

The Making of an SS Killer: Case Study of a Perpetrator¹

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Thank you for the invitation to present to you today, here in Oświęcim. I'm grateful for the opportunity to talk to you in the framework of this workshop on the subject of my forthcoming book, a biography of a mid-level, front-line Holocaust perpetrator; an SS officer who led an Einsatzkommando – a mobile task force – deployed behind the advancing German Army in the Soviet Union between June and October 1941, and was responsible during this four-month period for the deaths of more than 18,000 Soviet citizens, mostly Lithuanian and Belarusian Jews. The title of my paper is 'The Making of an SS Killer: Case Study of a Perpetrator', and the subject is Dr Alfred Filbert, an Obersturmbannführer – or lieutenant colonel – in the SS.

For the first two-thirds of my paper I'd like to give you an overview of the key moments in Filbert's life and career, punctuated by analysis of pivotal moments. I'd then like to discuss his motivations and what we can learn from this particular case study.

Filbert was typical in many ways for the young elites in the SS and police apparatus who orchestrated and, in many cases, implemented a campaign of terror and mass murder against racial and political opponents across German-occupied Europe in the years 1939 to 1945. He was born in 1905, in Darmstadt, a member of the so-called 'war youth generation' (E. Günther Gründel). The members of this generation were too young to have personally experienced the First World War at the front, but the childhood and teenage years of the

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males belonging to this generation had been shaped by the hopes, despair and fallout of the Great War. Their fathers' world had collapsed and with it everything they had known.

Filbert's father was indeed a career soldier, and Filbert in fact spent the first six years of his life at the garrison of the First Grand Ducal Hessian Lifeguards Infantry Regiment No. 115, where his father was stationed. Filbert, the youngest of three children, two boys and one girl, had a strict, authoritarian upbringing. He would later describe this upbringing as 'proper'. In his home and family life, he knew only 'command and order'. Nevertheless, he regarded his father as kind and warm-hearted, looked up to him and missed him terribly as a child during his absence on active military service, including during the First World War, when he served as a captain and company commander. It was in fact left to Filbert's mother to be the disciplinarian; she, however, was 'too strict', as Filbert would later testify. To prove his point, Filbert recalled that during one of his father's absences he had suffered a bad fall and lay on the ground yelling in considerable pain. His mother came out and beat him with a stick for weeping. Only then did she look at his leg and discover that it was broken. Filbert put his mother's strictness down in part to her being so busy looking after three children. It was his soldier father with whom Filbert identified and whom he would later attempt to make proud. The historian Wendy Lower notes that whilst historians cannot put their subjects on the couch or into a laboratory, 'it is worth pointing out that most Germans of the Nazi era were raised in authoritarian households where regular beatings – certainly not inductive reasoning – were employed to discipline and motivate children'.

Like so many other young men of his generation who subsequently became Nazi perpetrators, Filbert experienced a politicisation during the interwar years. In Filbert's case it was as a 16-year-old bank apprentice in Mannheim. During this time, Filbert was still living with his parents in Worms, which is located on the left bank of the Rhine River. In order to reach Mannheim, Filbert had to cross over to the right bank. Those parts of the People's State of Hesse on the left bank of the Rhine were occupied by French troops until 1930 in accordance with the terms of the Versailles peace treaty of 1919. The blockade of the bridges across the river in the French-occupied Rhineland in 1923 caused Filbert 'considerable difficulties' that led him to abandon his apprenticeship in Mannheim after a year and a half and instead complete it in Worms. It is not known what, if any, kind of *political* response these 'considerable difficulties' aroused in the teenage Filbert, though it is

certainly conceivable that the French occupation of the Rhineland and everything this entailed may have led to the development of revisionist nationalism within him.

