

At Bitburg: The SS, Reagan. . . und Ich

by Samuel Hux (October 2015)

Günter Grass's death in April 2015 (as I observed my birthday) reminds me that in June 1984 I drove from Normandy to Brittany in order to visit Mont-St. Michel. (The Grass connection will not be obvious immediately.) Acutely aware of the recent fortieth anniversary celebrations of D-Day, my companion and I decided to stop at the American military cemetery at St. James. (Odd name for a French town, English, but appropriate given the circumstances.) The crosses and stars of David were not easy for us to handle; there are few if any more solemn sights. A day later, passing through Pontorson, a few kilometers south of Mont-St. Michel, a direction sign in German: *Deutscher Soldatenfriedhof*. I mentally pocketed the directions, after slow-motion recognition that the literal "peace yard" (*Friedhof*) could only mean cemetery. The bookish German I learned in school has retreated over the years through lack of use, more than once causing me some embarrassment.

A matter of minutes from Mont-St. Michel lies the village of Huisnes-sur-Mer; a kilometer beyond the village, the German military cemetery at Mont-de-Huisnes. My companion was not eager to visit—she's Jewish—but was as curious as I was. From this hill you can clearly see Mont-St. Michel, which looks to be a couple of miles away. From the mount you could never see the Friedhof, for it is itself discreetly buried. Imagine a circular fort, 47 meters diameter, sunken two stories into the earth, with central parade ground, cross in center of parade. As you enter the portal through the hillside on a level with the parade ground you pass a flat black rectangular monument. Translating confidently: "Here rest in a common grave". . . many names follow. . . "as well as 58 unknown war-dead of the Second World War," etc. Beyond, in the two circular stories there are 68 crypts, like cubicles, each holding up to 180 dead lying filing-cabinet style, 11,956 in all.

We circled the crypts. I noted names. Schmelzle. Pranger. Although I wondered, it did not occur to me actively to look for SS; I did not know if they would be so designated. These were all just *Soldaten*. Rostek—Germano-Slavic. Lilla. . .

Hans Lilla—very odd. But not so, really; one comes across many Latinate surnames in German history and culture, both real and adopted: ã Kempis, Novalis, Pestalozzi, Fontane, Brentano, Fallada, Adorno—so great the ethnic migrations in European history, such a lie, the Nazi myth of the Nordic.

I note all this to try to convey a mood, or the absence of the expected one. In spite of historical memory I had expected to be moved. I had thought, that is, that a complicated variety of the emotions felt at St. James would obtain here. Death to blond or swarthy, in a just cause or a crippled one, is so final, and mysterious. I submit there is *something* about a military cemetery, there just is. But in this case. . . no feeling, a cold note-taking, an ethnic survey.

And I wondered at the time why this survey, for there was nothing surprising: of the few Germans I have known personally a bare majority have clear-cut Teutonic names, the others French or Slavic. And then I had it, an absurd and embarrassing mental flush, which wasn't conditioned, surely, by any expectation. Years in New York had habituated me to think of German- or Slavic-sounding names as Jewish. And here at Mont-de-Huisnes with its crypts and the common grave of unknown war-dead was, in spite of the total absence of Nazi insignia, Hitler's dream: a world *judenrein*, cleansed of Jews.

Before departing we stopped in a chamber adjacent the common grave. I picked up a German publication, *Kriegsgräberfursorge* (War Graves Commission). If you want an eight-day tour including the graves at La Cambe, Marigny, Orglandes: DM 890 full pension (allow for inflation), with DM 125 surcharge for single-room occupancy, *und so weiter*. My companion jotted something in French in the *Gastebuch*—but that's her story. I looked over some remarks in the book, and one of them made the visit worth it; my coldness dissipated; a flow of sympathetic warmth. A lady from Bremerhaven had written, in apparently elliptical German, "Very good! (it is) good for us (he) has fallen!" The implicit "he" may have been Hitler; it may have been—and much more touching, pained—a cousin, a brother, a father. This is the sort of reconciliation I can respect: an emphatic recognition that one must be responsible for one's service no matter how harsh, final, and mysterious the cost.

Three months after my visit to the Deutscher Soldatenfriedhof I shared my discovery with a German Jewish friend in New York who gave me a lesson in the

idiomatic uses of "to fall." "*Sehr gut! hat uns gut gefallen!*" she had written. No implicit "he," as I had rather forcedly fantasized, but an "it." "Very good! (it) fell out well for us!" That is, she and her mates enjoyed their visit. One can only hope that Ronald Reagan enjoyed his almost a year later, May 5, 1985, to the military graveyard in Bitburg.

