

Denunciation as a subject of historical research

Gellately, Robert

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

GESIS - Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Gellately, R. (2001). Denunciation as a subject of historical research. *Historical Social Research*, 26(2/3), 16-29.
<https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.26.2001.2/3.16-29>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Denunciation as a Subject of Historical Research

*Robert Gellately**

Abstract: As Europe's new police and surveillance systems were introduced in the late 18th and early 19th century, an integral role in their everyday operation was played by the provision of information from the population at large. Modern surveillance societies came into being over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries as citizens - for a whole host of reasons - began to watch and listen, and then to inform the 'authorities' about deviations they witnessed. More authoritarian regimes require more, not less, social involvement in surveillance and control. For one thing they want to control more aspects of social life.

Until recently, denunciations were at best considered marginal, even by most social historians. But historiography filled that gap in the last decade. It has moved this social phenomenon from the margin of the stories to the centre and produced quite different pictures, especially with regard to Nazi Germany.

Definition

Let me begin with a few remarks on the problem of definition: It is important to situate the definitions of denunciation in historical context, as these definitions often reflect social attitudes. The working definition I used in an essay with Sheila Fitzpatrick was essentially that denunciations are "spontaneous communications from individual citizens to the state (or to another authority such as the church) containing accusations of wrongdoing by other citizens or officials and implicitly or explicitly calling for punishment."¹ That definition is

* Address all communications to Robert Gellately, Professor and Strassler Family Chair for the Study of Holocaust History, 950 Main Street, Worcester, Ma 01610, USA, E-mail: rgellately@clarku.edu.

¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, Introduction to the Practices of Denunciation in Modern European History, in: Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, *Accusatory Prac-*

useful, but it tends to emphasize the negative or repressive side of denunciations. In fact, denunciations are often used for 'positive' or instrumental purposes.

"The punishment for wrongdoing" that is called for, is not always designed to uphold the law or to enforce a regime's policies. Very often the punishment is intended to achieve quite specific personal ends for the denouncer. Therefore, 'wrongdoing' that is denounced, often provides merely the occasion or excuse to call on 'the authorities' to intervene against an enemy or rival.

The response of the authorities - police, church, or Party - is also important. If they ignore the denunciation or are not very receptive, then denunciations will tend to dry up. When the authorities welcome accusations of this kind, they will tend to get more of them. Thus, the essence of what makes a denunciation 'work' is the inter-action between the people and the authorities.

Denunciations, by their very nature, lend themselves to being used not only by good intentioned citizens, but as much and more by the unscrupulous ones. That is why in most societies, the very concept of denunciation carries pejorative or negative meanings and implications. During times of unrest and revolution, when the authorities become more hungry than ever for information, to track down dissent, panic-makers, rumors, or even treason, they open the door to denunciations. The more authoritarian these regimes are, the more aspects of social life they want to monitor or change, the more open they become to the denouncers. These people are tempted into making accusations and using the weapon of denunciation. Socially or politically powerless people can find ways to be taken seriously. Their words are followed up relentlessly, and their opinions are given more meaning than ever.

Official definitions of 'denunciation' have varied from place to place. In Revolutionary France there was a great deal of worry about the issue among the revolutionaries. In the end, when their concerns about conspiracies and counter-revolutionary threats grew, when they turned indifference into a crime, they not only fostered, but almost demanded denunciations.

In Germany's two dictatorships, denunciations were understood in official discourse as mean-spirited, base, personal, selfish, or even knowingly false informing. None of the leaders wanted to foster this kind of behaviour. Nazi leaders in fact often used the old German saying about the denouncer being the biggest scoundrel in the entire nation. They wanted to discourage such people, and published the verdicts in the press when providers of false information went to court. Hitler once remarked that such denunciations created a "monstrous uneasiness," and disrupted the economy, and he wanted it stopped.²

tices: Denunciation in Modern European History, 1789-1989, Chicago 1997, pp. 1-21, here p. 1.

