‘The Truth about the Concentration Camps’. Werner Schäfer’s Anti-Brown Book and the Transnational Debate on Early Nazi Terror*

The step that carried Gerhart Seger across the border from Nazi Germany to Czechoslovakia at Bodenbach [Děčín] on 5 December 1933 marked the beginning of a life in exile and a career as an international anti-Nazi publicist. The thirty-six year old Social Democrat, Reichstag deputy for Magdeburg since 1930, had been among the first parliamentarians to be apprehended in the wave of political arrests conducted by the Nazi power holders in March 1933. Since 14 June, Seger had been held in the concentration camp at Oranienburg, a small industrial town of 15,000 inhabitants to the north of Berlin, before making an audacious escape on 4 December and successfully fleeing across Germany’s south-eastern frontier in the early hours of the following day. Once ensconced in Prague, home of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in exile and the destination for many fellow émigrés from the Third Reich, Seger devoted himself to writing about his experiences in the camp. Articles in the party’s Neuer Vorwärts came first, and then a book, published by its Karlsbad-based publishing house, Graphia, in the first week of February 1934 under the title Oranienburg: First Authentic Report by an Escapee from the Concentration Camp.¹

The camp, set up by local storm troopers in a disused brewery on Oranienburg’s main street, is paradigmatic for how the pre-war camps have ‘largely vanished from popular memory’.² Sachsenhausen, the larger, SS concentration camp established in the same town two years after the SA camp had closed, further overshadowed this early camp in particular. Indeed, Oranienburg is the Nazi camp that has fallen furthest from prominence: during its sixteen-month existence, it was rivalled only by Dachau as a byword for Nazi brutality, both within Germany and – to an even greater extent - internationally.³ Once synonymous with
Nazi terror, it also became a focus of the international debate around the meaning and significance of that terror.

A key contributor to that debate was the camp’s commandant, Werner Schäfer. By the standards of the early Nazi camps, Schäfer presided over an unusually violent regime: of around 3,000 inmates held at Oranienburg in total, at least sixteen either died in custody or as a result of injuries inflicted on them there; the majority of the fatalities occurred during Schäfer’s year-long tenure in charge. Seger was not alone among former prisoners in describing the brutal beatings meted out to inmates by Schäfer’s guard staff. However, overseeing such brutality was not the commandant’s only contribution to the publicity around his institution. Uniquely, Schäfer also helped to shape the narrative of early Nazi terror by writing a book in response to foreign criticism of his camp in general, and Seger’s effort in particular; this 246-page text in turn fuelled the debate further when published in early 1934. While hardly the only contemporary propaganda justification of the Nazi camps, his is the only book-length non-fiction effort, and the only account of a concentration camp to be penned by a serving commandant during the lifetime of the Nazi regime.

All the more surprising, then, that the book and its author have yet to be the object of sustained, systematic study; Schäfer remains an obscure figure. To date, a single published article deals with Schäfer, focusing on postwar judicial proceedings relating to his later career as commander of the Emsland prison camps. Despite increasing interest in both Nazi propaganda and the concentration camps in recent years, a scholarly edition of his book is lacking - the sole reprint saw it published in heavily abridged form, out of a perceived need to excise sections of the book serving the ‘glorification and dissemination of National Socialist ideology’. Ernst Nolte’s willingness to treat the text as a credible source has not been emulated by other historians. There are passing and isolated references to Schäfer’s publication in the historiography of the camps, yet analysis in depth has never before been
attempted. Even the historiography of the Nazi paramilitary organisation, the storm troopers [Sturmabteilung – SA], neglects this account of a camp run by storm troopers, authored by a storm trooper. More recent cultural histories of the SA, including studies of storm trooper literature and autobiographies, continue to overlook Schäfer’s book.

The present study will examine this now largely-forgotten Nazi perpetrator’s self-justification in print in order to demonstrate the key role played by lower-level functionaries, often acting on their own initiative, in forming the public image of the Nazi camps in the infancy of the Third Reich. This was a process in which a number of organs of the Nazi state cooperated. Far from being monolithically directed by the Propaganda Ministry, publicity for Oranienburg concentration camp involved the Foreign Office, the Gestapo, and the SA, including provincial storm troopers such as Schäfer, as much as it involved Goebbels and his colleagues. It will show how the international critique of Nazi terror was combatted by individuals who likewise operated internationally, and, as in Schäfer’s case, could do so without leaving Germany. The early years of the Third Reich saw a dialogic process by which commentators within the regime, perpetrators such as Schäfer included, established a narrative of the early Nazi terror by arguing with the contentions of external commentators, among them victims of the camps. Analysing Schäfer’s book as a response to critics such as Seger will reveal how argument and counterargument built upon and critiqued each other, with both sides of the debate engaging closely with the claims of the enemy, sometimes even incorporating elements of them into their riposte, in order to present the ‘truth’ about the concentration camps. Yet it will also demonstrate how the Nazi state’s attempts to refute alleged ‘atrocity propaganda’ could be undermined by the involvement of foreign sympathisers and domestic perpetrators in this task. At a historical juncture when the
international consensus on the Third Reich was still to form, and with understandings of Nazi violence contributing greatly to the hardening of opinion against the regime, Schäfer’s storm trooper account of a storm trooper camp presented an all too authentic image of the worldview of the rank and file Nazi activist let loose on his enemies, even as he attempted to whitewash the violent reality of the archetypal early concentration camp he ran.

I: The Making of a Storm Trooper – Werner Schäfer before the Third Reich

The third son of Max Schäfer, a high-ranking army musician, and his wife, born Hedwig Gesmer, Werner August Max Schäfer was born in Strasbourg, Alsace-Lorraine, on 18 April 1904. Schäfer thus belonged to that generational cohort too young to experience the First World War as soldiers, but old enough to perceive something of the conflict as children on the home front: the ‘war youth generation’, in the modish, albeit rather functional, terminology, or ‘victory watchers’ in Peter Merkl’s more evocative phrase. Experiencing material deprivation and paternal absence as a consequence of the war, while vicariously imbibing militarism and nationalism, these adolescents then experienced the disillusionment of the German surrender and the return of ‘defeated father figures’. While the crushing disappointment felt by many Germans at the lost war has been well-documented, there is little record of Schäfer’s own reaction. It may be surmised that the sense of injustice and loss was likely to have been acute in the Schäfer household given the father’s occupation, tying the identity of the individual and his family particularly closely to that of the German military and its fortunes. The evidence suggests, furthermore, that Schäfer senior failed to find another job after demobilisation. The lost war thus brought as a direct result a toxic combination of loss of national prestige, loss of homeland, loss of livelihood for the family, and loss of identity and purpose for the head of the household. Expelled from an Alsace
returned to France under the terms of the Versailles Treaty, the family moved in with relatives in Berlin in 1919, Schäfer resuming his schooling there for the next two years.\textsuperscript{17}

The family arrived in the capital at a time when the political atmosphere was febrile, as real and imagined Communist rebellions were met with violence from the paramilitary right. The army declared a state of emergency in different regions of Germany on no fewer than thirty-seven different occasions between 1919 and 1923; a Reich-wide state of emergency was declared in 1923 itself.\textsuperscript{18} The exact effect of these tumultuous events on the still-teenage Schäfer cannot be precisely known – there are no documents recording his contemporary reaction, and the reference in his book to 1919’s ‘red terror’ comes in an account by a British sympathiser. Yet he clearly absorbed radical right-wing sentiment while living in the capital in this period, joining Berlin’s nationalist ‘Olympia’ \textit{Wehrverband}, in his words ‘at that time the largest \textit{völkisch}-oriented organisation in Berlin’, in 1921.\textsuperscript{19} Leaving school prematurely that same year due to his parents’ inability to meet the fees, the teenage Schäfer worked briefly in a succession of jobs, among them piano-player, navvy and ironsmith.\textsuperscript{20} He balanced this employment with his paramilitary activities in the north-easterly working class, industrial and strongly left-wing district of Prenzlauer Berg. Schäfer remained a member of ‘Olympia’ until October 1925, by which time it counted 2,000 members, almost twice as many as its two closest rival organisations combined.\textsuperscript{21} Schäfer and his many fellow students and high school pupils in the organisation mixed with former army officers and hundreds of former members of the Reinhard Freikorps, a particularly murderous outfit involved in violence and atrocities in Berlin in the first quarter of 1919, and divided their time between street fighting and military training.\textsuperscript{22}

In the realm of civilian life, however, Schäfer met with frustration. His initial ambition of ‘dedicating myself to academic study’ was thwarted by his father’s struggle to reintegrate into civilian life: ‘because my father had lost all his property along with his
livelihood’, Schäfer recalled in 1928, ‘I had to abandon fulfilment of my wish’. Instead, Schäfer took a year’s apprenticeship in medical engineering while also attending commercial college part time, before being offered another apprenticeship at the Wertheim bank in Berlin. After two years thus engaged, Schäfer once more entertained hopes of devoting himself to study, this time by becoming a full-time student at the college. Again circumstances at home thwarted him: ‘the financial circumstances of my father, who had thus far waited in vain for the state help due to him as a displaced person [Verdrängter], shattered these hopes, too.’ An attempt to join the navy as an officer cadet came to nothing when he failed to submit his application on time. On the advice of a friend of his father, Schäfer joined the police, encouraged by hopes of rapid promotion to the rank of police officer. In April 1926 he signed up at Brandenburg an der Havel police academy [Schutzpolizei]. After a year’s training, followed by a year’s service as a junior constable [Unterwachtmeister] in Berlin’s Mitte district, Schäfer left the police service in 1928. A change in ministerial policy, as he put it at the time, favouring better-educated candidates for promotion, had made his ‘prospects for promotion as good as hopeless’, and prompted him to ‘return to financial life without demur’; twenty years he later he gave a somewhat different account of his decision, stating that he had no longer felt able to abide by his oath given the ‘political orientation’ of the police at this point, so ‘contrary to [my] own political convictions’. As from 1 May 1928 he was employed at a local bank in the Niederbarnim district of Brandenburg, leading its municipal branch in small-town Klosterfelde from 1930.

