

## [Giles on Goeschel, 'Suicide in Nazi Germany'](#)

Review published on Wednesday, November 28, 2012

**Christian Goeschel.** *Suicide in Nazi Germany*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. vii + 247 pp. Bibliography, index. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-953256-8.

**Reviewed by** Geoffrey J. Giles (University of Florida) **Published on** H-German (November, 2012)  
**Commissioned by** Benita Blessing

### **Sol Invictus: The Inextinguishable Light of Those Who Thought to Remove Themselves from History**

On May 12, 1945, nine days after the city of Hamburg had surrendered to the British forces, Lieutenant Hans Ochsenius spent a congenial evening at home, playing cards with his invalid mother and his father, a retired lieutenant-colonel. He gave no sign of any dark plans, yet the following morning his mother found him dead in his bedroom, where he had deliberately and tidily undertaken his own suicide.

Hans had been in town for the past month with soldiers from his propaganda company, assigned to stiffen the resolve of the local citizenry via the Hamburg radio transmitter. A fanatical disciple of Adolf Hitler, he also swallowed the fantasies of Joseph Goebbels about the vengeful cruelties to which the Allies would subject Germans (and especially Nazis), if the latter did not hold out and win the war. However, he was smart enough to see that defeat was coming, and, as he revealed in his suicide note, had already planned to kill himself in March 1945, in an absurdly theatrical gesture, in the Barbarossa Tower at Trifels Castle in the Palatinate, where the crown jewels of the Holy Roman Empire had been held in medieval times. Instead, he decided to see his parents one last time, though the decision to kill himself held firm. Having served for seven years as the *Gaustudentenführer* of Hamburg's National Socialist Students' Association (NSDStB), he was convinced that the Allies had it in for him. His suicide note stated: "This little piece of life! Cling abjectly to life simply to preserve this *corpus*, until they pick me up for torments without end? No! Rather a conclusion in dignity and honor!"[1] The persecution that he would undergo would be quite unfair, he thought, because he had been a good Nazi, an intellectual, decent Nazi, unlike the uneducated rabble who had apparently committed certain atrocities. And he did not want to be associated with them. "The vermin amongst these bigwigs always look askance at people like me out of jealousy for my qualities. Get hounded now along with them just to console such creatures? Do you want that?"[2] He also took comfort from one of literary Germany's most famous suicides, Heinrich von Kleist, whose death mask (along with those of Beethoven and Frederick the Great) had adorned his bedroom wall since his teenage years. A biography of Kleist was on his bedside table the night he killed himself.

Hans Ochsenius came of age, believing in Germany's greatness, at a time when the country had been turned upside down. His family had suffered heavy losses in the hyperinflation. However, "Hans believed quite sincerely that he had discovered not only the solution to all Germany's ills but also the canker at the root of her troubles. These were respectively: National Socialism and the Jews. Over cups of cocoa, and with pictures of Hitler in many different postures pinned to the walls about us, Hans told me why he thought that National Socialism was the only thing which could save Germany

from complete chaos ... . Unless the Nazis came to power there would be no hope of a job for him when he left university, for [his parents] had no influential Jewish friends." [3] The speaker is Christabel Bielenberg, later to marry a German who was arrested following the July 1944 plot against Hitler. But during the Weimar period, she was taking singing lessons in Hamburg, and lodging with the Ochsenius family, though she does not mention the family name in her well-known memoir. She found the enthusiasms of "the apple of his parents' eye" rather surprising: "Hans was by nature a gentle fellow, but sometimes when he really got going he rose to his feet, his face flushed, and struck poses very like those in the postcards on the walls. I never asked him whether he practiced in front of a mirror, because I liked him and he was too honest and too earnest to be teased. He lent me Hitler's *Mein Kampf* to read, and I kampfped with four turgid pages before giving up." [4]