The preceding sentence is rather snotty, representing my tone the spring of 1985. But let me make it clear that my admiration for Ronald Reagan has increased over the years so that with only slight exaggeration I can say it has become near unlimited. Nonetheless, this extraordinary man, intellectually so much sharper than his critics assumed him to be, so un sentimentally clear about the nature of communism, naïvely stepped into a German hornet's nest, and (how else to put it?) was too pig-headed to step out. Already committed to meetings in Europe the spring of '85, Reagan accepted an invitation from Chancellor Helmut Kohl to visit a military cemetery in Germany to symbolize the long-achieved friendship between the two once-enemy nations—and also, it seems clear enough, to repay Kohl for his support of certain foreign policies dear to Reagan. The Soldatenfriedhof at Bitburg was chosen *apparently* because the existence of an American Air Force base just outside the small German city seemed to offer a logical connection. So far, a relatively innocent political quid-pro-quo. But when it was discovered or disclosed that among the 2,000 military dead were 49 *Waffen SS*, a fire started that was almost impossible to extinguish. Faced with demands that he withdraw his acceptance, Reagan—in the one clear mistake of his presidency—refused and dug in his heels, foolishly so, it still seems to me. For he not only refused, he justified his refusal in a way that was far beneath the standards of the "great communicator," declaring that "there's nothing wrong with visiting that cemetery where those young men are victims of Nazism also. . . . They were victims, just as surely as the victims in the concentration camps." While it is stupid to think that "those young men" referred specifically to the SS dead instead of to German youth in general, it was still a sloppy locution, especially in the comparison with the camp dead. I remember thinking at the time of a *pensée* of Elias Canetti's in his book of reflections, *Die Provinz des Menschen* (The Human Province): "Some sentences release their poison only years after." I was wrong; the release was immediate.

These many years later Reagan's motives strike me as being as honorable as his

judgment was flawed and his expression ill-formed. But I am not so sure about the honor of all those surrounding him and I wonder if their judgment was not corrupt rather than flawed. Did no one before the disclosure of SS "attendance" know the composition of the cemetery "population"? Did no one among the official West German hosts care? Was Chancellor Kohl a mere innocent? I find that hard to believe. I am not so paranoid as to believe that there was some quiet conspiracy to gain forgiveness-at-last for the SS as well as Army, Navy, and Air Force. I am not so well-disposed as to think it just simply out of the question. In any case I am comfortable in saying that *I think Ronald Reagan was hoodwinked.*

In September 1985 I flew from London to Luxembourg for the sole purpose of crossing the border to visit Bitburg to see what I could see. In August 1986 I returned, compelled perhaps by unresolved anger, perhaps by some melancholic attraction.

Bitburg is neither nondescript nor charming enough for the tourist trade. But it doesn't suffer for the latter: the American air base is a local industry. Perhaps the most exciting thing about the town—before May, 1985—was the local beer, justly famous, Bitburger Pils'. *Bitte ein Bit!* I arrived at night in September 1985 in rented car and found a hotel. The proprietor, thirty-odd years old, was behind the bar, serving a customer who turned out to be an American non-com. "*Haben Sie ein Einbettzimmer?*" I asked. "*Ja.*" "*Gut! Ich habe im Auto mein, meine, ah, ah,*" gesturing as if lifting a suitcase. "Well now," he said, "what shall we speak? German or English?" "I'll have a cognac," I smiled.

My notes of the first night reveal I didn't care for the proprietor. But in the light of day and after a walk about the *Ehrenfriedhof Kolmeshöhe* I revised my opinion; I like ironic people. "You're not military, and you look too old to be an army brat." "Well, I was in Luxembourg, vacation, and I saw on a map yesterday how close Bitburg is," I lied, "and I remembered Reagan's visit, and I was just curious." "And I suppose you've been to the cemetery. Anyone else there?" "A busload," I said, "and a couple from Colorado." "Hah! I've lived here ten years, and I've been once. Nobody knew the damned place was there until your president decided to grace it with his presence." Which, while not literally true. . . .

I met no one else skeptical of the great event, neither then nor in 1986. Much more typical was a shopkeeper: "It is a very small *Friedhof*. They were very

young—15 or 16 years. I think there is no American base here he does not come. It is good that he came. I am pleased.”

Stöhen Sie bitte nicht die Ruhe und den Frieden der Toten.

Der Bürgermeister

—reads the sign at the entrance to the Ehrenfriedhof (*Ehre*: honor). “Please don’t disturb the quiet and peace of the dead.” It was possible in ’85 to wander among the graves in what is indeed a small Friedhof, merely a section set off by shrubbery from a much larger civilian cemetery, and with none of the visual drama of Mont-de-Huisnes. By 1986 it was no longer possible to approach the graves directly, photographing the 49 SS or the more numerous Army graves, without permission; one could only circle the expanse within the shrubbery-walls: the grave rows themselves were discreetly fenced off by a foot-high railing. I returned two more times those days in 1985, trying to see if I would feel anything. I might as well have been at Mont-de-Huisnes.