This professional activity was combined with political proselytization. Having joined the Nazi Party in November 1928, Schäfer founded the area’s first local chapter [Ortsgruppe] of the NSDAP in Klosterfelde in 1930, leading it for the next two years. While by no means particularly young for an NSDAP member – as of January 1933, 42 per cent were, like Schäfer, under thirty years of age - Schäfer was unusually young to hold a responsible
position in the local Party; nationally, only a sixth of all *Ortsgruppenleiter* in this period were less than thirty years old.\(^30\) Quitting his bank job in October 1932, Schäfer devoted himself to paramilitary life – having only joined the storm troopers in the spring, he was promoted three times in the ensuing year, attaining the rank of *Sturmbannführer* (equivalent to an army major) on 8 March 1933 and leadership of *Sturmbann I/208*.\(^31\)

II: The Showpiece Concentration Camp – Oranienburg and Foreign Visitors

Still only twenty-eight, Schäfer now found new employment as commandant of Oranienburg concentration camp. The first in Prussia, the camp was established on 21 March 1933, just seven weeks into Hitler’s chancellorship, to house prisoners arrested by SA *Standarte* 208 on that day. In common with other camps in this period, the overwhelming majority of the prisoners were Communists, with Social Democrats like Gerhart Seger a much smaller proportion.\(^32\) Here as elsewhere, most of the prisoners came from the local area - in the case of Oranienburg, from either Brandenburg province or from Berlin, which together accounted for eighty per cent of all prisoners; some thirty per cent came, like most of the guards, from Niederbarnim itself.\(^33\) The majority of the inmates were aged 31 or over, and 7.4% were over 50 years of age, a relatively high proportion for an early camp.\(^34\) Thus they were on average older than their guards, the majority of whom, like Schäfer, and most guards in the early camps more generally, were between 20 and 35 years of age.\(^35\) Guard and prisoner numbers both peaked in August 1933, with around 150 SA men guarding some 900 prisoners.\(^36\) Reflecting the chief function of the early camps – the breaking of political opposition – incarceration was temporary in practice; two-thirds of Oranienburg’s prisoners were released within three months.\(^37\)
It is unlikely that Schäfer was specifically selected as such for his new post - it was common practice across Germany in 1933 for the local Sturmbannführer to also take charge as commandant of a camp set up by his storm troopers within their area.\(^{38}\) While the manner of his appointment was arbitrary, the specifics of Schäfer’s new position were unique. The early Nazi concentration camps were never intended to be secret, but fulfilled a public remit: as visible sites of political terror they acted as a deterrent against subversive activity, while making manifest the clampdown on the left long desired by the German right. Extensive publicity for the camps furthered both purposes; Berlin’s Nazi Party daily, \textit{Der Angriff}, referred to the Oranienburg camp within 48 hours of its opening. However, this came at a cost in terms of Germany’s prestige: from the outset, Nazi terror met with negative international publicity. In this context, Oranienburg’s relative size and proximity to Berlin made it the ideal institution to present to international, as well as German, visitors as representative of all Nazi camps, while foreign criticism of violence perpetrated within Oranienburg in particular stimulated further interest in Schäfer’s institution.

From the first, therefore, a key part of Schäfer’s role was to present his institution to foreign and domestic visitors, a duty he seems to have performed with aplomb. In his own account of his experiences, published in 1934, former prisoner Max Abraham conceded that ‘Schäfer understood perfectly how to mislead’ visiting journalists; his fellow inmate Stefan Szende recalled a similarly calculating figure, cynically selecting ‘Jews and Intellectuals’ as the prisoners likely to make the best impression on visiting foreign liberals.\(^{39}\) Guided tours came thick and fast: it is estimated that German and foreign visitors arrived almost daily in the camp’s first four weeks. Within a fortnight of the opening of the camp, Oranienburg’s local newspaper reported on a visit by ‘Six gentlemen from the Chinese Embassy in Berlin’.\(^{40}\) The day the article appeared, Schäfer was again in company: aviator and explorer Tryggve Gran, part of Robert Scott’s Antarctic expedition twenty years before, visited from Oslo, and
subsequently discussed his experiences in a radio broadcast upon his return to Norway. In his book the commandant names further ‘influential foreigners’ who received permission to visit his institution: a representative of the New York Times four days after Gran’s visit; Stockholm journalist Sven Ludin on 7 April; ‘two American journalists under the authority of the Gestapa’ at the end of May. In later months interest cooled, but never completely disappeared - a journalist from The Times, for example, visited Oranienburg in October 1933.

These were a fraction of the total number of visiting foreigners; according to Schäfer, ‘representatives of the press of almost every country were led through the camp with the expressed permission of the government’. This naturally took place, in the commandant’s account, ‘without any restrictions, because there was nothing that needed to be hushed up or palliated’. All sincere observers were enraptured by what they saw, and ‘all […] could satisfy themselves that – apart from their freedom – the prisoners lacked nothing.’ The commandant also lent his voice to a programme for German radio’s foreign service, made at the camp on 30 September 1933; a Communist inmate was hauled before the microphone to testify to the ‘good and plentiful’ food and the absence of all ill-treatment.

Schäfer’s facility in French and English made him a better linguist than most camp commandants, and proved a boon as far as his propaganda duties were concerned. At Dachau a plucky English-speaking prisoner was able to inform British visitors of the realities of the camp in the presence of the oblivious monoglots of the camp SS; similar scenes played out at Heuberg concentration camp in Württemberg during the visit of Edmund Taylor of the Chicago Daily Tribune. Schäfer, however, was able to follow the remarks made by one of his Anglophone inmates in an encounter with British journalists; not daring to tell the truth, the unfortunate individual ‘had to sing a paean of praise to the treatment in the camp’, a fellow prisoner later recalled.
As his book attests, Schäfer preferred to display his camp to the likeminded, in visits which demonstrate the networks between individuals and groups on the international far-right. Space is found at the end to quote in full a letter written by ‘a young Englishman’, George Thomas, who had visited Oranienburg on 17 January 1934; praising the institution at length, Thomas vows to tell the British public ‘the truth about the German concentration camps’. Schäfer neglects, however, to mention the political affiliation of this individual, although the letter’s concluding words of abuse for the ‘Jewish lie-mongers abroad’, bent on abusing ‘the New Germany’, furnish a clue.48 The twenty-three year old Hull native had in fact served as a branch leader of the British Union of Fascists in south London the previous year. Leaving in favour of the smaller British Fascists (BF), Thomas had risen to self-styled ‘Storm-Leader and Director of Propaganda’ by the time of his visit.49

This encounter with the camp is recalled in the memoirs of Kurt Lüdecke, a former associate of Hitler who had briefly been held in Oranienburg himself at the time. Lüdecke has Schäfer describing the visitor as ‘a British Fascist, well recommended’.50 This was accurate on both counts: a Special Branch report on Thomas suggests the trip to Germany was facilitated by Ernst Röhm himself, through the latter’s friendship with Colonel Bruce Wilson, a leading BF figure. Received in Berlin ‘as a person of some importance’, Thomas had apparently met both Goering and Goebbels, and struck up such a close relationship with Röhm as to live with the SA leader ‘for some weeks’ during his stay.51

It therefore seems likely that Röhm was also instrumental in enabling Thomas to visit Oranienburg. This may explain the unusual assurance Schäfer apparently felt that Thomas would write a favourable account; Lüdecke claims the commandant delegated to him the task of shepherding the visitor around the camp, which would certainly have broken with his usual practice of conducting such tours personally.52 Lüdecke is advised that the Englishman is preparing an article for his newspaper; ‘a very important matter’, the commandant warns. For
all his sympathy for Schäfer, Lüdecke waxes sceptical on the utility of Thomas for the commandant’s ends: explicitly emphasising Thomas’ membership of the more minor British fascist organisation, he adds dismissively: ‘It was hard to conceal my amusement at this Britisher, beaming with importance in his black shirt, for I knew that his organization had no political importance and that the circulation of his publication was two thousand at the most.’ With total membership of the BF at just 300 in the year before Thomas’ visit, Lüdecke’s assessment seems doubly judicious given the organisation’s eventual collapse in bankruptcy in 1935.

Another visiting enthusiast for the Third Reich from the British fascist scene was Margaret Bothamley, who made the trip, accompanied by a Gestapo official, in October 1933. It is unclear how her connection with the Nazi government came about, though it has been claimed she ‘endeared herself’ to the movement by her association with the fanatical British anti-Semite Arnold Leese, having been a founder member of his Imperial Fascist League (IFL). Relatively early adherents of the National Socialists, rather than Mussolini’s Fascists, on the British far-right, the ‘pitifully small’ IFL, comprising only a few hundred members in total across its decade-long existence, had been established in November 1928. Bothamley would ultimately spend the duration of the Second World War in Germany, writing and presenting English-language radio broadcasts twice weekly for the Propaganda Ministry from July 1940 onwards, for which she was sentenced to twelve months in prison after a trial for treason at the Old Bailey in March 1946.