Having completed his bank apprenticeship and unable to find employment in a bank due to the prevailing economic crisis, Filbert returned to school and obtained his school-leaving certificate in 1927 as an external candidate in Mainz. Filbert was apparently the best in his examination group, and on the basis of his good exam results, his father 'allowed' him to commence university studies in law and economics. University studies in law were also typical for the later young elites in the SS and police apparatus. Filbert attended the universities of Giessen and Heidelberg between 1927 and 1933, when he passed the First State Legal Exam. Two years later, the qualification of a Doctor of Laws was officially conferred on him. Subsequently, Filbert would describe his childhood and his student years as his 'loveliest' time. His identity card from the University of Heidelberg shows a handsome man of almost twenty-four with short cropped hair and prominent ears. In his very first semester at the University of Giessen, he joined the student fraternity Alemannia, which obliged each and every member to engage in at least six fencing matches. As a member of the Alemannia, Filbert obtained the facial scars that he would carry for the rest of his life.

In August 1932, more than a year before the end of his university studies in Giessen and five months prior to the Nazi takeover of power in Germany, Alfred Filbert joined the SS. Only days later, he also joined the National Socialist German Workers' Party, or NSDAP. Upon completion of his university studies Filbert had the very real prospect of a career in law. Instead, however, he made the conscious decision to pursue a career in the intelligence services. He applied to the SS Security Service, more commonly known by its abbreviation SD. As a full-time employee of the SD since March 1935, Filbert was embedded in an institutional sub-culture already favourable to tough physical, legal and biological remedies for social ills years before genocide was initiated. As the sociologist Michael Mann has pointed out, the Nazi regime 'could more easily accomplish genocide wielding such a willing core' of perpetrators. Filbert's training in law had furthermore already provided him with experience of 'a conducive sub-culture in which Nazi ideology could resonate', as Nazis were heavily over-represented in the legal profession. In his analysis of over fifteen hundred biographies of perpetrators of Nazi genocide, Michael Mann identifies 'disrupted employment' as a characteristic that affected almost a quarter of his sample. It is doubtful,

though, that Filbert's joining of the Nazi Movement was a consequence of 'career disruption' caused by the upheaval of the French occupation of the Rhineland. Whilst indisputable in itself, Filbert's career disruption was nonetheless not particularly grave when compared with the German population of the time as a whole. Moreover, although never a brilliant law student, he could feasibly have had a career in law, had he not followed his ambition and ideology in opting for the SD.

In the SD Main Office, Filbert was assigned to foreign intelligence under Heinz Jost. It soon became clear that he had an aptitude for the work. Filbert enjoyed a rapid rise through the SD and the ranks of the SS during the period 1935 to 1939. After becoming a full-time employee of Jost's counterintelligence office within the SD Main Office in March 1935, he was promoted in July 1936 to the first SS officer rank, *Untersturmführer* (equivalent to second lieutenant). Further promotions followed in January and September 1937, and in March 1938. In January 1939 Filbert was promoted again to *Obersturmbannführer* (i.e. lieutenant colonel), and with the creation of the Reich Security Main Office in October of that year, he was appointed both deputy head of SD Overseas under the aforementioned Heinz Jost, and head of the subordinated Group A, responsible for General Tasks.

It was at this point that Filbert's rapid ascent up the SD career ladder faltered. The blow to his career prospects came, indirectly, from an unexpected source: his elder brother. Otto Filbert, one-and-a-half years older than Alfred, had left Germany for the United States of America in 1926 and was employed as an engineer for the Pullman Works in Philadelphia. Twelve years later, in 1938, their parents persuaded Otto to return to Germany with his wife and their two sons for one year on a trial basis. According to Filbert's later testimony, his brother Otto was unable to adapt to the new way of life in Nazi Germany and resolved to return to the United States. Otto had already obtained from the US consulate in Hamburg the relevant papers for his departure, when he learned of an order from Hitler that prevented German citizens wherever possible from emigrating. Despite the twelve years he had spent in the USA, Otto Filbert had remained a German citizen. He could not leave Germany. This left him in a state of considerable embitterment. In response to the failure of the assassination attempt on Hitler's life by the carpenter Georg Elser on 8 November 1939, Otto commented to a colleague at the Junkers Aircraft Factory in Dessau, where he worked: 'Pity that the scoundrel didn't perish.' This comment was promptly reported by Otto's

colleague and Otto was arrested by the Magdeburg Gestapo. A regular court of law in Dessau then sentenced him to four years imprisonment for 'treachery'.