Only once did I have a rush of emotion. The second day, walking a row about a third of the way up from the base where stands the tower at the foot of which Reagan had laid a wreath, I saw, a couple of grave plaques away from where I stood, *my surname!* Good God!—I almost lurched. But it wasn’t. A *K* can seem from an angle an *H*. Apparently not SS, no rank indicated: “Heinrich Kùx, 22/2/26-24/2/45.” The following year I quite cynically used this experience to gain permission to wander the rows again, with camera.

When I returned to Bitburg in August ’86 I checked into a better hotel, walked to a bar-restaurant called the Kuhstall (cow stall), ordered a Bit, and tried to revive my poor German with the barmaid, very un-German looking. “*Wo sind die Kuhe?*” I asked. Where are the cows? Later, “*Später,*” she said. “*Wir haben das ‘Happy Hour.’*” More desultory conversation, very halting. So I was surprised when she asked, “*Sind Sie Deutscher?*” “*Me?! Ich bin Amerikaner!*” “*Ah. Ich bin Spanieren!*” she said. Good, so we could talk. She herself was “not political,” had no particular feelings about the presidential visit the year before, although her German husband was pleased by the visit and outraged by the protests. Any particular part of the protests, any of the protestors in particular? No, not that she knew. (But perhaps people are cautious before someone named Samuel. I’d noticed a quizzical narrowing of the eyes a couple of

times the previous year, before I awkwardly referred to my *Vorname* in literal translation as *Christlichennamen*.) Vacation? she asked. Sort of; I want to look up a relative.

The next day at the cemetery, when I found the graves fenced off, I sought out the caretaker. (I reproduce my ridiculously poor and inadequate German, declensions all awry, in order to suggest that I might have missed some subtleties in my two turns in Bitburg, but also to suggest something else: often people are more revealing, because more relaxed, in the presence of someone they perceive as an innocent.) "*Ich bin Fremd*," I said—a foreigner; "*Ich habe in diese Friedhof ein Verwandte*"—a relative. "*Gibt es ein Plan? Kann man. . .*" ? "Komm'," he said, gesturing that I follow. "*Der Nachname?*" "*K, U, X, mit Umlaut*," confident that if he asked to see identification I could explain away the H. He didn't.

In a shed attached to the cemetery offices he opened a registry and began thumbing the pages, "*K-a, K-e*". . . . "*K-u*" I reminded him. "*K-i, K-l*," etc. I waited. "*K-u-b*." Finally, "*Ach, Kux. . . Heinrich?*" "*Ja! Danke schön*." Heinrich was Catholic. *Viatikum* read the listing: extreme unction. "*Kann man photographieren?*" "*Ja. Komm*'." A man of few words. At the grave site the caretaker kept a respectful distance. "*Neunzehn Jahre*," I said to him—only 19 years old. He gestured how sad and left me to my feigned sadness—which in a moment was not quite feigned. Extreme unction. It wasn't instant, then, he knew he was dying? Alas, *arme Heinrich*—poor Henry.

As I walked to thank the caretaker, a friend of his who'd noticed joined us. He was curious. *Ein Cousin* of my father, I lied. Many Germans in America? Many; "*Aber die meisten sprechen keine Deutsch. Meine—Sie können hören—ist lächerlich*:"—laughable. "*Nicht wahr! Sehr gut!*" We're getting chummy. When chummy enough, he expresses his hilarity that such *Freunde* as we should once have been such *Feinde*—enemies. Then confides his seriousness: We should have known better. Or rather you should have. The great Eisenhower should have listened to *Herr General Patton. Die Russen*. . . ! But now. . . !

It doesn't take a sophisticate to read one subtext of the great Bitburg event. As Jürgen Habermas, with no sympathy, summarized this view in 1985: "forty years ago there was in fact only one victor. Seen clearly, the Western powers had actually lost the war along with the Germans; on the eighth of May they would do

well to remember 'this inheritance of defeat in victory.'" "Folks back home must be nuts," an airman said to me in '85; "what's the big furor?" "We get along, the Germans and us," said his companion. "We need each other. We have a job to do." He looked properly serious and resolved, quite probably repeating something from an orientation lecture.