The frequent condescension to Bothamley as a ‘batty old biddy’ in popular literature on British traitors sits oddly with her near ubiquity on the interwar British far-right’s more extreme fringes and, indeed, her evident lucidity during the criminal proceedings against her after the war, the elderly defendant retaining the presence of mind to dissociate herself from her erstwhile broadcasting colleague William Joyce, executed for treason a month
previously. Her Kensington address a veritable ‘pro-Nazi salon’ in the late 1930s, Bothamley was active on the British extreme right scene - including Joyce’s short-lived British Union of Fascists breakaway organisation, the National Socialist League - until shortly before the outbreak of hostilities. She was a leading activist in the Nordic League, along with the IFL one of interwar Britain’s three main extremist anti-Semitic organisations. Founded in 1937, this self-proclaimed ‘association […] of race-conscious Britons’, aimed at ‘exposing and frustrating the Jewish stranglehold on our Nordic realm’, commonly attracted to its meetings audiences of sixty to two hundred people. Bothamley was also heavily involved with The Link, another pro-Nazi, anti-Semitic outfit established in 1937, acting as secretary of the latter’s 400-strong central London branch, and playing a key role in making it the most extreme arm of the organisation.

During her time in Oranienburg, Bothamley not only toured the camp, but was first taken by Schäfer to see the prisoners at work in the countryside, the very setting from which Seger would soon make his bid for freedom. Bothamley occupies some twenty pages of Schäfer’s book, far more than any other individual. The commandant recounts her visit, their subsequent correspondence – his follow-up letter and her reply are reproduced in full – and includes the text of a lecture she gave ‘seven times’ in Britain on ‘What I Saw in Germany’. The description of her visit makes plain Schäfer’s warmth and admiration for a foreign sympathiser. ‘She spoke very good German and was eager to learn’, he remarks approvingly, praising her ‘kindly, friendly eyes’, as well as her line of questioning, shrewd ‘as only a woman’s can be’. Bothamley is presented by the commandant as an informed, disinterested observer, telling him she had come ‘with very mixed feelings’ and challenging him on damaging claims in The Times, before concluding ‘after long reflection’ and with palpable relief that her interlocutor ‘must in reality be innocent [unbelastet].’
As so often in Nazi propaganda, a ‘neutral’ observer was in practice one whose views mirrored the Nazis’ own. Her lecture invokes the ‘terror’ of the Russian and Hungarian revolutions, as well as Germany’s ‘red terror’ of 1919 – ‘during this revolution 10,000 people were killed’. She juxtaposes this with the ‘so-called terror’ of 1933 Germany, in which some ‘excesses’, unavoidable in the circumstances, had been exaggerated by ‘foreign Jewish propaganda’. A long section is devoted to Jewish ‘control’ of the Weimar Republic’s stock market, media and cultural life, and their discrimination against and exploitation of the German population. While poverty-stricken Germans sold their overcoats to pay the rent, Jewish women dripping in gold and jewellery – and ‘mostly speaking Yiddish’ – strolled through the Tiergarten in fur coats. ‘Would we’, she demands, ‘not feel anger against such people?’

In this way, the most sustained anti-Semitic ‘justification’ of the regime in the book comes not from within Germany, but from a foreign and female observer. For Schäfer this was doubly advantageous: supposedly lacking firm political convictions, women were seen as politically impartial almost by definition, while the fact that the typical foreign observer was assumed to be hostile meant that one who actually agreed could be presented as truly informed and enlightened.\textsuperscript{63} Thus could these arguments be presented as ‘common sense’ and informed by knowledge and experience of German realities. As a token of his gratitude Schäfer sent to Bothamley’s Ascot home a gift of a picture of Hitler he had had drawn for her by a luckless (and unnamed) inmate, along with a letter expressing the hope that ‘you remember our camp fondly’, earnestly adding with unconscious irony that ‘I believe that in the few hours that we were together you have met people who do not deserve to be described as criminals.’\textsuperscript{64}

Such flattery had its effect, and Bothamley duly became as energetic a defender of the camp as she was of the regime, writing letters on Oranienburg to \textit{The Times}, praising Nazi
Germany in the anti-Communist, anti-Semitic British weekly *The Patriot*, and self-publishing her lectures on National Socialism. Increasingly Bothamley contributed directly to the regime’s domestic propaganda output. The lecture reprinted by Schäfer was also published by Franconian Gauleiter Julius Streicher’s anti-Semitic newspaper *Der Stürmer*. Bothamley also contributed an article to the Berlin daily newspaper *Das 12-Uhr-Blatt*’s special issue on ‘the Jewish question’, published in January 1939. Here she dismissed qualms about persecution of Jews as ‘sentimentalities’, expressed yearning for the ‘racial kinship’ of ‘Old England’ and ‘the New Germany’ to find expression in a ‘familial alliance’, and described an England presently ‘helpless’ in the face of a Jewish conspiracy comprised of the City, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, and the London School of Economics.

III: The Counter-Attack – Foreign Publicity and the Response

This international activity was intended to combat an international problem for the regime: the receptivity of many people outside Germany to denunciations of Nazi brutality. A key example was the *Brown Book of the Reichstag Fire and Hitler Terror*, published in Paris in August 1933 and arguably the definitive anti-Nazi publication of the 1930s. A transnational enterprise, the text was produced by a collective of (mostly German) communist exiles in the French capital, using international sources: its material on the camps alone draws upon Danish, British, American and Dutch, as well as German, newspapers. The *Brown Book* had a lasting impact, not least in its aim to convince world opinion that the titular fire had been the result of a Nazi conspiracy to provide the pretext for dictatorship. Its immediate impact was even greater: it became a bestseller, with 8,000 copies published in French, and perhaps twice as many in German. Ultimately translated into twenty-four languages, it went through more than fifty-five editions. An English edition, published in London, enjoyed six
printings of twenty-five thousand each.\textsuperscript{69} Crucially, broadly favourable notices in even conservative newspapers helped to extend its reach beyond a narrowly Communist readership.\textsuperscript{70} More troubling still for the likes of Schäfer, unlike its account of the Reichstag fire itself - riddled with inaccuracies, inventions, and no little homophobia - much of the \textit{Brown Book}'s material on the concentration camps was accurate.\textsuperscript{71} The commandant’s choice of the title ‘Anti-Brown Book’ for his own effort represented a backhanded compliment to the Paris publication, which had dealt with his camp among others. An unnamed female German journalist who had acted as an interpreter for yet another foreign reporter touring the camp is credited as the source for a ‘confidential report' presenting ‘appalling conditions’ in Schäfer’s institution, from prisoners sleeping on dirty straw strewn over cement floors, to Machiavellian overlords tempting inmates with opportunities to escape in order to fire on them.\textsuperscript{72}

Nevertheless it was Gerhart Seger’s book, referred to in the introduction, published six months later, that presented the most detailed account of Oranienburg yet. Seger’s nuanced description acknowledges both exceptions to the rule of SA cruelty and instances of hostility between the inmates, while allowing the reality of SA-on-prisoner violence to take centre stage.\textsuperscript{73} Seger devotes a whole chapter to Room 16, the ‘torture chamber’ presided over by the camp’s ‘sadist-in-chief’ Hans Krüger, in which Krüger and his colleagues had beaten two prisoners to death in the course of interrogations.\textsuperscript{74} Schäfer’s other minions are likewise exposed, not least Krüger’s successor, the ‘insidious, particularly infamous sadist’ Hans Stahlkopf; their brutality afforded both Stahlkopf and Krüger a notoriety in émigré and international denunciations of the camp that arguably equalled that of their boss.\textsuperscript{75}

An extensive character sketch is reserved for the commandant himself, characterised as ‘a thoroughly subaltern individual’ whose ‘boundless hatred for the Social Democrats’ exceeds his antipathy for Communists. While he had ‘laid hands on prisoners more than
once’, Seger concedes the commandant was ‘not often given to physical abuse’ of the prisoners personally, and was even, albeit rarely, prepared to listen to the inmates’ attempts to defend themselves against accusations of wrongdoing. Seger also notes Schäfer’s ‘isolated, and only very temporary’ attempts to distance himself in the eyes of the prisoners from the abuses carried out by Krüger. None of this, however, appreciably alters the reality of the camp, for which Schäfer remains ultimately responsible, Seger emphasises; the commandant’s ‘predilection’ for verbal abuse of the ‘defenceless prisoners, who naturally have to stand to attention to him according to the camp regulations’, belied his attempt to present a more benign figure. Instead of personally beating the inmates, the commandant was simply ‘all the more generous with disciplinary punishments’, bans on post and visitors, and assignment to punishment battalions; his ‘contemptible’ attempts to ‘pass the buck for all the criminal barbarities on to subordinates’ is merely indicative of Schäfer’s character, Seger fulminates.76