Remarkably, there exists a doubtless wholly unknown photograph of Christabel Burton, as she then was, giving what looks much like a Hitler salute with Hans. The niece of both Lord Northcliff and Lord Rothermere, newspaper magnates in the First World War, she stands arm in arm with Ochsenius, whom she apparently always called Hans-Adolf, doubtless as an affectionate tease (after all!) about his Nazi fanaticism. They are both smiling broadly, so it is clearly more in fun than out of serious conviction, and the date is 1927, when the Nazi Party was still in the doldrums. [5]

A respectable Nazi, then? Certainly a Nazi from deep conviction, willing to overlook parts of party policy he disagreed with. The application of his father to join the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party) for example, was rejected due to past membership in a Freemasons' lodge. [6] Did he shut his eyes to atrocities committed against the Jews? His father commented reprovingly in his postwar memoir of his son: "No word of judgment ever crossed your lips about the eradication of Jewry in Germany, which was pursued with subhuman brutality by Hitler." [7] Ochsenius the propagandist certainly did not shy away from blaming Jews in public for Germany's problems. In a February 1944 article about the history of Hamburg University, he noted that it was "a Jewish rector" (i.e., president) who had banned as "un-academic" some placards protesting the Versailles treaty. [8] Elsewhere he referred in 1942 to the Soviet Union as "this barbaric system of Jewish cultural destruction." [9] And he welcomed with enthusiasm the new student dormitories at Eilbecktal in 1939, although as *Gaustudentenführer* he could well have pondered the fate of the patients who were cleared out from this mental asylum to make room for the students. They were of course murdered in the euthanasia program. The emphasis in his propaganda pieces and his private letters during the war lay out the tremendous sacrifices and dedication of the German troops, fighting to achieve the supremacy that rightfully belonged to the German nation. The greatest moment of his life, described with an almost hysterical breathlessness, was when Hitler drove past him and his driver on a country road in Belgium in June 1940 on the way back from a visit to the front. "*Heil mein Führer!* I have never yelled at another person like that before! Just the two of us are standing there and slowly the car drives by, the *Führer* is sitting there, draws himself up and looks straight at us, turns halfway round to us as he drives by and raises his arm right up, and salutes *just* us two! ... This was an absolutely amazing day." [8] Yet it all came crashing down in the spring of 1945, and Ochsenius could not imagine a life without National Socialism. What he did imagine was appalling mistreatment at the hands of the Allies. In articles around the end of 1944 he was already inventing American atrocities, writing that their soldiers had rounded up the inhabitants of a village near Saarbrücken in the local church, and then set fire to it.

To most historians, even of the city of Hamburg, Hans Ochsenius is an unknown, minor figure.

Fortunately it happens to be possible to reconstruct a good deal about his life and thought. And this helps the historian to understand the motivation behind his sudden departure. Not mental illness, not acute depression, but on the one hand an irrational fear, and perhaps also the notion that this was the traditional, honorable exit for an officer defeated in war. In Christian Goeschel's book, in which he does not appear, we do not encounter such detail. The vignettes of his subjects, who do include Nazi suicides at the end of the war, are largely teased out from their short suicide notes. His most important source is a collection of these, ranging from 1901 to 1945, drawn up by the chief of the Berlin homicide squad, Ernst Gennat. They are generally very brief, but sometimes the police files allow Goeschel to probe a little further into the circumstances and milieu. First, he sets up a framework by reminding readers of Emile Durkheim's trio of egoistic, altruistic, and anomic suicides; he leans toward anomie as a "particularly useful" concept in "explain[ing] suicide as a historical event" (p. 2). He reflects also on how suicides were reported, cautioning that Catholic regions only appear to have a lower rate of suicide, because they were often recorded there simply as accidents. The very choice between the two German words denoting suicide could be heavy with meaning, *Freitod* having more positive connotations than *Selbstmord* (cf. note 1). Male suicides occurred at a higher rate than those of women, perhaps because men often retained firearms from the First World War. White-collar workers in particular often shot themselves. Women on the other hand, at least during the Weimar Republic, seem to have preferred methods that left a possibility of survival, such as drowning or slitting their wrists. Goeschel finds class differences as well: blue-collar workers tended to gas themselves (in Berlin) or hang themselves (as in Frankfurt).