² See Robert Gellately, 'A Monstrous Uneasiness': Citizen Participation and the Persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany, in: Peter Hayes (ed.), *Lessons and Legacies: The Meaning of the Holocaust in a Changing World*, Evanston 1991, pp. 178-195; 358-364.

Nevertheless, the Nazi police followed up all accusations and even anonymous letters of denunciations - even when they swore they would not. In spite of half-hearted efforts, the Nazi regime never solved the problem.

If the Nazis did not want (mean-spirited, selfish, or false) 'denunciations', they definitely did want the people to watch and listen and, when moved by 'idealistic' or proper motives, to report wrongdoing. In the event, of course, the authorities responded whenever they received information about 'important' issues, like race, resistance, or even mild criticism of the government. Under the circumstances, the Nazi police and the Party received all kinds of denunciations - some of them clearly for all the 'wrong' kinds of reasons. They almost invariably acted on them anyway. On balance, they definitely preferred too much information rather than too little.

What we define as denunciations fades into our own contemporary 'whistle-blowing' and neighborhood watches. We cannot draw clear lines between denunciations and 'whistle blowing', and we cannot limit the definition in advance. In fact, many writers remind us that our modern societies are also surveillance and control societies. Denunciations belong to that wider development.

For the purposes of historical research it is important not to be too restrictive in our definition, because the behavior of the denouncers is at times difficult to distinguish from volunteer informers who work on an informal basis for the police, the dominant Party, or other authorities. In my own work I argue against including among the denouncers, those who informed who were members of the Party or civil servants. I regard them instead as part of the apparatus of surveillance and control.

Historiographical Background

In 1988 I published an article on denunciations in Nazi Germany.³ At that moment there was almost nothing written on this topic in the vast literature on the 'Third Reich'. There were some fleeting references to this topic here and there, but only two essays published in out-of-the way places. One by Martin Broszat was published in 1977. He did not reprint that article nor commission a follow-up study as part of the large Bavaria Project he led at that time. He did not want to recognize the significance of denunciations for the entire internal history of the 'Third Reich'. Not only that, but we are learning from recent studies of the occupied nations during the war, that denunciations played an important role there as well. Aside from Broszat, there was an important essay

³ Robert Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society: Political Denunciation in the Gestapo Case Files*, in: *The Journal of Modern History*, 1988, 654-694.

by Reinhard Mann, published in 1987. Historians generally paid little attention to Mann's work when it was published, but it was discovered afterwards.⁴

In the late 1980s one could also find isolated studies from other places and times that touched on denunciations during times of upheaval. There was Geoffrey Elton's study of Cromwell's England and Richard Cobb's study of the French Revolution, and a few others. None of them focused directly on denunciations, but touched on them in passing.⁵

Why was the topic neglected for so long? I will mention two main reasons: First of all, the social phenomenon of denunciation falls between a number of historical approaches and methodologies. Historians who wrote on the perpetrators in the police and justice system in Germany and elsewhere, generally adopted a 'top-down' approach and focused primarily on institutions, leaders, decision-making, and so on. Very often these accounts were written as if 'society' or popular in-puts did not exist at all. Perhaps the best example is the justly famous study, 'Anatomie des SS-Staates'.

More generally, historians of the police - of which there were few in any case - focused on the specifics of the institution. Almost none of them examined how the police operated in society at large on a routine basis. Many of these historians now claim that of course they had known for years that the police could only operate when they received information from the general population. Be that as it may, that insight was not reflected in the studies these historians wrote. No one seemed to be interested in exploring the inter-action between the people and the police in any systematic way. Even Richard Cobb's memorable study of the people and the police during the French Revolution (published in 1970) did not inspire any follow-up studies for many years. Cobb was noteworthy for even mentioning denunciation. For the generation of 1968 and after, the police was not a popular topic. No one wanted to study the police or the 'means of repression' as sociologists liked to label them.