A worldwide success, and Graphia’s most successful publication by some distance, Seger’s book was translated into six languages: to the German-language original were added editions in French, Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish and Danish.77 An English-language book, A Nation Terrorized, was published in the USA a year later, comprising a translation of the original text plus a chapter detailing the tribulations of Seger’s wife and (not yet two year old) daughter, who had themselves been held as hostages in another concentration camp – Rosslau, near the Segers’ hometown of Dessau - after his escape from Oranienburg.78 The book also became a model for subsequent memoirs by former prisoners of the Nazi camps, such as Wolfgang Langhoff’s Moorsoldaten.79

Seger’s work was soon doing brisk business. In Stockholm, the Social Democratic press reported that the Swedish edition had already enjoyed unusually extensive distribution in its first two weeks since publication; a new edition of 40,000 copies was already being
In mid-April, the Reich’s ambassador in Oslo notified Berlin that the Norwegian translation, too, was ‘reportedly selling well.’ The Dutch edition, meanwhile, reputedly sold 53,000 copies in a single fortnight. Worse yet for the regime, Seger’s revelations were being disseminated even in countries lacking their own edition of his text. The German ambassador to Latvia reported that ‘Seger’s work appears to be being sold here secretly’, while by mid-February Estonia’s most influential daily, Postimees [‘The Courier’] had printed sections of Seger’s book under the headline ‘Oranienburg – the Solovetsky [Islands] of the Germans’. There was better news from Spain for the National Socialists. Admittedly, the Madrid newspaper El Socialista was publishing extracts from Seger’s volume, and the German edition of the book was now for sale in Spanish kiosks, the publishers having sent the book unbidden to ‘numerous Madrid bookshops’. Yet it did not seem to be selling well, nor had an edition in Spanish translation been produced. This did not, however, disguise the book’s overall success, and its remarkably wide dissemination for a publication on the Nazi camps by a German exile. According to the San Franciscan Jewish newspaper Emanu-El, by December 1934 Seger’s memoir had sold 210,000 copies worldwide, a figure which rose to 224,000 by the time the English-language version was published a few months later.

Such a reputational threat demanded a speedy response. Schäfer’s own book duly emerged within a month of Seger’s. The Berlin publishing firm responsible established something of a cottage industry for concentration camp propaganda, also publishing a novel with a camp theme in the same year, authored under a pseudonym by the editor of Der Angriff, Willi Krause. The commandant’s swift reaction was no doubt facilitated by the fact that swathes of the book were given over to reprinted newspaper articles dealing with (German) journalists’ visits to his institution. Fully a third of the book comprises articles and documents either verifiably or purportedly written by others. It was itself cannibalised in
turn as the source for further features in the domestic press; such was the speed with which Schäfer wrote and published his text that the Nazi Deutsche Zeitung had already begun serialising it in its entirety in daily extracts by 16 March, a mere month after Seger’s book had emerged. Beyond Berlin, the Hamburger Nachrichten’s illustrated serialisation commenced on 24 March 1934; Hanover’s Niedersächsische Tageszeitung and Stuttgart’s NS-Kurier followed suit a month later. Newspaper advertisements for the book announced a price of just under four Reichsmarks (roughly ten pounds in today’s money). The cover was adorned with a barbed-wire motif designed by Willi Horst Lippert, a prisoner in the camp since July 1933 and a graphic artist by trade – a laconic credit gives Lippert’s name and hometown but not his current circumstances.

It has been suggested that Schäfer did not write the book himself. There is, however, no persuasive evidence for this claim, which seems to be based more on intellectual snobbery than documentary proof, and mirrors the rather more understandable reluctance of his former captives to credit Schäfer with the sophistication necessary for sole authorship. The book is typically described by existing studies as having ‘appeared under Schäfer’s name’. Occasionally it is allowed that the commandant may have been entrusted with providing information for some unknown Propaganda Ministry employee to write up, although this assertion, too, remains unsupported by evidence.

Noting that Seger’s article in Neuer Vorwärts had claimed that Goebbels had commissioned the commandant to write the book, Schäfer hotly denied the assertion: ‘no such commission exists; this book was written on [my] own initiative’. He would have been further exercised when Seger’s work appeared in English, bearing on the cover a claim that Hitler himself had ordered the commandant to produce the book. As a witness at the Nuremberg Trials, Schäfer continued to assert, repeatedly, and fully twelve years after the fact, that he had not been commissioned to write the book by anyone else, and had not even
discussed the matter with another party – and this in the context of cross-examination on the more incriminating passages of the book, where the motivation to disown its content would have been strong. Other, more senior propagandists for the Nazi cause had indeed used the forum of the Nuremberg proceedings precisely to attempt to dissociate themselves from involvement in propaganda material. On the contrary, Schäfer explained from the witness stand that the ‘deluge’ of newspaper reports about the camps had convinced him to write ‘a justification of the Oranienburg camp’ personally.

The very content of the book itself speaks in favour of Schäfer’s claim of authorship. This is true not only of the occasional autobiographical flourishes cited in this regard by the more perceptive existing studies. The book’s dwelling on the subject of women in the camp, including mugshots of two and a lengthy account of the interrogation of one, complete with the threat of violence against her person, is unlikely material from a regime at pains to deny scandalised coverage abroad of its brutality against women, and which played down the subject of women in the camps domestically. Its elaborate and repeated praise for the SA as builders of the Nazi ‘revolution’, and pleas for recognition of their sacrifice, would also have been inexpedient at a time when the SA was restive and increasingly the object of suspicion at the highest levels of the regime.

Schäfer’s sole initiative, furthermore, is by no means as anomalous as it may seem. Especially in spring and summer 1933, the infancy of the camps and the Propaganda Ministry alike, the initiative for print publicity on the institutions frequently originated not from any government agency, but from local journalists or the camp commandants themselves. Regional newspapers in Lower Saxony and Hessen wrote to their nearest concentration camps, not vice versa, to request an opportunity to visit the camps and write an article on the experience. The first notices on Breitenau concentration camp, near Kassel, resulted from press releases sent to the local papers by its commandant. Numerous and diverse actors
were able to shape the official narrative on the camps, filling the vacuum created by what one historian has called the ‘lengthy process of negotiation’ during which the Propaganda Ministry ‘shaped itself’ and set its aims and jurisdictions, both *sui generis* and in relation to other government organs.\textsuperscript{103}

In such a context, in which individuals lower down the chain of command could help to shape the agenda, a further motive in writing the book was Schäfer’s personal ambition. Schäfer would have been right to perceive in Oranienburg’s status as the Third Reich’s ‘flagship camp’ an opportunity for himself.\textsuperscript{105} The act of writing the book demonstrated anew his commitment to and activism for the Nazi cause, at a time when few of his fellow storm troopers had any outlet for their zeal other than acts of random anti-Semitic violence. At a time when the massive influx of new members into the Nazi Party meant the prestige accorded to an ‘old fighter’ was at a premium, Schäfer made sure to find space in his book to assert his importance to the movement not only in the present, but stretching back to 1928.\textsuperscript{106}

There was likely a personal element to all of this, too. Schäfer was manifestly an ambitious individual, and had risen rapidly through the ranks of first the Nazi Party, and then the storm troopers. Yet he found himself needing to save some face following Seger’s flight. Not only had a prized prisoner, whose capture had been much trumpeted domestically, been able to escape from his ‘model camp’, a blunder which itself reflected poorly on Schäfer’s competence at a time when escapes were rare.\textsuperscript{107} Said escapee had then found his way into exile, and published from the safety of Prague a bestseller detailing the manifold iniquities of Schäfer’s institution, a further challenge for the commandant’s personal standing with his superiors, especially those trying to improve the regime’s international image, that could have had worrying implications for his career. A telling moment towards the end of Seger’s book finds the fugitive claiming that Schäfer had been given ‘a couple of clips around the ears’ on the yard of his own camp by a furious regional Party bigwig for having let him get away.\textsuperscript{108}
While this may well be a mischievous flight of fancy on Seger’s part, there is surely a grain of truth in the idea of Schäfer having incurred the wrath of his bosses.

It was therefore all the more useful to Schäfer to write the book himself, and to be seen to have written it. In one of his last acts as Oranienburg commandant, Schäfer composed a letter to Hitler on 24 March 1934, enclosing a copy of his book. His eagerness to ingratiating himself is clear:

I am humbled to take the liberty of presenting the Anti-Brown Book about Oranienburg … After very careful consideration I, as commandant of the first SA concentration camp of Standarte 208 Berlin-Niederbarnim, have written the book … as a weapon in the defence against the propaganda of lies and smears abroad.”