There was something of a morbid fascination with suicide during the Weimar period, and Goeschel artfully compares the different reporting in the press in one case, ranging from the Communist (a pregnant woman, unable to pay her rent for three months and facing eviction, was the victim of a cruel society), to the Social Democrat (her welfare payments had been quite adequate), and the liberal press (she was an alcoholic who had abused her children even before murdering them). The Protestant welfare organization, the Inner Mission, even sponsored a prose competition on the topic of suicide, with a one thousand Mark prize, but the results were disappointing. Many entrants did not even bother to write an essay, but simply threatened to kill themselves if they were not sent cash immediately! The churches tended to blame secularization, urbanization, and the atomization of society for suicides; political parties saw political and economic conditions as the cause. Whatever the reason, the Weimar Republic saw plenty of suicides. Hitler himself noted in a speech in May 1933 that there had been over 224,000 cases since 1919. Goeschel asserts that Hitler was almost correct, and gives the number as more than 214,000, based on a later Nazi publication. It is a pity that he does not address Max Domarus's contention that Hitler's figures here were "as usual, exaggerated." [10] Domarus claims that Hitler had simply taken the highest Weimar annual average of sixteen thousand and multiplied it by fourteen. In fact, says Domarus, the suicide rate was higher in 1913 (23.2 per 100,000 inhabitants) than between 1919-23 (18.4-21.7 per 100,000), which casts doubt on the connection between economic misery and suicide. [11] Indeed, Goeschel's own tables show that suicides peaked for the 1920s during the relatively stable period in 1926. Admittedly they rose after 1929, when the Great Depression set in.

The harsh conditions for many Germans under the Nazi regime kept the coroners busy, with rates never falling much below the high of 1932. Goeschel puts the annual rate during the Third Reich around ten percent higher than in 1913 for men, while deaths of women were forty percent higher. He attributes this to the greater impoverishment of war widows, that is, an economic cause. Since

that would have spoiled the caring image of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, there was now little reporting on suicides in the Nazi press (reflecting a similar press blackout in Fascist Italy and the Soviet Union, where it was claimed that the utopian society removed any impetus for suicide). Moreover, it was cowardly or unpatriotic to deprive the community of your useful life. Beyond that, those who killed themselves were probably mentally deficient in some fashion, and Germany was probably better off without them. Even Gottfried Benn opined in 1940 that most people "who commit suicide belong to the imperiled and labile types whose reproduction is not necessarily desirable" (p. 62).

It is clear that some were driven to suicide by the repressive Nazi regime, but here Goeschel is a little inconclusive, noting that "there is little indication in these [suicide] notes of a potential impact of Nazi discourses on suicide" (p. 89). He cites the death of a man facing forced sterilization, but does not quite know what to make of it: "It is hard to say whether suicides among 'social outsiders' really led to a substantive increase in suicide levels in the Third Reich ... but this must remain a possibility" (p. 89). The chapter ends with another rather puzzling conclusion: "To a degree ... suicide with a political connection may have replaced suicide from economic motives." But then eight lines later: "The experience of ordinary people with suicide shows that it remained, to a great extent, a private act devoid of wider political meaning" (p. 94).