Alfred Filbert later claimed to have done everything he could to help his brother, including visiting him several times in prison and speaking with the prison warden. No-one, however, was able to help Otto, apparently, since Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler had personally decreed that after serving his sentence Otto should be sent to a concentration camp. According to Filbert, it was this affair with his brother that put a stop to any further promotion for him within the SS. In the space of two-and-a-half years he had been promoted five times; yet over the next six-and-a-half years he would not be promoted again. Filbert would remain at the rank of SS-Obersturmbannführer. He was, one might say, a marked man. He nonetheless remained a key figure within the SD, no doubt due in no small part to the ineptness of his superior, Heinz Jost.

In the early spring of 1941 came another pivotal moment for Alfred Filbert. Among those initiated into German plans to invade the Soviet Union in the summer of the same year, he learned that commandos of the Security Police and the SD would be deployed alongside security divisions of the Wehrmacht in order to 'cleanse' the regions between the three advancing army groups of scattered enemy soldiers and partisans. Along with a handful of other senior SS officers, Filbert volunteered for service in the impending operation. According to Filbert's post-war testimony, all those who volunteered were apparently unaware that their activity would include carrying out executions of, among others, Jews. When he first made this claim to ignorance, Filbert was under arrest for the mass murder of Soviet Jews. His assertion should be viewed in this context. Only a few weeks earlier, Reinhard Heydrich had sent a memorandum to a select few colleagues in the Reich Security Main Office, including Filbert, which had made it clear that the German leadership expected Jews to be among those who would be 'put up against the wall' in the course of the military campaign against the Soviet Union. Filbert knew precisely what a commission in the East would entail and he volunteered for it.

During the first five weeks of Germany's military campaign against the Soviet Union, up to the end of July 1941, Einsatzkommando 9 under Alfred Filbert – like the other commandos of the four Einsatzgruppen – murdered primarily Jewish men of military service age. Of the five commando units comprising Einsatzgruppe B, Einsatzkommando 9 had shot

and killed during these five weeks the most people (just under 6,000 at a conservative estimate). One member of the staff of Einsatzgruppe B testified after the war that 'in Einsatzgruppe B it was common knowledge that Einsatzkommando 9 was particularly rigorous in its approach to the liquidation of the Jewish population'. The targeting of primarily Jewish men of military service age would change dramatically from the end of July onwards. During two massacres in the Belarusian town of Vileyka at the end of July, women and children were victims of the shooting operations for the first time. Filbert's deputy, Wilhelm Greiffenberger, subsequently put the number of Jews murdered in Vileyka at 500 and believed that 'all Jews who had resided in Vileyka' had thus been shot by Einsatzkommando 9. The Vileyka massacres at the end of July marked the transition to genocide against Soviet Jewry. As such, Einsatzkommando 9 was not only the first commando within Einsatzgruppe B to begin systematically killing Jewish women and children, but in fact the first commando of *any* of the four Einsatzgruppen to do so.

The massacres continued. Less than two weeks later, the entire Jewish population of the town of Surazh was murdered by Filbert's unit: 500 – 600 souls, two-thirds of whom were women and children of all ages. In the first half of August, 2,000 Jews were killed in Haradok. The Wehrmacht provided voluntary assistance. The following month, the Jewish ghettos in the Russian town of Nevel and the Belarusian town of Yanavichy were dissolved, along with all of their inhabitants, 640 and 1,025 Jewish men, women and children, respectively. During the first ten days of October, between 6,000 and 10,000 Soviet Jews were slaughtered by Einsatzkommando 9 during its dissolution of the ghetto in Vitebsk. On 20 October, shortly after the dissolution of the Vitebsk ghetto, Filbert was relieved as commander of Einsatzkommando 9, and he returned to Berlin.

Based on the research carried out for my biographical study of Alfred Filbert, Einsatzkommando 9 killed *at a conservative estimate* just over 18,000 people during the four months it was under Filbert's command, though it might easily have been several thousands more. Of these 18,000 people, the vast majority – over 99 per cent – were Jewish men, women and children.

