power in 1933 and the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, Ingrao's subjects discovered how to transform a radical ideology into actual government policy. SS intellectuals viewed the east as fertile ground for a Nazi utopia, but first Germany's racial enemies must be defeated. Ingrao connects this mindset directly to World War I: "Drawing on historical memories as it did, the thought of the east was inseparable from the previous war" (136). This "us vs. them" mentality led many of the SS intellectuals Ingrao studies to join the *Einsatzgruppen*, which committed heinous atrocities all along the Eastern front, including the systematic murder of Jews, Russians, and others, primarily by firing squad. It was through the activities of the *Einsatzgruppen* that an ideology of death became a terrible reality.

At the conclusion of World War II many SS intellectuals were placed on trial for their crimes. The most prominent was Otto Ohlendorf, commander of *Einsatzgruppen D*, which operated in the Ukraine. Ohlendorf, a trained economist, seemed an unlikely perpetrator of mass murder, but he described in grisly detail during his trial how his unit executed 90,000 people, most of them Jews, during his year in the Ukraine. Ohlendorf's understanding of the war in the east as an "us vs. them" struggle for national survival, as well as his frequent references to Germany's defeat in World War I, support Ingrao's argument for the enduring influence of the earlier conflict.

Ingrao's work stands as an example of model scholarship, innovative in its research methods and careful in its use of sources. Ingrao relies on a mountain of statistical data to demonstrate the extent to which this cohort of SS intellectuals was extremely homogeneous, both in life experiences and demographically. Ingrao is also careful to balance out this statistical data with the proper amount of context, which he gets from the personal diaries, letters, and other primary sources connected to these men.

Ingrao's work is not without flaws. He makes a number of generalizations throughout and at times appears to be oversimplifying a very complex issue. While Ingrao demonstrates that World War I was critical for the cohort of Nazis he studies, he does not reconcile clearly enough why other groups with similar war experiences did not follow a similar path. In addition, Ingrao misses an opportunity to engage with scholarship that explores how the economic and political instability of the Weimar era might account for Nazi ideology's appeal. In conclusion, Ingrao's narrative is readable, free of jargon, and accessible to undergraduates, specialists and the general public alike. I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the Holocaust, World War II, Nazi Germany, and genocide studies.

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