That comment is partly brought into question by Goeschel's observation, in his chapter on Jewish suicides, that some men deliberately put on their medals from the First World War before killing themselves. And he believes that many of these suicides were "not simply acts of despair" but "very often ... carefully planned by the time the deportations had started" (p. 117). In the early years of the regime, newspapers like *Der Stürmer* applauded the suicide of Jews; once the Holocaust proper swung into motion during the war, SS guards resented their own loss of control over life and death, and punished attempted suicides in the camps with twenty-five lashes. The presence of a dedicated ward for failed suicides in the Berlin Jewish hospital by 1943 underlines their increasing frequency. The deportations gave rise to between three to four thousand suicides of Germany's Jews. Suicides of non-Jews also increased alarmingly during the war. In the army alone, there were almost seven thousand suicides between April and September 1943, five times the number from the equivalent period two years earlier. Goeschel attributes this in large part to the defeat at Stalingrad and the growing realization that the invincible *Wehrmacht* might actually be defeated by the Soviets. However, the examples he cites are of men above the age of fifty, who would not have been liable for military service on the eastern front. Stalingrad was indeed a crucial turning point but the majority of Germans did not yet fear that the Bolsheviks were at the gates. When that became clear and seemed inevitable, the effectiveness of German propaganda about the atrocities to be expected led to a unparalleled spike in suicide rates, almost four thousand in April 1945 alone, at the climax of the Battle of Berlin. As the author rightly notes, there was a "notable lack of guilt among the top Nazi leaders," but rather a fear of retribution against them (p. 156). However, my opening vignette of Ochsensus shows that such a reaction extended much farther down the chain of command. There were indeed Russian atrocities in the vanguard of victory: Goeschel believes that many of the ten thousand Berlin rape victims who died, did so by their own hand.

In his concluding remarks, Goeschel attempts to tie this study to a big issue, and asserts that his subjects "cast into doubt the now widely popular and largely simplistic hypothesis that the Nazis hardly needed to terrorize Germans who were allegedly enthusiastic Nazi supporters and collaborators right until the regime's downfall" (p. 169). Yet that suggests that the tiny minority of

those who killed themselves were typical of the average German, which is clearly not the case. Those citizens in the clutches of anomie and desperation were outsiders; at the same time those on the inside, provided they followed orders, could feel, so to speak, lucky to be alive at such an exciting moment in history, at least until the disaster of Stalingrad. Given the inevitable limitations of his main source bank, those brief suicide notes, however, Goeschel has crafted a very well-organized and thoughtful investigation of a group of Germans whose personal trauma was rarely detached from the political and social milieu in which they felt unable to continue living.

#### Notes

[1]. The quotation is given in the lengthy typescript memorial written by his father, Karl Ochsenius, between Easter and September 1947, in the form of letters to his dead son, *Sol invictus! Denkschrift für meinen Sohn Hans-Karl Ochsenius, Gaustudentenführer Hamburgs, Dr. phil., Leutnant der Reserve, durch Freitod aus dem Erdenleben geschieden am 13.5. 1945*, 3, Archiv der Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte, Hamburg.

[2]. Ibid., 40.

[3]. Christabel Bielenberg, *Ride Out the Dark* (New York: Norton, 1971), 20-21.

[4]. Ibid.

[5]. The photograph is glued into *Sol invictus!*, 15.

[6]. The father was allowed to join after Hans had become *Gaustudentenführer*, with the proviso that he should never hold rank in the Party. *Sol invictus!*, 23.

[7]. Ibid., 38.

[8]. "Die Studenten der Hansischen Universität von 1919 bis 1944," Anlage 1, *Sol invictus!*

[9]. "Gedanken in der norwegischen Eisenbahn," August 12, 1942, Anlage 5, *Sol invictus!*

[10]. Sonderführer und Wachtmeister Hans Ochsenius to parents, June 2, 1940, Anlage 3, *Sol invictus!*

[11]. Max Domarus, *Hitler: Reden und Proklamationen 1932-1945, Band 1: Erster Halbband* (Wiesbaden: Löwit, 1973), 278.

**Printable Version:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=32700>

**Citation:** Geoffrey J. Giles. Review of Goeschel, Christian, *Suicide in Nazi Germany*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012. **URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32700>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).