As Schäfer reminded his Führer here, the debate on Nazi terror was always an international one. Both sides operated internationally and used material internationally to build their arguments: exile publications used the German press, and the media of the Third Reich in turn used and debated with foreign publicity. The two sides thus engaged in a dialogue with each other’s contentions; an intemperate and highly ideological dialogue to be sure, but a dialogue nonetheless. Schäfer was no exception, and in his writings refers directly and often to the Brown Book, individual articles in specific periodicals, and Seger’s pamphlet, at times even giving the page number of the points in these texts to which he refers. There is also extensive use of what was to become a common Nazi propaganda tactic, namely to rehearse or even reproduce at length an opponent’s arguments, the better to try to refute them and expose their alleged ridiculousness. This added a further layer of international exchange to the debate.
At times, the very heavy-handedness of some early Nazi propaganda lent itself to the enemy cause. A photograph taken at Oranienburg for use in domestic propaganda, showing a prisoner climbing with evident difficulty over a wooden apparatus, was intended to demonstrate the healthy, reformative exercise on offer for inmates.\textsuperscript{111} The image was gleefully seized upon by the makers of the \textit{Brown Book} as an example of cruel, humiliating mistreatment of prisoners by gawping storm trooper guards.\textsuperscript{112} In turn, however, lapses of accuracy in émigré publications on the camps became the focus for rejoinders by the likes of Schäfer. Of necessity a conspiratorial enterprise, the \textit{Brown Book} had been cobbled together from an eclectic range of sources in various Parisian hotel rooms and apartments and, like other émigré works, had had to rely heavily on the Third Reich’s own newspapers as a source.\textsuperscript{113} Even its harshest critics concede that the material on Nazi violence was much more accurate than its account of the Reichstag fire.\textsuperscript{114} Yet weaknesses remained to be exploited. The \textit{Brown Book} had shown a flat-capped young worker flanked by guards at the camp gates; the caption asserted that the inmate was being ‘led away’, adding, ‘perhaps in a few hours the papers will report: “shot while trying to escape”!’ As if to further rouse Schäfer’s ire, the image fell within a chapter of the book baldly titled ‘Murder’.\textsuperscript{115}

Schäfer took full advantage of the fact that the image, culled from a German press report of April 1933, in fact clearly showed the inmate \textit{leaving} Oranienburg.\textsuperscript{116} The prisoner in the picture, he explains, is ‘carpenter Karl Vainceur of Glienicke, Niederbarnim, released along with other prisoners as part of the amnesty of 1 May 1933’.\textsuperscript{117} Upon reading the \textit{Brown Book}, Schäfer elaborates, his first thought had been to get in contact with this former inmate. The commandant makes sure to mention that in the meantime Vainceur had found work on a construction site on the outskirts of Berlin, an implicit validation of his broader message of the camp as reformatory, where jobless workers were converted into useful members of the community.
Vainceur, one of those German workers who had struggled for their socialist ideals throughout their young existences *[Arbeiterdasein]*, sat there as if turned to stone when I showed him his picture in the *Brown Book* with this utterly idiotic commentary. His first words were: ‘Something must be done! That’s a really mean aspersion!’ And something was done.\footnote{118}

Specifically, Schäfer had the luckless former prisoner hauled back into the camp to make ‘an important statement in the interests of the Foreign Office and the Ministry of the Interior’. Schäfer reassured the doubtless apprehensive Vainceur that this was solely so that he could be ‘used by the government as a witness against the atrocity propaganda disseminated abroad’.\footnote{119} On the initiative of the Propaganda Ministry, Vainceur was filmed in the camp for a domestic cinema newsreel, the second to be shot at Oranienburg. Just as he had appeared in the *Brown Book*, Schäfer notes with satisfaction, Vainceur stepped through the gate, suitcase in hand, and uttered a refutation of the book’s supposed claims: ‘As you can see, I am alive, healthy and in work!’\footnote{120}

**IV: Violence, Vengeance and Victims – Propaganda and the Storm Trooper Mentality**

As this vignette suggests, the manifold references in foreign publications to violence at Oranienburg represented a particular challenge for Schäfer. Perhaps surprisingly, the commandant addresses the issue directly. In the most oft-quoted statement in the book, he admits that violence had been a part of his concentration camp, albeit, he claims, only at the very beginning.\footnote{121} Discussing the first arrivals to the camp, he states:
I wrote at the start of this book, that I intend to conscientiously sketch light and shade. To conceal that some of the arrested had experienced none-too-gentle treatment in the meantime [i.e. between arrest and arrival at the camp] would be foolish and also completely incomprehensible. Incomprehensible insofar as such treatment was an urgent necessity.\footnote{122}

Schäfer casts his explanation in terms of the victimhood of his own SA men at the hands of these same violent agitators. After years of persecution, ‘beaten bloody, outlawed’, now ‘finally the moment had arrived when our old SA men could […] refresh the memories’ of their erstwhile aggressors.\footnote{123} ‘These people’, he writes of local communists, ‘simply didn’t deserve to be handled with kid gloves. If the hand of one or the other SA man slipped, God knows it was understandable.’\footnote{124} In a clear expression of the SA view, facilitated by the highly localised nature of early Nazi terror, of the concentration camps as a continuation of the street battles of the Weimar years, Schäfer thus endorses the violence of his men as righteous vengeance. Elsewhere Schäfer recounts with malicious relish how an Oranienburg Communist paramilitary, notorious among his SA men in 1932 – Schäfer refers to him by his nickname within the storm troop’s watering hole - found himself among the inmates the following year. Revenge was sweet: with undisguised contempt Schäfer gloats that, conducting the interrogation personally, he had brought this once-fearsome adversary to tears, then abject betrayal of his comrades.\footnote{125}

Yet retribution is not the sole aim of his storm troopers. Musing upon the ‘extraordinary dedication’ shown by his men, ‘marvellous educators’ confronted with ‘particularly impudent Communist rowdies’, Schäfer offers the following homily:

I often think of the story of the man who gave a boy a firm box around the ears when he caught him red-handed stealing an apple at the market. What great significance lay in this
small, but for us adolescents so instructive story! Years later a well-respected man thanked his ‘teacher’ for showing him the way by means of this healthy clip around the ears.126

Schäfer draws here upon ideas of violence-as-education common in Germany, and indeed adhered to across Europe, at the time. Corporal punishment continued to be seen as a valuable pedagogical tool at school and in the home, ‘a quick and effective, and thus desirable, form of motivation’.127 The ‘clip around the ears’ [Ohrfeige], in particular, represented a ‘tried and tested’, and – because ‘minor’ - socially acceptable form of punishment that also had a symbolic character, highlighting the inequality between the person being beaten and the one doing the beating. This was usually an inequality already manifest in the respective ages of the parties, mostly administered as it was by adults to children or adolescents, hence ‘from “above” to “below”’.128

Thus when used against grown men by other, younger, men, as in Oranienburg and other early camps, where storm trooper guards exercised power over prisoners often fully a generation older, the kind of violence Schäfer describes played a crucial role in establishing not only the power relationship in the camp but, by extension, the ‘revolution’ that had taken place outside: the ‘new Germany’, as represented by the SA men, were now the masters over an older generation whose time had passed and who now needed ‘instruction’ in the new reality of Hitler’s Germany. Not for nothing was the violence of young guards against older prisoners singled out in exile criticism of the early camps, Oranienburg included, as indicative of the wider iniquity of the Third Reich, a world turned upside-down.129

Here is a link with the Freikorps milieu from which many of the SA, Schäfer included, had stemmed. There, in Klaus Theweleit’s words, ‘the proletariat’ represented ‘a great horde of pupils and children’; the Freikorps, ‘men charged with the duty of teaching and education’, using violence thereby to affirm the ‘proper place’ of the beaten and beater
alike. Yet there is a further aspect to all of this, which likewise drew upon an inheritance of the Weimar years, during which the utility of physical violence in putting things right was familiar to many, not least among the working class. There was no suggestion that the beatings that ensued should be the cause for any lasting enmity, let alone a change in the fundamental relationship between the parties involved. Quite the contrary: the young nationalist males analysed by Theweleit ‘expected their victims […] to recognize beatings as valuable warnings and to display the requisite degree of gratitude’, while convincing themselves of their ‘benevolent’ pedagogic intent in using violence against ‘educable’ victims.

For Schäfer, therefore, there was no inherent contradiction between the frank admissions of ‘necessary’ violence quoted above, and the raft of letters reproduced towards the end of his book, purportedly from grateful inmates thanking him for their time in the camp. Against such a backdrop, the references littering Schäfer’s book to ‘none-too-gentle treatment’ of the prisoners by ‘marvellous educators’ begin to make sense, as does his rage at foreign criticism of camp violence. Schäfer’s insistence on the ‘re-educative’ purpose of his institution aligns his narrative with broader trends in the official representation of the early Nazi camps. Given their beliefs and background, men like Schäfer felt, and sought to argue, that they used limited, targeted violence selectively to break particularly stubborn characters – a last, but not in itself illegitimate, re-educative resort. To claim instead that the violence of his camp was endemic and – worse – gratuitous, was for Schäfer the most grotesque calumny. A similar line of thought underlies Schäfer’s discussion of foreign criticism of physical training in his camp. For someone like Schäfer, who had spent much of the previous decade in organisations – from far-right street-fighting bands, via the Prussian police academy, to the Nazi paramilitary organisation - where this was the norm, it was barely conceivable that the practice could be so misunderstood as to be characterised as ‘cruel
drilling’, even while he fully admitted, indeed emphasised, its military character. In an unusually histrionic passage, aimed — once again — at the Brown Book, Schäfer rails against this ‘typically Jewish’ distortion of a healthy process by which reform of the body reforms the soul, and the inmates are relieved of their inner lack of discipline.

This anti-Semitic interpretation of criticism of his camp is highly representative, as Schäfer manifestly shared with admirers such as Thomas and Bothamley a worldview which attributed all unfavourable views of the Third Reich to the machinations of Jews. As might be expected from a commandant who instituted physical separation of Jewish prisoners from the remaining inmates before such a thing was commonplace in the Nazi camps, Schäfer’s anti-Semitism is clear not least from his numerous sideswipes against prominent Jews, particularly those publicly critical of the Third Reich and its camps. More sustained expressions of anti-Semitic sentiment are rare; one of the exceptions, however, again hinges on a critical international publication. In one of the lengthier rebuttals in the book, Schäfer turns his attentions to the case of a welfare home for Jewish adolescents in Wolzig, rural Brandenburg, raided on 7 June 1933 by the local storm troop; forty youths from the institution, ranging from 13 to 19 years of age, were held at Oranienburg until 10 July.