Secondly, denunciations as a theme or topic of historical investigation was ignored by most social historians who studied history 'from the bottom up'. For complex reasons, the many varieties of social history, including the 'history of everyday life', did not focus specifically on the denouncers, but overlooked them.

Why? Perhaps mainly because social history set out to give voice to the outsiders, the downtrodden, and the victimized. The emphasis, therefore, was on the history of specific locations or groups and individuals - such as women, youth, or workers - who had been denied the attention of traditional (political) historians. The denouncers did not fit well into these stories, because they belonged to the bad guys. They were not victims, but victimizers, and so were

⁴ For complete references see Robert Gellately, *Gestapo and German Society, Enforcing Racial Policy, 1933-1945*, Oxford 1990.

⁵ For a discussion of the literature, see Robert Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society*.

on the side of the oppressors and the perpetrators. Thus, at best the denouncers were marginal in social history. They were generally written off or taken for granted as part of 'the system'. Alternatively, they were trivialized as mere 'gossipers' and spreaders of rumors. (It turns out, of course, that the analysis of gossip and rumor is much more interesting than had often been assumed.) Denunciations, in any case were considered, even by serious historians of Nazi Germany, as little more than 'Klatsch und Tratsch'.

Under these circumstances, it was obvious that the denouncers were not considered by many historians as valid objects of research. Surely before 1990 (and for some, even after then) no German history Professor would think of fostering doctoral work on such a topic.

In sum, therefore, denunciations appeared on the margins of the narratives historians were writing, or they were totally ignored. As we can see from the many fine papers in this volume, and word about the many other studies of denunciations now under way, that neglect is now being overcome. There is a good deal of very exciting research now nearing completion or underway. The study of denunciation or delation, has become a field in its own right. Surely a journal specifically devoted to the topic cannot be far away.

The New Interest

What has caused the great upsurge of interest in the topic of denunciations in history? First, there has been a historical and historiographical conjuncture. On the one hand, with the fall of the Berlin wall and end of the Soviet Union, many witnesses came forward to offer their insights 'from below' or the grassroots, on how those systems had worked. What was shocking about the revelations of the Stasi system was how many people were recruited as 'unofficial workers'. Among other things that made it possible for the secret police to extend their surveillance right into the private sphere. When husbands spied on wives, as the Stasi files showed, the neat divisions we had drawn up, between 'totalitarian' systems, and society at the grassroots, did not hold up. Those theories, like the functionalist theories in Germany during the 1970s and 1980s, looked like history with all the people left out. The revelations clearly put many of the older theories of totalitarianism, the police state, and functionalism-structuralism, into doubt. They just did not seem to fit what happened. It turned out that the people themselves were involved in their own surveillance and control more than we had expected.

I would now argue that the net effect is that over the last decade a paradigm shift took place in the history of modern dictatorships, especially in the case of Nazi Germany, the German Democratic Republic, and the Soviet Union. We have moved to a more interactive model of dictatorship in which we have come to realize that the people were not totally determined, repressed, and isolated.

In short, they were not just lifeless objects or the ‘masses’. We have come to recognize, that in these systems, many people found new ways to act, to participate, and to make their presence felt. For example, they acted in niches left open to them as intermediaries, individual citizens not part of the system or only informally tied to it. They learned how to operate in spaces ‘in-between’, and in various ways played important roles in surveillance and control. Many people, even without being pressured, began acting as volunteer denouncers. Thus, our focus on the denouncers has helped to provide new approaches to modern dictatorships. Moreover, denunciation research leads naturally into opening up many other new avenues for research and for work on the theoretical sides of the issues.