Most of my conversations were jejune, banal. A French restaurateur isn't the least bit interested in my leading questions. He's too excited at having an American customer unattached to the air base: a prophecy of profits to come? Only one conversation was thoroughly "satisfying"—on my second night in '85. Proprietress, or manager, of bar and I are speaking. She likes speaking English, although apologetic. "Nonsense. Consider my German." "Yes, but I have many American customers, can practice." Another customer, German, isn't interested in where I try to lead the conversation. He's interested, as she is, in AIDS. Two cases recently, someone has whispered, she says, someone who knows someone in the . . . in the . . . health office. "You understand what is health office?" "Office in German is *Amt*" I think out loud. "Yes, I know," she laughs. Eventually she *wants* to talk. . . . Afterwards I excuse myself to lavatory to jot in my note book—I have a very good memory—not bothering to reproduce phonetically: *W*'s are erratically *W*'s and *V*'s, all final *S*'s are *S*'s, not *Z*'s, all *Th*'s are soft sibilants.

"Bitburg people don't know nothing. Maybe 2,000 in 12,000 know there was SS men in cemetery. And there was difference between SS and Waffen SS. My father say he was glad when he see Waffen SS. They were the first to be killed. When combat was dangerous, here comes Waffen SS—and my father thinks he will maybe live. They were different from regular SS—even German people was afraid of *them*. German people don't know what Hitler is doing. There was no TV—the newspapers say what the government wants. I don't understand these people—I ask my parents how you can stand for such things, but they say they know nothing then. It was not like now with TV and everything. What if Reagan does not come? What then? In Bitburg we hold our breath. The Bürgermeister say do like this . . . [holds her hands together over waste in pantomime of 'be calm']. German people and Americans here know each other—friends for long time. I have friends. Bitburg people still. . . like this [same gesture]. The TV they are so many. Journalists from everywhere. And they make lies, stories. Some people say they move wreath to an SS from another grave. The things they say! It is

forty years! They say what one man says—and he has been dead six months. A Jewish man. And people from everywhere—Jewish people—France, Luxembourg, Germany, all over. I don't want to say. They make troubles. The Waffen SS was young—kids, 16, 17. I don't know, I don't want to say."

Some of the Waffen SS graves (I translate military ranks, and instead of reproducing birth and death dates give ages): Private Siegfried Schiller, 18; Corporal Josef Wolf, 18; Technical Sergeant Otto Franz Bengel, 22; Private Koloman Chrenko, 24; Sergeant Heinrich Müller, 26; Private Bonifas Dolinsky, 29; Sergeant Franz Kuckelkorn, 36; Corporal Thomas Thal, 39; Master Sergeant August Kuchar, 44. American apologists for the visit also said they were all a bunch of kids.

It's all there is the proprietress's ruminations. (I should confess that I liked her, nonetheless.) The Germans knew nothing. We're friends now, so. . . . It's been forty years. The Jews are making trouble. The Waffen SS was not the *real* SS. . . .

There are several variations of that last cliché, and they were all played by both Germans and Americans in the introduction, development, and recapitulation of the Bitburg sonata. Since the brutal fact was that there were indeed SS graves a step of two away from where the president would lay a wreath, then pop historical revisionism was welcome. Seldom had the Waffen SS received such attention since Nuremberg; seldom had history been so trivialized.

It was so easy to buy, unwittingly perhaps, the claims of the HIAG, or *Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit* (Mutual Aid Association of Waffen SS veterans), that (1) the Waffen (armed) SS were "soldiers just like the others" (*Soldaten wie Andere Auch* as the title of General Paul Hausser's memoirs had it—one of many in the West German light industry of SS *selective* recollections), only nominally related to the parent *Allgemeine* (general) SS, and was instead merely a "fourth force" within the *Wehrmacht* along with Army, Navy, and Air Force; that (2) the Waffen SS was not to be confused or associated with the dregs of Nazidom, the concentration- and death-camp guards and administrators; and that (3) while the *Allgemeine* SS was strictly volunteer the Waffen SS was in great part a conscripted force and thus not the party army of true-believers it was cracked up to be. The first and second claims can be sustained by no historical examination, none. Only the third can be sustained at

all, with significant reservations, the reservations so large that they ultimately render the question relevant and irrelevant at the same time.

The first claim is easily and quickly dismissed. While the Waffen SS fought, usually, under broad Corps-wide or Army-Group Wehrmacht command this was no more than wartime commonsense. It was carried on SS, not Wehrmacht, payrolls and organizational tables, was subject to SS, not Wehrmacht, discipline. It was a fully integrated branch of the SS, merely on loan as it were in battle situations. Indeed, this had long been Hitler's and Heinrich Himmler's plan: in wartime the Waffen SS should have the opportunity to spill its blood, the better to insure its reputation and élan when it returned to its peacetime duties as a kind of "Securitate," if you will remember Ceausescu's Romanian guard. As for the Waffen SS's putatively clean hands with respect to the concentration- and death-camps.