‘After being treated decently, sadly far too decently’, one of the boys had written an account of his experiences which found publication in both The Times and the New York Times, Schäfer diligently recorded; The Times report even formed the basis of the dust jacket of his book. Inside, this ‘mendacious, completely distorted’ article is reproduced in its entirety in German translation, liberally strewn with the commandant’s shocked exclamation marks. Its numerous minor factual errors are also fully exploited in Schäfer’s attempt to discredit the substance of the article, namely its descriptions of prisoner suicides, everyday violence, and corruption among the guards. The lack of full candour in the article about the
purpose of the institution – the author describes it somewhat euphemistically as an ‘agricultural school’, with no mention of its corrective remit, perhaps for fear that this would damage his credibility – presents another opportunity for Schäfer. He duly rails against the mendacity of the author, and presents as typical the few of the adolescents who had had brushes with the law or prison sentences, in order in turn to combine in typical fashion the Nazi enemy categories of the Jew, the criminal, and the Bolshevik.\textsuperscript{140} ‘The files that arrived with [the transport], he claims, ‘showed the shocking extent of the previous convictions for criminal and political offences held by these degenerated, utterly asocial Jews.’\textsuperscript{141}

This one case thus allows Schäfer to rehearse some of the anti-Semitic accusations central to Nazi ideology: Jewish criminality, ‘pathological’ mendacity, and implacable hatred of the New Germany. In an equally typical dualism, however, this nevertheless coexists with notions of Jewish pusillanimity. Schäfer’s aside that Ernst Heilmann ‘gave us no grounds to take him into solitary confinement; he lacked the courage and the character’ is revealing in this regard, but arguably more a function of Heilmann’s position as a leading Social Democrat.\textsuperscript{142} As both a Jew and a leading SPD figure, Heilmann’s cowardice in Schäfer’s eyes was over-determined. Among SA men of his age-group, simple hatred of Jews as such was less prevalent than a brand of anti-Semitism that was inextricably entwined with a combination of social resentment, anti-bourgeois sentiment, and anti-materialism. These younger storm troopers identified the Jews as much with Weimar’s middle-class establishment, exemplified by the entrenched power of the SPD, as with Bolshevism.\textsuperscript{143}

The anti-bourgeois prejudices of storm troopers of Schäfer’s vintage, with their tendency to interpret loyalty to the Weimar state, and lack of radicalism in political struggle, as evidence of cowardice, idleness and a tendency towards materialism over idealism, found an ideal focus in the SPD.\textsuperscript{144} Little wonder in this context that his book furnishes abundant proof of Seger’s observation, confirmed by other observers, that Schäfer’s hatred for the
moderate left was the greater. Neither the commandant, nor his storm trooper colleagues more generally, regarded adherents of the political left as interchangeable. The tendency of some studies of the SA to generalise about attitudes towards ‘the political left’, lumping together Communists and Social Democrats, obscures important aspects of the storm troop worldview. In the book he differentiates sharply and consistently between ‘the two stripes of reds’. Schäfer finds words of praise for the KPD’s adherents, who ‘generally’ possessed the ‘more exceptional qualities’, namely ‘conviction, [and] courage’, alongside their ‘deeply criminal inclination’. Antipathy for Communists was laced with a grudging admiration of their fanaticism, reaching a macabre apotheosis in Schäfer’s description of a communist’s suicide in the camp as an ‘idealistic’ and ‘characterful’ act unworthy of ‘the idea and above all the “leaders” for which he struggled and died’. Markedly harsher words are reserved for the SPD men in the camp, ‘characterless’ leaders such as Heilmann and Seger above all. Yet even the lower echelons are abused as ‘ossified, calcified, enfeebled, yet mendacious, malicious and cowardly.’ Communists are at least real men, young and willing to fight, ‘honourable enemies who look one straight in the eye’; the Social Democrats are tellingly contrasted as ‘pussyfooters, hypocrites’ - unmanly and superannuated, as well as corrupt. More than once Schäfer refers to local Social Democrats he had released early: their ‘lack of manly virtue [männlicher Tugend]’ meant that to keep them in the camp would only have demeaned his storm troopers, he sneers. Mockery of the SPD’s hidebound constitutionalism, exemplified by Seger mailing his account of Oranienburg to the Reich Justice Ministry – and, indeed, the SPD’s similarly legalistic reaction to Papen’s illegal deposition of their government in Prussia in July 1932 – was something on which Schäfer could agree with his Communist adversaries.
As well as responding to international criticism, Schäfer’s book demonstrates concern for the international political context within which the Third Reich found itself. The notion that Germany was not being treated as an equal partner by the wider world, an article of faith for National Socialists, is voiced at length. ‘Is not every Frenchman, every Englishman, every American also a blackguard [Lump] in the eyes of his Fatherland-loving compatriots’, he fulminates, ‘if he slings mud at his Fatherland [?].’¹⁵¹ ‘Why’, he demands plaintively, ‘can those abroad not muster any understanding for this?’ He and his colleagues asked themselves this ‘daily, hourly’, he asserts, when they read ‘certain foreign newspapers’ which, reputable though they were, nevertheless seemed willing to print ‘the most preposterous fairy-stories’. In Schäfer’s mind, the international press could both reflect the foreign policy of other nations, and play a decisive role in shaping it - he immediately turns to international diplomacy itself. ‘To speak of a policy of understanding [Verständigungspolitik] on the one hand, while one systematically helps to undermine trust on the other – that can only be a dishonest solution to unresolved existential issues between peoples’, and one which every rational person must therefore reject, he urged.¹⁵²

Schäfer was writing at a time – early 1934 – when Britain and France could have crushed Germany militarily. Precisely the violence and nationalistic chauvinism of the regime’s first year had compounded the geopolitical isolation Hitler inherited from his predecessors. Domestically ‘coordinated’, the Nazi regime was still weak in international terms – the recent friendship treaty with Poland was the only real progress made at this point, and there was a genuine fear, in some quarters at least, of intervention against Germany.¹⁵³

We, of course, know that London and Paris ultimately did not crush the nascent Nazi state, but this was by no means a foregone conclusion from the point of view of Nazi activists like Schäfer. This international context only made the battle of meanings more crucial, even –
perhaps especially - for such relatively lowly figures. For if Britain, France and the USA were to side with the Gerhart Segers of the world, what implications did that have for Germany? The fact that individuals like Seger tended to yoke together discussion of their experiences behind Nazi barbed wire with dire warnings of German rearmament would only have made the perceived threat more acute. The cooler heads in the Propaganda Ministry ultimately decided Schäfer’s effort was not the best tool in this ongoing, wider battle, yet this does not diminish the importance of this additional motivation for Schäfer. Time and again he returns to the sacrifices he and his fellow storm troopers had made to build ‘the new Germany’, before and since Hitler came to power. The desire to remind his superiors of the SA’s contribution was only part of the motivation here.

For men like Schäfer, their struggle was Germany’s struggle, and vice versa. Should international opinion turn against Germany, the possibility arose of the Third Reich being snuffed out by the old adversaries in London, Paris and Washington DC, and the dreaded rerun of 1918. The remarks in Schäfer’s letter to Bothamley seem absurd at first in their juxtaposition of the parochial and the international. He expressed the earnest hope that his camp had impressed upon her ‘that here all is being done to save the entire world from the scourge of communism!’ Germany’s predicament, he continued, was Europe’s predicament. ‘When unconscionable individuals abroad attempt to incriminate the German Reich of Adolf Hitler with falsehoods and lies, they increase Europe’s plight and open the door to Bolshevist Asia.’ As if to prove his point, the next sentence informs Bothamley of the latest attack on his camp in another Parisian émigré publication.

Such sentiments explain why, for Schäfer, the exact course of events in his disused brewery in provincial Brandenburg needed to be set out; why the world needed to know, for example, that far from having been murdered, twenty-six year old Communist Walter Klausch, from the outskirts of Potsdam, had committed suicide (Schäfer even claimed to have
tried to revive the prisoner himself). For Schäfer, criticism of his camp and his men risked far-reaching consequences, which could undo not only the fruits of their struggle, but that of all adherents of Hitler’s movement; his book was his part in securing the reputation of the Third Reich internationally – and thereby its future.

Such hopes were to be frustrated: the book was met with indifference by most of the mainstream international press, and responses were largely confined to those individuals or publications attacked within its pages. The newspaper of the exiled SPD published an immediate response, across three-quarters of its front page. Once again the same photographs were used for different purposes by the two sides of the argument. Borrowing the Gestapo mugshots of Seger, Heilmann and other leading SPD men from Schäfer’s book, in which the necessarily unflattering images had been held up as proof of their lack of worth as political leaders, the newspaper asserted that their desperate visages ‘say better than any words, how it has been for them’ in the camp. An article in a Prague-based anti-Nazi periodical was devoted to Schäfer’s ‘crown witness’, Margaret Bothamley. Focusing on her anti-Semitism, it poured scorn on her assertion regarding Schäfer’s men that ‘I would voluntarily leave a beloved child in the charge of these boys’. In his follow-up to his own book on Oranienburg, Seger included a sideswipe against the commandant and his ‘vain attempt’ to defend the camp. Outside the exile publicist scene, interest was scantier. Noting ‘much interesting material about the camp’, The Times’ Berlin correspondent drily commented on the ‘letters from released prisoners expressing gratitude for their treatment’ the author had included, ‘and a table showing the gain in weight of various prisoners during their internment; one man in three months gained three stone’.