In the last decade there has been a flood of publications on the place of denunciations in history. These studies by no means dismiss or ignore the key ingredients in dictatorships ‘above’ like leadership and decision-making. It would be folly to ignore the role of the police or the ruling political party. The new emphasis on denunciations in Nazi Germany does not mean that the Gestapo, Kripo or Orpo were somehow irrelevant or less terroristic. Investigating denunciations is definitely not to apologize for the misdeeds of the police. I underline this point in my new book, ‘Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany’.⁶

We are not faced with the choice of *either* a terrorizing police *or* denouncers who provided lots of information. They obviously worked very well together. I wanted to suggest new ways of thinking about how the control, surveillance, and terror systems, and how they operated at the grassroots. To say that the police were and are usually ‘reactive’ is not to say they are never active. As we know, the Nazi police were highly active in tracking down the July conspirators, and also in tracking the Communists. In the last months of the war, the police on the ground in Germany became fanatically active. Those times did not make them any less responsive to denunciations, but if anything more responsive.

At any rate, the shift of scholarly interest and research on dictatorships was caused in part by the revelations about the inner workings of dictatorial systems since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The other main influence came from the works of scholars such as Michel Foucault. Foucault’s popularity in North America was part of a larger social phenomenon about reconceptualizing the subject and power in history. Foucault was in favor of ‘cutting off the head of the King’, which is to say, he wanted to think about the ‘micro-physics’ of power. In short, he asked how ordinary people were involved in their own relations of power at the grassroots, as well as in other power networks.

The very mention of Foucault was usually enough to cause grave upset among the historians. Especially those who specialized in crime or the police

⁶ Oxford, 2001.

outdid each other with accounts of how wrong Foucault was. In fact Foucault put them on the map, and his popularity showed that there was a widespread desire among scholars and the public at large, to rethink approaches to the past with ordinary people as participants and subjects of the investigation. We are no longer prepared to tolerate narrow institutional histories or structural analysis. We want to know what it was really like on the ground, at the grassroots. We need to study the links and interrelationships between the structures and the people.

The results of the conjuncture between historical events like the end of Communism and the growth of concerns sparked by historians and others have been remarkable, above all in the history of denunciation. It is very likely that more studies of denunciations have been written in the last five or ten years than in the rest of history put together. The conference on which this volume is based provided an opportunity to assess the work that has been done and to look to the future.

Content of Denunciations

It is clear that the content of denunciations opens up a whole host of interesting questions. This is one of the most challenging sides of denunciation research. Although most of the studies that have proliferated in the last decade deal with the content, there is more room for attention to the language used in letters or statements of denunciation. There is plenty of room for social and psychological analysis.

Citizens in modern dictatorships must be conscious and self-conscious about language. In conversations recorded in Nazi police files one reads that citizens had to guard against incautious remarks, but during the war they had to watch what they said lest it betray that their source of information might be foreign radio. Again and again in the files, denouncers refer to the 'way people spoke' from which they deduced, and not always correctly, that the speaker must have listened to forbidden broadcasts.⁷

To my mind, the most intriguing side of content analysis, is the possibility of getting at the motives of the denouncers. It is true, of course, that 'for the system' the motives of the denouncers are not important. The authorities, especially in times of upheaval, may not care about motives or ignore them. But the motives of the denouncers greatly interest us. We want to know, not just why and how the system worked, but why ordinary people volunteered information. There are at least two important problems with assessing the motives of most the denouncers we will study. On the one hand the denouncers often tried to

⁷ See Hauptstaatsarchiv Düsseldorf, henceforth HStAD: Gestapo 58426; Gestapo 38569; Gestapo 58336.

conceal or mask their real motives. On the other, the police or the Party often did not record what they discovered about the motives of the denouncers. I would say that most of the time we must reconstruct these motives with misleading and / or very limited information.

Where there is evidence of motives in police and Party files, we can divide them into affective and instrumental. In fact the motives are invariably mixed.⁸ By now it is common to suggest that in Nazi Germany, ‘system-loyal’ and / or Nazi ‘convictions’ played a decisive role in around one-quarter of all denunciations to the Gestapo or letters to the Nazi Party.⁹ Put the other way round, this means that about 75 percent of all denunciations were provided for reasons that had little or nothing to do with obviously or expressly supporting the Nazis.