It was as if, in response to the imprisonment of his brother and the stagnation of his own career thereafter, Filbert wanted with his zeal in the campaign against the Soviet Jews, the alleged pillars of the Jewish-Bolshevik system, to prove to the Reich Security Main Office and SS leaderships his commitment to the National Socialist cause and his ideological reliability. It may, or may not, have helped his own career, but it certainly didn't help to improve the situation his brother Otto found himself in. Otto Filbert served out his full four-year prison sentence in Dessau. Instead of being released, he was then transferred in December 1943 to Buchenwald concentration camp, situated near the city of Weimar, the focal point of the German Enlightenment. Alfred Filbert later testified that Otto had sent his last message to the family from Buchenwald in winter 1944 or spring 1945. Otto was thereafter missing without trace. In fact, Otto Filbert left Buchenwald before winter 1944. He was released from the main concentration camp in October of that year, only to be transferred to an external camp detachment in Weimar. Less than six weeks later, Otto was then released from Buchenwald entirely. This by no means meant that he was free, however. On the contrary: he was assigned to serve in the Waffen SS Dirlewanger formation. The Dirlewanger Brigade was one of the most notorious of all SS formations, and also a penal battalion. The core of the unit, which had been set up in 1940 under the command of Dr Oskar Dirlewanger, consisted of convicted poachers. Dirlewanger was himself a habitual criminal.

A total of almost 2,000 political prisoners from various concentration camps were assigned to the Dirlewanger Brigade in November 1944 and early 1945. The new recruits were transported via Kraków to Slovakia, where they received brief military training. Now including the political prisoners from the concentration camps, Otto Filbert among them, the SS Storm Brigade Dirlewanger was deployed on the Hungarian front against the advancing Red Army. Of the almost 770 former political prisoners, roughly 480 deserted to the Soviets by 18 December. Of the remainder, around 200 men were either wounded, had been taken ill or had fallen victim to the executions within the unit. Whether Otto Filbert was among those who escaped across the front lines is impossible to say. It is just as likely that he had already died as a result of either the brutal treatment within the brigade itself or the hostilities in Hungary.

Although Alfred Filbert was aware of Otto's almost twelve-month incarceration in Buchenwald concentration camp, there is no indication that he learned either at the time or

at a later date of his brother's brief deployment with the Dirlewanger Brigade. In the testimony he provided at various times after the war, his allusions to the fate of his brother were generally made in a sober and matter-of-fact way. Frequently, this was coupled with the utilisation of Otto's suffering first and foremost as evidence of his *own* suffering. This victim mentality was evident throughout Filbert's post-war trial, during his imprisonment and indeed subsequent to his release. Beyond responding to Otto's arrest and imprisonment in 1939 by demonstrating a renewed, complete commitment to the ideological objectives of the Nazi regime, as mentioned earlier, it remains unclear what the extended torment of his only brother actually meant to Filbert at the time on a personal level.

Alfred Filbert *did* survive the war and promptly went into hiding using one of the fake identities he had operated under during his time with the SD. He lived for six years under the false name 'Selbert' in the town of Bad Gandersheim in what is now the federal state of Lower Saxony. His wife and their two sons also lived in Bad Gandersheim during this entire period, though at a different address. It is probable that Filbert's contact with his family was limited during these years in order to avoid detection by the authorities. In 1951 Filbert reassumed his real name and moved to the city of Hanover, where he began work for the *Braunschweig-Hannoversche Hypothekenbank*. Another two years passed before his family joined him in his apartment on Borkumer Straße at the end of 1953. Filbert managed to work his way up the career ladder at the bank to the point that he was named manager of the West Berlin branch in 1958.

In the autumn of 1958, the West Berlin Public Prosecutor's Office initiated an investigation into former members of Reserve Police Battalion 9, some of whom had been assigned to Einsatzkommando 9 in the summer of 1941. During the questioning of a police official, Filbert's name was mentioned. In February 1959 Filbert was arrested by the police in his West Berlin apartment. He was eventually indicted, along with five other former officers in Einsatzkommando 9, and accused:

[...] during the period from the beginning of July to 20 October 1941 in the area of Vilnius, Grodno, Lida, Vileyka, Maladzyechna, Nevel and Vitebsk acting jointly with Hitler, Himmler, Heydrich and others in at least 11,000 cases of having with premeditation from base motives, maliciously and cruelly killed people or of having arranged their killing by subordinates.