In the byzantine process whereby SS grew from a small elite guard within the SA (*Sturm Abteilung*—storm troopers) into a semi-autonomous domestic empire, the first armed SS units were the *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* (body guard. . .), and the *Wachverbände* (guard formations for the concentration camps) soon to be redesignated *Totenkopfverbände* (Death's Head formations) and eventually the Totenkopf division. Soon new armed units joined with the Leibstandarte to become *SS-Verfügungstruppe* (roughly "troops at the disposal of" the Fuehrer). This is the genealogy of the Waffen SS. When the name *Waffen SS* was invented in 1939 and made official in 1940, it originally meant the erstwhile Verfügungstruppe. But by August 1940 the Death's Head units, by then *Totenkopfstandarten* (regiments), were included in the Waffen SS, the Death's Head designation becoming an honorary Old Boys' title as in *III SS-Panzerdivision "Totenkopf"* (and the Death's Head symbol worn on collar and helmet in place of the double lightning bolt runes used by other units). That is, Theodor Eicke, first chief of the concentration camps and commandant of the Totenkopf units, led his Death's Heads into the Totenkopf division battle formations in 1940. But not all of them in physical fact, a minority remaining in the camps where they had the double duty of camp-guarding and training as a replacement pool for the Totenkopf division and then at Himmler's insistence for any Waffen SS division. Throughout the war guards and combat veterans were exchanged continuously. For in spite of Waffen SS mythology and the pop history embraced by apologists in Bonn and D.C. in 1985, the rock-bottom fact is that camp-guarding was a Waffen, not General, SS

job; the dregs of the SS were Waffen SS.

This does not mean that only Totenkopf contained the dregs. For although manning the camps was a Totenkopf responsibility (a neat arrangement, with Dachau serving as home administration and Buchenwald as supply dump for the Totenkopf division), there was considerable transfer of personnel at all ranks from division to division and camp to camp and camp to battle unit and battle unit to camp throughout the war. The careers of generals and field-grade officers are not hard to follow, but so many SS records were lost or destroyed we'll never know the exact numbers and routes of passage of enlisted men. Much evidence is anecdotal, if that's the right word. Rudolf Höss recalled that during his tenure as Auschwitz commandant, May 1940 to December 1943, field veterans and camp staff were continuously exchanged to the tune of 2,500 each. Anton Kaindl, commandant at Sachsenhausen (after service on the Totenkopf divisional staff) recalled 1,500 exchanges in his almost three year tenure. That is, an average of almost two a day at Auschwitz, more than one a day at Sachsenhausen. Admittedly these aren't large numbers even if we assume similar figures at other *Lager*, but they do rather forcefully suggest the connection it was in the interest of Waffen SS veterans to deny.

Now to the matter of Waffen SS "conscription." Some Waffen SS were indeed not volunteers. A minor truth which grew in exponential fashion into a major distortion: some were conscripted / many were conscripted / most were / the Waffen SS was not the volunteer party army it was cracked up to be. It's hard to say where and when the transformation of a volunteer elite into just plain soldiers began. I only know I'd heard the theme well before Bitburg, from people with no particular grasp of Nazi history, although I had not heard its tragedy-of-innocents culmination *until* Bitburg. So, some historical facts:

By war's end there were or had been 38 Waffen SS divisions, plus a score of lesser special units. About half were prefixed "SS," as in *I SS-Panzerdivision "Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler,"* *II SS-Panzerdivision "Das Reich,"* or *III SS-Panzerdivision "Totenkopf."* And about half were suffixed "der SS," as in for instance *XIV Waffen-Grenadierdivision der SS.* This is no pedant's detail. The prefix "SS" was reserved for units made up of German citizens of the Reich (*Reichsdeutsche*), ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*) from Axis or conquered lands, Scandinavians, Dutch, and Belgians (Flemish). The suffix "der SS" was reserved for units made up of the non-Teutonic: French, Balts, Rumanians, Ukrainians,

Balkan Muslims, what have you. The single exception to this rule was the XXXVI *Waffen-Grenadierdivision der SS* (actually of brigade size) comprised primarily of conscripted German convicts (which was only appropriate since its commandant Oskar Dirlewanger had himself served time in 1934 for corrupting a minor). I am trying to suggest a certain Teutonic fastidiousness in SS circles, whereby the suffix "der SS" designated units which were useful but not quite of one's sort. These units not quite of one's sort, especially if Eastern European in composition, would have a healthy number of conscripts—although *conscription* is not really the proper term for the recruitment of non-citizens, *press-ganging* being a better one.