Nevertheless, we should not exaggerate the significance of that finding. Why? Because I would now argue: (a) that almost all denunciations helped to bring Nazi ideology to life. (b) They supported the encroachments of the dictatorship into everyday life. (c) And finally, it is clear, given lifeworld perspectives, that no one would have offered information to the authorities unless they implicitly or explicitly accepted that the specific law or measure involved should be enforced and the wrongdoing punished. In short, even the most self-ish motives worked in system-loyal ways.

I have found in my research that relatively few people bothered to make explicit reference to the ‘right kinds’ of motives, such as hatred of a stigmatized enemy or commitment to an endorsed or privileged ‘official’ value. But whether or not affective motivation and / or attitudes of civic virtue as defined under Nazism may have lurked behind the acts of some informers on occasion, there is far more evidence of overt and obvious instrumental motives. Indeed, it would be safe to conclude that in spite of the newly proclaimed social ideals of the solidarity of ‘community of the people’, self-interest seems to have fuelled denunciations more than anything else. Furthermore, all denunciations contributed greatly to the enforcement of the most invasive policies, including an-

⁸ See Reinhard Mann, *Protest und Kontrolle im Dritten Reich: Nationalsozialistische Herrschaft im Alltag einer rheinischen Großstadt, Frankfurt (M.) 1987*, p. 295, who shows that of 213 denunciations he analysed, only 50 (24 percent) were motivated by what he terms “system-loyal views (political motives)”; on the other hand, more people (80 of them or 37 percent of the 213) informed for “private motives, resolving private conflicts”; and in 83 instances (39 percent of these cases) there was no evidence he could discern as to why information was offered.

⁹ See Gisela Diewald-Kerkmann, *Politische Denunziation im NS-Regime oder Die Kleine Macht der ‘Volksgenossen’*, Bonn 1995, pp. 136; 150, who shows that only 30 percent of the 292 letters of denunciation to the NSDAP she analysed were “system-loyal”, while 38 percent had a “private” or personal motive and 4 percent were anonymous. Presumably the rest had no discernable motive. For a revealing analysis, drawn from surviving letters to another local Party, see John Connelly, *The Uses of Volksgemeinschaft: Letters to the NSDAP Kreisleitung Eisenach, 1939-1940*, in Fitzpatrick a. Gellately (eds.), *Accusatory Practices*, pp. 153-84.

tisemitism. Thus, in Nazi Germany it would be difficult to imagine that anyone who informed about breaches in the anti-Jewish laws could not have known that he or she was supporting official antisemitism.

The instrumental utilization of the authorities by denouncers in Nazi Germany was widespread. Denouncers offered tips in order to get rid of enemies, rivals, or competitors. No social group and few social enclaves were entirely immune. Social inferiors certainly used denunciations against those up the social scale, like their bosses at work.¹⁰ In theory denunciations offered the less powerful and the disadvantaged an opportunity to take out their spite against those who stood over them, or those they resented, like the better off social classes. But social classes did not mix that much, so that informing tended to occur within social classes, neighbourhoods, (apartment) houses, even within families.

Extensive private and personal uses were made of informing in order to gain personal advantages, such as when husbands and wives informed on each other over common problems. Not surprisingly, denunciations were often used to resolve frictions with neighbours, friends, workmates and family.¹¹ It often turned out that even denouncers who said they went to the police to uphold the law, in fact were moved by personal aims that became clear in the course of investigation. In spite of official guidelines and continuing warnings from the police and the Ministers of Justice and the Interior to do everything possible to stop precisely these kinds of denunciations, the flood could not be held back.¹²

Denunciation research should make another point clear: New laws on the books and the willingness of police to act on the most outrageous allegations made possible growing repression, and the invasion of the private sphere. Yet these new laws also had 'productive' effects. They made more denunciations possible, especially those laws that regulated the private and sexual lives of ordinary citizens.