Defenders of Schäfer’s effort abroad were few, and hardly impartial witnesses. In her missive to The Times, Bothamley asserted that the commandant’s effort ‘is not an “attack,” but a spirited defence against an attack on a group of young men who, I realized after close
and critical observation, were performing a difficult task with humanity as well as efficiency.' Chancing upon her letter during a brief visit to London, Seger was sufficiently incensed to arrange a showdown with her the following day. The ‘completely fruitless’ encounter in a hotel lobby saw Bothamley accompanied by a fellow sympathiser, George Knight, who presented Seger with a copy of his own pamphlet, *In Defence of Germany*. The former Oranienburg inmate is unlikely to have been impressed by Knight’s account of his own visit to the camp which, gushing over the ‘facilities for sunbathing’ and language classes allegedly on offer, exceeded those of either Bothamely or Schäfer himself.

These responses to the commandant’s book reaffirm however that the debate around Nazi terror was always, and on both sides, an international one: while the transnationalism of the critique of the Third Reich is well known, that critique also met with an international response. Schäfer’s efforts demonstrate this, while also revealing the limitations inherent within the international approach taken by the Nazi counterattack. Nazi Germany’s detractors, operating transnationally as a matter of course, were quick to exaggerate the transnational reach - and intent - of the regime; émigré publications such as *The Brown Network* asserted the existence of a veritable ‘brown octopus’, a ‘worldwide Nazi propaganda machine’. Attempts at creating an international platform for Schäfer largely came to nothing, however. A request by the Foreign Office, in response to the wishes of its ambassadors, for Schäfer’s book to be translated and disseminated internationally, met with a cool response from the Propaganda Ministry. Only a cheaper, untranslated, unillustrated edition was produced, commissioned from the publishers by the Defence [Abwehr] division, led by Hermann Demann. One of the Ministry’s seven departments, this had been established by Goebbels in the face of Foreign Office opposition in May 1933, for the dissemination of ‘active’ propaganda for foreign audiences. Two thousand copies were given to the Foreign Office for circulation to their embassies at the end of April 1934.
An abridged Norwegian edition was published that same year, but the book was never translated into any other languages; again suggesting that the Propaganda Ministry did not put its full weight behind the book.\textsuperscript{167} The Deutschlandreferat, the Foreign Office body responsible for monitoring Germany’s reputation abroad, vetoed as an ‘unpromising and primitive propaganda method’ an initiative by the leader of the Oslo NSDAP to hijack a Seger public lecture so that Schäfer could give his side of the story.\textsuperscript{168}

Schäfer’s unique initiative in writing the book nevertheless secured it some measure of continuing usefulness to the regime in the medium term. The volume was still being used as late as 1939, if only for the lack of similarly extensive propaganda material. The Gestapo, the German Foreign Office, and Germany’s American consulates continued to track Seger’s North American public appearances throughout the pre-war years, dutifully chronicling what he had said, where he had said it, and what the papers had reported.\textsuperscript{169} As part of this effort, the German Embassy in Washington DC wrote to the Propaganda Ministry on Seger’s activities in March 1939, bemoaning the fact that ‘the only material against him to hand here’ was Schäfer’s book, but praising the ‘detailed refutations of [Seger’s] atrocity fairy-tales’ therein.\textsuperscript{170} Domestically, advocates of the book were to be found not within Goebbels’ Ministry, but within the Gestapo and the SA itself.

Nevertheless, the most lasting impact of the book was less on international public opinion, than on Schäfer’s career. Headhunted for the role by Reich Justice Minister Franz Gürtner, Schäfer left Oranienburg at the end of March 1934 to take up a new post as commandant of the Emsland penal camps, near the Dutch border; an announcement in the local newspaper gamely highlighted the new man’s ‘sensational book’.\textsuperscript{171} Indeed presenting a favourable image of his institution continued to occupy Schäfer’s energies; the Bishop of Osnabrück visited the camps in summer 1936 on the commandant’s invitation, and obligingly enthused about what he saw in a subsequent press article.\textsuperscript{172} Schäfer continued in his post for
another six years, before being called up for war service on 25 May 1942, taking part in the battle of Stalingrad. After the war, Schäfer spent several years in British internment camps, punctuated by his testimony at Nuremberg. Never tried on any charges relating to Oranienburg, Schäfer was twice sentenced to jail terms in relation to crimes committed at the Emsland camps; in both cases, time spent in custody was taken into account, allowing him to leave the courtroom a free man. Unmolested by the courts thereafter, Schäfer died on 7 November 1973 in Lindenberg im Allgäu, outliving in the process his old adversary Gerhart Seger, who had died on 21 January 1967 in New York after thirty-two years’ residency there.

VI: Conclusion

Werner Schäfer’s activities ultimately had a limited impact on international opinion of the Nazi regime. The Foreign Office conceded the significant role played by Seger’s memoir in turning world opinion against the Third Reich, while international observers who took the time to compare Seger and Schäfer concluded that the latter had more reason to lie. Reluctance within the Propaganda Ministry to allow his book to reach a wider audience abroad further restricted its potential influence, as did factors inherent to the text itself. Schäfer’s reliance on ideological analogues such as Bothamley and Thomas, whose influence in their home countries was as limited as their sympathies were obvious, further reduced his chances of changing the terms of the international debate on Nazi terror. Yet his book demonstrates the ability of lower-level actors within the Nazi regime to contribute to the narrative on that regime’s actions, and the degree of concern at all levels of the Nazi state with managing its image abroad in its first years in power. Far from being indifferent to its international reputation, the regime sought to monitor and manage foreign opinion, entering
into a (highly charged) dialogue with its detractors in the process. This was a project which involved numerous government organs and obscure, low-level figures as well as the elite. Propaganda on the early camps was a collaboration between a multiplicity of organisations and individuals; publicity on Oranienburg involved not only the Propaganda Ministry, but also the Foreign Office, the Gestapo, and the SA, a fact which reflected the importance of the task as well as the familiar administrative chaos and competition over jurisdiction so characteristic of the regime. With no one organisation setting the agenda, ambitious individuals, a mid-ranking provincial storm trooper like Schäfer included, could play a central role, and in so doing fulfil a variety of objectives: from advancing his own career, to defending the cause of National Socialism, via championing his SA as the true progenitors of the ‘New Germany’. The downside of this in propaganda terms, and perhaps the reason the Propaganda Ministry set little store by the book, was that this was very much a storm trooper’s defence of a storm trooper’s concentration camp. While sharing with other propaganda on the early camps its claim of an Oranienburg as firm but fair reformatory for Volksgenossen, it diverged from this wider narrative in its consistently vengeful tone and its open revelling in violence even as it sought to deny specific brutalities; and this at a time when reports of Nazi violence had been a feature of the international media for a year, to say nothing of reports on storm trooper violence predating the regime.\textsuperscript{176} By 1934, violent settling of scores sounded very much like what one could expect from an SA concentration camp; Schäfer, in his own way, was only too happy to confirm this. The very authenticity of the vision of the camps offered by the commandant was precisely its undoing in propaganda terms.

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4 For the figures for total inmates and fatalities, see Berward Dörner, ‘Ein KZ in der Mitte der Stadt: Oranienburg’, in Wolfgang Benz and Barbara Distel (eds), *Terror Ohne System. Die ersten Konzentrationslager im Nationalsozialismus, 1933-1935* (Berlin, 2001), pp. 128 and 131, respectively.


9 See the comments in Ernst Nolte, Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917-1945. Nationalsozialismus und Bolschewismus (Frankfurt/Main, 1987), n. 9 p. 556.


13 For example Stefan Hördler (ed.), SA-Terror als Herrschaftssicherung: “Köpenicker Blutwoche” und öffentliche Gewalt im Nationalsozialismus (Berlin, 2013); Yves Müller and Reiner Zilkenat (eds),

14 Bundesarchiv Berlin (hereafter BA), R 3001/73678, Bl. 1, 5.


19 BA, R 3001/73678, p. 5.


24 Ibid.


28 ‘Zeugnis’, Kreissparkasse, Kreis Niederbarnim, 12 October 1932. BA, R 3001/73678, Bl. 22.


Ibid., p. 55.

On the age and origin of the guards see Morsch (ed.), Oranienburg, p. 157.

Figures of 170 SA men ‘in summer 1933’ and 911 prisoners in August of that year in Dörner, ‘Ein KZ in der Mitte der Stadt’, p. 128.


‘Chinesischer Besuch in Oranienburg’, Oranienburger General-Anzeiger, 1 April 1933.

Schäfer, Konzentrationslager Oranienburg, p. 106.


Schäfer, Konzentrationslager Oranienburg, p. 107.


SA-Führer Fragebogen, 14 August 1934. BA (ehem. BDC), SA Film-Nr. 169-B, Schäfer, Werner.


Abraham, Juda verrecke, p. 20.
48 Schäfer, *Konzentrationslager Oranienburg*, pp. 243-4, quotes 244.