This does not mean that there was zero conscription, or press-ganging, into units prefixed SS, but with one irrelevant and one dramatic class of exception noted below that fate was generally reserved for Volksdeutsche, a minority of whom in the Waffen SS had been *made* to see their racial duty. Those classes of exception:

First: In 1939 the *SS-Polizeidivision* was filled primarily by assignment of members of the *Ordnungspolizei* (uniformed regular police) who, although under command of SS General Kurt Daluege who answered directly to Himmler, were themselves not technically members of the SS. This case was a somewhat anomalous example of what later became a source of Waffen SS manpower: actual members of actual SS agencies. For instance, in January 1940 the SS head office issued an order that members of the Allgemeine SS in age groups subject to induction into the Wehrmacht would be inducted immediately into Totenkopf units. Commenting on this instance and a similar one, the Historian Hans Buchheim (writing a deposition for a 1963 German war crimes trial) notes a 1942 instruction from *Reichskommissar für die Festigung des Deutschen Volkstums* (Reich Commissioner for the Consolidation of German Nationhood) or RKF, on the authority of Himmler, that all RKF personnel subject to imminent Wehrmacht draft "will report for voluntary service in the Waffen SS." Buchheim: "The almost ludicrous contradiction contained in this instruction was possible simply because it was aimed at people already members of one SS organization (the RKF) who were to move to another (the Waffen SS). A similar situation arose when men from the Allgemeine SS were drafted into the Totenkopf units. . .—they could come from nowhere else—people who had of their own free will joined the Allgemeine SS and so placed themselves under the . . . ideological authority of the

Reichsführer-SS" (Himmler). It's stretching things to call this conscription at all; I'd call it "transfer."

Second: By 1943 because of periodic manpower crises the Waffen SS was allowed to draft from outside SS ranks in special and limited circumstances. For instance, when two new Reichsdeutsche divisions were short Himmler dipped into the Reich Labor Service. Ensuing parental and churchly protest forced the SS to compromise: draftees were "undrafted" with the stipulation of one month's military training after which they could volunteer or be released. Even if one takes with some salt SS claims that only three men asked for release, and even crediting the enormous pressure all must have felt, one should not dismiss the fantastic reputation the Waffen SS had among German youth after a decade of ideological indoctrination.

Such limited irregularities were however a prefiguration of what was soon to come. Although strict definitions of exceptions to voluntary recruitment remained on the books as late as February 1945, SS fastidiousness broke down near totally as German fronts broke beyond reestablishment and the Waffen SS entered its terminal spasms—when even elite divisions received forced replacements of shipless naval personnel and *Luftwaffe* ground-crewmembers with no planes to maintain.

And now Günter Grass enters the story. The great novelist and scourge of old Nazis, left-wing conscience of the new Germany, critic of the SS veterans, protester against the Bitburg drama and Ronald Reagan's visit to Ehrenfriedhof Kolmeshöhe, *und so weiter*—who had claimed for decades that his war service was as a teenage *Flakhelfer* impressed to guard anti-aircraft batteries—confessed in 2006 that he had been one of those youths drafted from the Labor Service to the Waffen SS in 1944. Although specific details are very obscure, apparently he was not one of those only three the SS claimed had asked to be released. In any case his service was with one of the crack divisions, *X SS-Panzerdivision "Fruntsberg."* Grass took a lot of flak for these revelations. Such a hypocrite, and so on. But at the same time, it was possible to "forgive" him—as several commentators did on both sides of the Atlantic—because he had been so young (yes, of course) and because, after all, his service in the Waffen SS was service in a military organization that was, as his story shows, not really a volunteer army. And so it goes.

But, however, and. . . it simply makes no sense (no matter how sentimentally appealing to some) to define the classic Waffen SS by what parts of its decimated ranks became as it was falling apart along with Germany itself. And, in any case, the fact of a modified "conscription" is profoundly irrelevant unless it could be shown to have had some positive effect upon Waffen SS behavior. That is, the question is relevant only if Eastern European and heavily Volksdeutsche units, where most press-ganging occurred, behaved differently in the field than did the classic Waffen SS, and if crack divisions reformed their behavior during the terminal spasms when complemented by forced replacements. I refer of course to the matter of atrocities—the issue which ultimately gave the Waffen SS its fearsome reputation even more than its being the specifically Nazi-party (more than just German) army and its well-deserved press as one of the truly elite military forces of modern history.

Exclude the thousands of Jews, Polish intellectuals, and psychiatric patients murdered in September 1939 by three Totenkopf regiments, since this was before Totenkopf officially became Waffen SS. Exclude the notorious *Einsatzgruppen*, the mobile killing squads who carried the burden of the Final Solution before the perfection of the death camps, who were only partly composed of Waffen SS soldiers and not under Waffen SS control. Exclude those Waffen SS responsible for the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto, who were in training battalions and thus merely receiving practical instruction in atrocity. After these acquittals through technicalities, the number of known atrocities is stunning.