We used to think that dictators like Hitler or Mussolini and Stalin were so powerful that they manipulated the people almost at will. Without underestimating the cunning of these leaders in any way, we can also see how ordinary Germans and Italians and Russians manipulated the system 'from below' for purposes of their own. Systems that are hungry for information about wrongdoing, open themselves to manipulation by denouncers. A dictatorship like Hitler's could be more manipulated from below because of its need for information in order to control more aspects of social life.

¹⁰ See Diewald-Kerkmann, *Denunziation*, pp. 136 ff.

¹¹ See eg.: HStAD: Gestapo 58102; Gestapo 5574; Gestapo 38794; Gestapo 52146; StAW: Gestapo 8071.

¹² Bundesarchiv Berlin: R58/243, 317 f, Chef Sipo to Stapo (24. Feb. 1941). See also 'Richterbrief' (1. Nov. 1944), in: Heinz Boberach (ed.), *Richterbriefe. Dokumente zur Beeinflussung der deutschen Rechtsprechung 1942-1944*, Boppard am Rhein 1975, pp. 363-376.

In Hitler's dictatorship, the German state and Nazi Party were repressive and highly invasive, but even so citizens made the necessary adjustments. Far from spending their every waking moment worrying about the Gestapo and being torn by anxieties over the surveillance and terror system, many people came to terms with it. In fact, citizens in dictatorships or during times of upheaval and revolution, often robbed of the opportunity to participate in 'normal' politics, often seek alternative means to articulate and satisfy their needs. One of these methods is the denunciation.

In addition, the people adjusted to the new rules. From our perspective it is easy enough to overlook the many ways in which the population began to count on, to solicit, and even to expect the interventionism of the system in their daily lives and to calculate how, by offering information they could harness the system.

By calling this manipulation of the system 'from below' I am trying to situate denunciations in the larger context of the therapeutic system that was National Socialism. What makes studying this novel behavior of interest and importance is precisely the complexity of the motivation behind them, as well as the multiplicity of their effects and functions.

Many citizens in Nazi Germany began to accept the interventionism of the system as 'normal' and demanded it work on their behalf. This point was brought out in a lengthy report of 20 July 1942 about "unnecessary demands on the authorities by the population."¹³ From all over the country requests, supplications, and complaints were made to the authorities. Even when such entreaties to Party and state proved fruitless they were repeated endlessly or sent elsewhere. Business competitors, such as one in Breslau who accused another of 'incorrect' practices, brought the most serious possible charges before 10 different authorities, from the city administration, magistrate, local (and regional) Nazi Party headquarters, attorney general, and the Gestapo, as well as to three different professional bodies and a branch of the Wehrmacht. This example highlights just some of the ways in which citizens acted in the new opportunities that opened up and were not merely passive, dependent, or powerless.

Indeed, letter-writing to the 'authorities' became a much-favoured form of citizen activity in Nazi Germany as it evidently also did in other dictatorships of the twentieth century.¹⁴ Many people adjusted to the dictatorship and in early 1933 began writing Hitler countless letters either offering information or seeking favours, so much, so that special announcements were made in the press for

¹³ The phrase is "unnötige Beanspruchung der Behörden durch die Bevölkerung". See *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, 1942, pp. 3968-3979, p. 3971.

¹⁴ See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Supplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, in: *Slavic Review*, 1996, pp. 78-105.

them to send the letters elsewhere.¹⁵ The letter-writers persisted, however, and at one stage Hitler's chancellery was receiving more than 1,000 letters and petitions per working day.¹⁶ Citizens used such opportunities, freed from bureaucratic and other constraints 'to speak to the Führer' in order to demonstrate their loyalty, to express some wish or to seek some favour. People also sent letters to many other Nazi leaders, including Himmler and Goebbels. In May 1933, it was reported in the press that Hermann Goering alone received about 2,000 letters a day from those seeking favours or wishing to make complaints, and he asked that in future such letters be sent to the relevant local authorities.¹⁷ Letters to the editors of national, regional and local newspapers were frequent, and, like those to the more notorious Nazi rags, like 'Der Stürmer', had specific denunciatory content. They might highlight how some merchant sold goods to Jews or how an ordinary citizen failed to accept the spirit of Nazi antisemitism.¹⁸

Suffice it to say, that a great deal remains to be said about the content of denunciations and the functional importance of letter-writing.