51 PRO, KV 2/1336, 16 July 1935 Metropolitan Police report on George Eric Thomas, pp. 12a/1 and 12a/2.


53 Lüdecke, *I Knew Hitler*, p. 729. Ultimately the article seems not to have been published at all – a search of the BF periodical *British Fascism*, and of *The Patriot*, a weekly close to the BF to which Thomas is known to have contributed, failed to find an article on Oranienburg, by Thomas or any other contributor.


56 On Leese and the IFL, see Linehan, *British Fascism*, pp. 71-9, quote p. 73; on its shift in allegiance from Italian fascism to National Socialism, dated to 1931, see *ibid.*, p. 74.
57 PRO CRIM 1/1763, Deposition of Major Reginald Spooner, Bow Street Magistrates Court, 6 March 1946, p. 3; ibid., Statement of Margaret Frances Bothamley, 2 February 1946, Hamburg, p. 28; ‘News in Brief’, The Times, 28 March 1946.


62 Schäfer, Konzentrationslager Oranienburg, 124-5.


64 Ibid., pp. 126-8, quotes 127 and 128 respectively.

Margaret Bothamley, ‘Was ich in Deutschland erlebt habe’, Der Stürmer, 48 (1934).


Ibid., p. 101.

For example ‘Nazi Germany’, The Times (1 September 1933); see also the further examples in Klaus Sohl, ‘Entstehung und Verbreitung des Braunbuchs über Reichstagsbrand und Hitlerterror 1933/1934’, Jahrbuch für Geschichte 21 (1980), p. 314.


Braunbuch, pp. 278, 281.

Seger, Oranienburg, pp. 33 and 52, and 38-41, respectively.

Ibid., pp. 17-20, quotes 17 and 29 respectively.


Seger, Oranienburg, p. 27.


‘Segers bok redan ute i 40,000 ex.’, *Social-Demokraten*, 29 March 1934.


‘Notes for a Protest Against the Internment of Frau Gerhart Seger and Her Baby in a Concentration Camp at Rossau, Near Dessau’, p. 3. The University of Reading Special Collections, MS 1416/1/1/1236.

Deutsche Gesandtschaft, Riga, to Auswärtiges Amt, 28 March 1934. AAPA, Inland II A/B Band 2 R99479 Nr. 5823; Deutsche Gesandtschaft für Estland, Reval, to Auswärtiges Amt, 17 February 1934, *ibid*.

Deutsche Botschaft in Spanien, Madrid, to Auswärtiges Amt, 24 April 1934. AAPA, Inland II A/B Band 2 R99479 Nr. 5824.


Peter Hagen, *Bormann gehört zu uns* (Berlin, 1934).

For example Schäfer, *Konzentrationslager Oranienburg*, pp. 86-106.

*Deutsche Zeitung*, 16 March 1934-19 April 1934.


On Lippert see Morsch (ed.), *Oranienburg*, p. 186.


94 Seela, Bücher, p. 182 n. 40.


96 On such an attempt by Otto Dietrich, Reich Press chief from 1937 onwards, see Jeffrey Herf, The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda During World War II and the Holocaust (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 22-3.


105 The phrase from Morsch (ed.), Oranienburg, p. 181.

106 See the perceptive remarks in Sösemann and Schulz, ‘Nationalsozialismus und Propaganda’, p. 89.

107 For newspaper reports on Seger’s incarceration and transfer to Oranienburg see ‘Besuch bei den Schutzhäftlingen im Gefängnis. Herr Seger will nun nichts mehr von der Politik wissen!’, and ‘Die anhaltischen Gefängnisse räumen. Seger und Kmiec auf der fahrt nach Oranienburg’, both Anhalter Anzeiger, 6 June 1933 and 14 June 1933 respectively.

108 Seger, Oranienburg, p. 73.

109 Letter from Werner Schäfer to Adolf Hitler, 24 March 1934. BA R 43 II/398 Fiche 3.

110 For example Schäfer, Konzentrationslager Oranienburg, p. 58.

111 ‘Bilder vom Sammellager in Oranienburg’, Berliner Illustrierte Nachtausgabe, 6 April 1933.

112 Braunbuch, facing p. 313. On the use of the obstacle course in Oranienburg see Szende, Zwischen, p. 37.


115 *Braunbuch*, facing p. 312.


117 It is unclear here whether the discrepancy in the dates is due to an error on Schäfer’s part, or whether the photograph was staged before Vainceur’s actual release.

118 This and the previous paragraph from Schäfer, *Konzentrationslager Oranienburg*, p. 171.

119 Bescheinigung, 25 September 1933, from Oranienburg concentration camp commandant Werner Schäfer. Brandenburgisches Landeshauptarchiv, Rep. 35G Nr. 3/42 (Film Nr. 49).


121 See the discussion, giving the misleading impression that in the quote Schäfer refers to the entire lifespan of the camp, rather than just the first night, in Longerich, ‘Vom Straßenkampf zum Anstaltsterror’, p. 30.

122 Schäfer, *Konzentrationslager Oranienburg*, p. 23. A translated extract from this and the following passages of Schäfer’s book can be found in Goeschel and Wachsmann (eds), *The Nazi Concentration Camps*, pp. 65-6.


Seger, Oranienburg, pp. 56-7; likewise ‘Besuch in Oranienburg’, Der Gegen-Angriff, 15 May 1933.

Klaus Theweleit, Male Fantasies Volume 2. Male Bodies: Psychoanalysing the White Terror (Minneapolis, 2003), pp. 293-5.

See the account of working class mining life in Hamborn in Alexander Stenbock-Fermor, Meine Erlebnisse als Bergarbeiter (Stuttgart, 1928), p. 81.

Theweleit, Male Fantasies Vol. 2, p. 290.

For example Schäfer, Konzentrationslager Oranienburg, pp. 238-43.


Schäfer, Konzentrationslager Oranienburg, pp. 57-8.

Schäfer cites expressions of this belief on the part of both individuals: ibid., pp. 244 and 139, respectively.

For example ibid., pp. 58, 146. On the exceptional nature of physical separation of Jewish prisoners in this period see Kim Wünschmann, Jewish Prisoners in Nazi Concentration Camps, 1933-1939, unpublished PhD thesis, 2012, pp. 96-100; on the ‘Jew Company’ at Oranienburg, see Julia Pietsch, Jüdische Häftlinge im frühen
Konzentrationslager Oranienburg. „Schutzhaft“ im Spannungsfeld von Antisemitismus und „Judenpolitik“, unpublished Diplomarbeit, pp. 105-111. I am grateful to Julia for agreeing to share her work with me.


140 On the level and nature of criminality among the Wolzig youths see Prestel, ”Jugend in Not”, pp. 314, 331.

141 Schäfer, Konzentrationslager Oranienburg, p. 109.

142 Ibid., p. 148.

143 Reichardt, Faschistische Kampfbünde, pp. 632-5; Merkl, Political Violence, pp. 480, 522-3.

144 On the features of SA anti-bourgeois sentiment see Reichardt, Faschistische Kampfbünde, pp. 643, 646.

145 See also Stoop (ed.), Geheimberichte aus dem Dritten Reich, p. 56.

146 As implied regarding the SA in ibid., pp. 617-21.

147 Schäfer, Konzentrationslager Oranienburg, p. 121.

148 Ibid., pp. 28, 32, 54 (quote), 172-3; quote in last sentence from Stoop (ed.), Geheimberichte aus dem Dritten Reich, p. 56.

149 Ibid., pp. 28, quote 54.


152 Ibid., p. 84.


154 See for example ‘“Hitler is preparing for war”. Ex-Reichstag Member’s Revelations on Re-armament’, Western Mail, 24 April 1934. More broadly see also the reference to German rearmament in the final sentence of ‘Miss Margaret Bothamley reist nach Deutschland’, Aufruf 1934, p. 478.

155 Schäfer, Konzentrationslager Oranienburg p. 127.

156 Ibid., p. 121.


158 ‘Miss Margaret Bothamley reist nach Deutschland’, Aufruf. Streitschrift für Menschenrechte 17 (1 June 1934), pp. 477-8. I am indebted to Ms Fenna Geelhoed of the International Institute of Social History for providing me with a copy of this article.

159 Gerhart Seger, Reisetagebuch, p. 25.

160 ‘Nazi Attack on “The Times”. Camp Conditions at Oranienburg’, The Times, 16 March 1934. For the weight gain claim see Schäfer, Konzentrationslager Oranienburg, pp. 245-6.

161 ‘German Concentration Camps’, The Times, 6 April 1934.

162 Seger, Reisetagebuch, pp. 25-6.


PAAA, R99574, Hermann Demann, RMVP to Auswärtiges Amt, 29 March 1934; Buch- und Tiefdruck-Gesellschaft mbH, Abteilung Buchverlag, to Güterversendungsstelle des Auswärtigen Amts, 21 April 1934; Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda (hereafter RMVP), 8 May 1934 (all unpaginated).

Werner Schäfer, *Hvad hendte i Oranienburg* (Oslo, 1934). It has been erroneously claimed that the book also appeared in English, Dutch and French translations. See Biereigel, ‘Schweigen ist Gold’, p. 44.


173 Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich, File Nr. ZS 586 (Schäfer, Werner), p. 3; Personalbogen, undated. BA (ehem. BDC), SA Film-Nr. 169-B, Schäfer, Werner.