The Nuremberg prosecution had a letter from the Waffen SS command office to Himmler, 14 October 1941: "I deliver the following report regarding the commitment of the Waffen SS in the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia during the civilian state of emergency": 99 shootings and 21 hangings in Prague, 54 shootings and 17 hangings in Brno. "Total: 191 executions (including 16 Jews)." The prosecution's point was not the *number* of executions, which in the context of the Nazi criminal record was relatively modest (!); the point was that executions were Waffen SS *policy*. Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, which had been refitting in Czechoslovakia for the Russian invasion, had departed by this time, and as the Nuremberg tribunal didn't identify which unit, we will have to leave the murderers anonymous. But murders in other cases are identified.

At Paradis, France, in 1940, 100 British prisoners were machine-gunned against a wall by Totenkopf. *V SS-Panzerdivision "Wiking"* killed 600 Jews in Galicia in

1941. The same year Das Reich murdered 920 Jews in Minsk.

Over a three-day period in 1942, Leibstandarte executed 4,000 Soviet POWs. According to Soviet estimates 20,000 citizens of Kharkov were murdered by Leibstandarte and Totenkopf. Only the number seems to be in doubt; I've also seen 10,000.

In 1943 the Italian village of Boves suffered mass executions by Leibstandarte. Das Reich murdered 99 French civilians in Tulle, the summer of 1944, and then murdered 642 more in October in Oradour-sur-Glanes.

The *XII SS-Panzerdivision "Hitler Jugend"* killed 64 British and Canadian prisoners in Normandy in 1944. And, of course, during the Battle of the Bulge, 71 American prisoners (some say 86) were machine-gunned near Malmédy by Leibstandarte.

So far we are talking about the militarily "elite" Waffen SS divisions. How about the relatively "lesser" units?

In the Pripet Marshes in 1941, 259 Soviet POWs and 6,504 civilians were killed by *SS-Kavalleriebrigade "Florian Geyer."* In the same region in 1943 the Dirlwanger Brigade of German criminals assisted General Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski's special SS anti-partisan commandos, and Oskar Dirlwanger was awarded the Cross of Gold for his troubles. Gerald Reitlinger (*The SS: Alibi of a Nation*) observed, "The strange thing about those 15,000 dead partisans is that only 1,100 rifles and 326 pistols were found on them." Untold numbers of Yugoslavs were murdered by the *VII SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgsdivision "Prinz Eugen"* (Volunteer Mountain Division) in the Balkan campaigns; for example, the reprisal killings of the population of the village of Kosutica, summer 1943.

The Dirlwanger Brigade and the Russian formation of Bronislav Kaminski shocked even the Germans (so they said) for their rampant, but uncounted, slaughterings during the 1944 Warsaw uprising. The much-rewarded Dirlwanger received the Knight's Cross for his efforts. The SS later claimed Kaminski's brigade was not a regular SS formation; perhaps, but Kaminski held the rank of SS-Oberführer (Senior Colonel).

The Polizei Division committed reprisal killings of Greek civilians at Klissura in 1944. And in the same year on the Italian Arno front, an estimated 2,700

Italian civilians were murdered by *XVI SS-Panzer Grenadier Division "Reichsführer-SS."*

And of course these are only the dramatic instances: witnessed or confessed and significant numbers. They say nothing of the killing of one or two or ten civilians or prisoners of war here and there, which is hard to believe did not happen. It was on record at Nuremberg that in the Hitler Jugend division which killed the 64 British and Canadian prisoners there were for selected companies and battalions "secret orders to the effect that SS troops should take no prisoners and that prisoners were to be executed after having been interrogated." The tribunal felt "the conclusion was irresistible that it was understood throughout the Division that a policy of denying quarter or executing prisoners after interrogation was openly approved." Given their quite remarkable and repetitive histories of atrocity it's hard to believe that similar orders and/or understandings did not prevail from time to time in Leibstandarte, Das Reich, and Totenkopf. Especially Totenkopf, with its historic connections to the camp machinery. Charles W. Sydnor (*Soldiers of Destruction: The SS Death's Head Division*) observes that it was so often the case that atrocities not committed by Totenkopf were committed by units commanded by men who had earned their grades in Totenkopf before being transferred. So what we have in the reported atrocities is only the tip of the iceberg? Hard not to think so. In any case it would take an act of blind faith to think that what we know happened is all that happened.