Comparative Issues

There is an obvious tension in historical studies of denunciations that is worth mentioning. This tension is between wanting to say something general and comparative about denunciations, reaching well back in time, while at the same time showing concern for the specificity and particularity in history. This should be a creative tension. Although we certainly can generalize and compare, I think it is important to study denunciations in the context of the lifeworld of their times. And the lifeworld is always specific and concrete. It is the historical specificity of denunciations that makes them interesting for our analysis. If denunciations are everywhere, there is the risk of saying they are nowhere. The key consideration in my view, provided by a lifeworld perspective, suggests that informing the police in Rothenburg in 2000, constitutes a very different act, than telling the authorities that one's neighbors are hiding Jews or criticizing Hitler in 1940. Context, lifeworld, specificity is everything.

¹⁵ "Es wird dringend empfohlen," in *Berliner Morgenpost*, 26 March 1933.

¹⁶ See Jeremy Noakes, Philipp Bouhler und die Kanzlei des Führers der NSDAP. Beispiel einer Sonderverwaltung im Dritten Reich, in: Dieter Rebentisch and Karl Teppe (eds.), *Verwaltung contra Menschenführung im Staat Hitlers*, Göttingen 1986, pp. 208-236, esp. p. 221. From 1937 to 1940, between 229,101 and 294,568 letters per year were sent in by citizens. For the larger figure, see the evidence cited in Michael Burleigh, *Death and Deliverance. 'Euthanasia' in Germany 1900-1945*, Cambridge 1994, p. 93.

¹⁷ See *Berliner Morgenpost*, 6. May 1933.

¹⁸ See eg. Fred Hahn, *Lieber Stürmer. Leserbriefe an das NS-Kampfblatt 1924 bis 1945*, Stuttgart 1978.

Are denunciations timeless or new? Of course in one sense there is nothing new under the sun. We can find examples of denunciations in most societies in the past, just as we can find examples of betrayals, treason, and civic virtue as well. As historians, of course, we attach enormous importance to the specific social, political and cultural context. The implications for our topic are important. I would argue in favor of lifeworld perspectives.

An interesting question is how far and in what ways denunciations in the 'Gestapo system' compare and contrast with what happened in other dictatorships like the Soviet Union and in the 'Stasi system'. For the Nazis, denunciations were needed to track down enemies and to enforce the many new laws. More positively, information from the population was needed to realize the ideal of the 'community of the people'. At the same time, of course, the spread of denunciations obviously contradicted the ideal of the harmonious and conflict-free 'community of the people'. The Soviets, and in their own way, the Stasi wanted to stop the misuses of informing and denunciation, and their system of surveillance and control was meant to rely upon people who were motivated for all the 'right' reasons, like idealism and political conviction. Clearly, however, these 'post-totalitarian' dictatorships ended up producing newer and even bigger problems. I have written on this issue elsewhere, but in general I would emphasize the contrasts and differences over similarities.

Another problem in denunciation research is the tendency to 'explain' them as part of human nature. That point is sometimes suggested or implied in the literature. However, I should think that as historians we would want to avoid what I will call a 'naturalistic' approach, that is, to use human nature as an explanation for behavior. It is the behavior in the context of a specific time and place that needs explaining.

Was there such a thing as the denouncer as 'social type'? If one looks at the social profile of the denouncers in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union or even in the French Revolution, it is safe to say that they tended to originate from the same social milieu as the denounced. Most denouncers we find in police files seem to come from the lower end of the social scale. It has to be recalled, however, that the police everywhere act with more restraint when complaints come in about the 'better' social classes. Under normal circumstances, the social elite has no run-ins with the police, one way or another, but have other methods open to them to realize their social aims.