Just focusing on the units "credited" above: Totenkopf, Wiking, Leibstandarte, Das Reich, and Hitler Jugend were the only crack Panzer divisions mentioned, and were German (Wiking having also considerable Scandinavians) and overwhelmingly volunteer in the true sense. Florian Geyer and Reichsführer-SS were majority Reichsdeutsche with minority Volksdeutsche. Prinz Eugen was majority Volksdeutsche. Dirlwanger was—remember—press-ganged German criminals. Is there some truly distinguishing pattern that I have missed? Admitting that in the last year there were some conscripts in the crack units, it is worth noting as Reitlinger does that "The company which carried out the massacre at Oradour-sur-Glanes in June 1944 was a typical latter-day SS infantry company." (Or battalion rather: 1st Battalion of 4th Regiment of Das Reich.) "It consisted partly of redundant ground staff of the Luftwaffe, drafted piecemeal into the SS, and partly of conscripted Alsatians who had been brought up as French citizens." I

repeat my question of just above.

Now, given the astonishing history of Waffen SS atrocities it is amazing that any German not a Waffen SS veteran (or related to one) would wish to insist that it was merely a "fourth force" within the Wehrmacht, soldiers just like the others. It is amazing that Germans would not want the Waffen SS segregated, so to speak, *from* the ordinary military and *in* German memory. Otherwise, atrocity is Wehrmacht practice and policy! Better the truth: the Waffen SS were not soldiers just like the others.

And the *SS-Männer* at Bitburg were—the irony is brutal—from the Das Reich division! The not-universal-volunteer argument, to have any worth at all in this context, would have to show that only the Old Hands murdered at Tulle and Oradour—which we will never know. Were those buried at Bitburg specifically guilty? Well, who knows? But it's irrelevant in any case. We deal here with symbols. As President Reagan's visit was a symbolic gesture.

The ironies will not cease, even if some of them are the sort that can only be realized in retrospect, since it is unreasonable to expect people to know everything that is going on and has gone on that impinges on their current actions. I suppose it is reasonable that some principals of the Bitburg extravaganza (German principals at any rate) might have been aware that during the May of the president's visit veterans of the Totenkopf division were celebrating a reunion in Nesselwang, and must have been excited by events only five hours away. But it's a good bet that some of those Death's Headers did not miss what principals probably did, that this contribution to the gesture toward rehabilitation of the Waffen SS as soldiers-just-like-the-others should have taken place in anticipation of, and in, Bitburg—which city was, in 1944, a staging ground for *SS-Oberstgruppenführer* (Colonel General) Sepp Dietrich's *VI SS-Panzerarmee* for the Battle of the Bulge, in which 19,000 Americans died, including those 71 at the Malmédy massacre, for which Dietrich (Hitler's favorite general) went to prison.

One final irony:

On my last day in Bitburg, September 1985, I wandered up the promenade Trierer Strasse to a small park honoring a Bitburg legend. Six statues of boys wearing animal skins; a plaque telling a story. I copied the plaque legend (translated

here) in my notebook.

“It was in the Thirty Years War. Swedish cavalry laid siege to Bitburg and wished to starve out the city. The Bitburgers were ready to surrender, when an alderman had a cunning idea. Young lads disguised themselves in furs of goats already slaughtered for need, and appeared thus on the city walls. The Swedes let themselves be deceived by the apparently still large stocks. They raised the siege and pulled out from here. Since then we Bitburgers are called ‘Gaessestrepper.’”

I couldn't translate *Gaessestrepper*—although I had a vague idea—but I assumed I could turn to a larger dictionary when at home. I did, but no such word. I called the West German consulate in New York, but the person I spoke to drew a blank: it has to be dialect. Goat is *Ziege* in High German, and that's the word used in the text. *Geiss* is South German for goat, and while Bitburg isn't so far south, *Gaesse* looks sufficiently similar. *Strepper*? No such word in dictionaries. The visual clue that it looks like “stripper” tells one something. An Austrian friend and colleague suggested *Streifer*, not exactly a proper word, but perhaps some nominative permutation of *streifen*, which can mean anything from “wander” to “glance” to “scrape off” (butter) to “slip off” (shoes or ring) to “pull on/off” to “strip” (leaves). So “stripper” looked good.

On my 1986 visit I made a point of asking several people. They all explained with enthusiasm and amusement. *Gaessestrepper*: one who strips off and pulls on a goat skin. That is—although no one said it so directly—one who pulls the wool over your eyes. *A hoodwinker*.

Samuel Hux is Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at York College of the City University of New York. He has published in *Dissent*, *The New Republic*, *Saturday Review*, *Moment*, *Antioch Review*, *Commonweal*, *New Oxford Review*, *Midstream*, *Commentary*, *Modern Age*, *Worldview*, *The New Criterion* and many others.

To comment on this article, please click