Gender: Although we have suggestions in the literature that women were over-represented as denouncers, in fact for Nazi Germany that contention does not hold up. Several writers recently have suggested that men tended to be more prominent as denouncers than women.¹⁹ In Gisela Diewald-Kerkmann's

¹⁹ Eric A. Johnson, *German Women and Nazi Terror: Their Role in the Process from Denunciation to Death*, paper given at the International Association for the History of Crime and Criminal Justice, Paris, June, 1993. He identifies about 20 percent of the denouncers as civilian females, about 60 percent as males, with the rest coming from officials or anonymous

study, 80 percent of the people who wrote letters of denunciation to the Nazi Party were male.²⁰ In some of the measures I analysed for my new book, there was a more even split, but men still outdid women as denouncers.²¹

What about the impact on the people against whom allegations were launched? In comparative terms, the effects are potentially out of control in dictatorships, while in democracies and under the rule of law, the effects are more calculable. The psychological impact of having a brush with the authorities in any dictatorship can easily be imagined in general terms. But more specific research is needed into the impact of denunciations on the victims. In general terms, 'big brother' has a chilling effect on social relations. Those who have investigated denunciation now insist, of course, that it is not 'big brother' alone, nor the 'police state' for that matter, but the participation of fellow citizens who make the 'all-seeing' and 'all-knowing' system come to life.

National patterns? One wonders if there are national patterns as to the incidence of denunciations. Some historians suggest that Italians in the Fascist system were less prone to denunciations than was the case in Nazi Germany. Were Germans more active as denouncers than other nations, and, if so, how do we explain that behavior? When it comes to comparative issues, therefore, a great deal remains to be done.

Conclusions

As Europe's new police and surveillance systems were introduced in the late 18th and early 19th century, an integral role in their everyday operation was played by the provision of information from the population at large. There may have been some variation in the propensity to cooperate with the police or other authorities from one country to another, but that can only be established by way of a long-term comparative study. Political cultures, civic virtues and traditions of participation certainly vary from country to country. Modern surveillance societies came into being over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries as citizens - for a whole host of reasons - began to watch and listen, and then to inform the 'authorities' about deviations they witnessed. As this popular participation gradually became an integral part in routine surveillance and control there emerged a new social phenomenon, dubbed by Michel Foucault as panopticism, the all-seeing society in which one never felt entirely beyond surveillance.

sources. For an opposite point of view, see Helga Schubert, *Judasfrauen*, Frankfurt (M.) 1990. For a critical analysis see Inge Marszolek, *Die Denunziantin. Die Geschichte der Helene Schwärzel*, Bremen 1993.

²⁰ Diewald-Kerkmann, *Denunziation*, p. 131.

²¹ There were 86 male, 77 female informers and 10 anonymous tips.

The implications of these changes were momentous for society at large. Broader social cooperation in the newer police activities made it possible not merely to control crime, but also to track menacing political opinions and movements, to control social behaviour deemed actually or potentially threatening and even to monitor popular moods and attitudes. These tasks have become an integral part of the modern state's routine, including in the great democracies.

More authoritarian regimes require more, not less, social involvement in surveillance and control. For one thing they want to control more aspects of social life. Denunciations or social cooperation with the police make it possible to realize the dreams of the ancient tyrants.

Until recently, denunciations were at best considered marginal, even by most social historians. What we have done in the last decade or so, is not merely to take up the study of denunciations to fill some kind of gap. Instead we have moved this social phenomenon from the margin of the stories, to the center and to produce quite different pictures.

In the last decade, historical research into denunciation has taken off into sustained growth, and distinguished German universities are now introducing seminars on the topic. It is fair to say, that denunciation has become a new subject of historical inquiry, and I can only imagine that interest in it will continue to grow.