The main trial took place over the course of 18 days in May and June 1962. On 22 June 1962, 21 years to the day since the German invasion of the Soviet Union had been launched and with it the massacres of the Einsatzgruppen, Filbert was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder. According to the court judgement, his conduct during his deployment as commando chief in the East had been 'that of a committed National Socialist'. This description had been used by co-defendant Bodo Struck, who also added that Filbert 'advocated one hundred per cent the aims of the regime of the time'. The court concluded furthermore that Filbert had been 'an energetic, even very strict commander' who insisted on the exact implementation of his orders. One trial witness described him as 'the engine of the Einsatzkommando'. Co-defendants Gerhard Schneider and Wilhelm Greiffenberger satisfied the court that shooting operations had only taken place on Filbert's express orders and that he had taken care of everything in the unit, even down to the last detail. Each and every mass killing operation had been preceded by a talk with the officers of the Einsatzkommando, during which Filbert had stipulated who would lead the operation. Filbert himself had personally led no fewer than three separate shooting operations and also fired a weapon himself. His deputy, Greiffenberger, described Filbert as a 'brutal and ruthless commando chief [...] who only had his own advancement in mind and thus rigorously advocated the shootings of Jews'. The court concluded that the evidence had clearly revealed 'that Dr Filbert strove to have shot all Jews he could get hold of and that he acted inhumanely towards the Jews'.

Ultimately, 'life imprisonment' did not actually mean life for Alfred Filbert, who was released in 1975 after a medical examination concluded that the 69-year-old was not fit enough to remain locked up due to his deteriorating eyesight. This medical condition was not severe enough, however, to prevent him from acting in a West German feature film eight years later. Over the period of eight weeks in the summer of 1983, Thomas Harlan, the son of Nazi film director Veit Harlan, shot the film *Wundkanal – Hinrichtung für vier Stimmen* or 'Gun Wound – Execution for Four Voices' at Exposure Studios outside Paris. In the film, a war criminal is kidnapped by a group of four young people, and imprisoned in a room filled with

mirrors and monitors, where he is constantly confronted with his own image. The four voices interrogate the criminal in a mock trial scenario, force him to pass judgment on himself and attempt to elicit a confession of guilt. The war criminal in the film is an SS mass murderer named 'Dr S.'. The man acting in this lead role was Alfred Filbert. Not only was he playing the role of an SS mass murderer, he was in fact playing himself: the name of the character – 'Dr S.' – was a reference to the name Filbert had used whilst in hiding after the war, Dr Selbert. If his brother's fate as a concentration camp inmate and member of a penal battalion had been unique; if Filbert had made a name for himself as one of the most radical enforcers of the genocide of the Soviet Jews; then this was an utterly unprecedented twist in the remarkable life of this SS killer: the only time a convicted Nazi mass murderer played a mass murderer in a feature film.

Why did Filbert agree to star in a film in which he not only played himself as a recognised mass murderer but in which he was also subjected to an intensive interrogation over twenty years after his trial in Berlin? First of all, Filbert was paid a fee of 150,000 French francs for his involvement in the film. Above and beyond that, however, there are indications to the effect that Filbert did not realise what he was getting himself into. Before the film shoot began, Harlan – by his own admission – had deceived Filbert into believing that he wanted to make a film *about* him. By means of this tactic, Harlan succeeded in persuading Filbert to take part in the film Harlan actually wanted to make, which was not in fact about Filbert as such. The real subject of the film was the continuity of Nazi biographies in the Federal Republic of Germany and of murder in the name of the state. Harlan and his crew treated Filbert so well, paid him so much attention and gave him a feeling of importance that he had not enjoyed for decades, that Filbert was soon prepared to become an actor. Harlan later said that 'little pressure and a whole lot of seduction' had brought this about. On Filbert's birthday, which fell during the shoot, Harlan arranged flowers and a cake for him.

Although the character Dr S. is released at the end of *Wundkanal* without any physical harm being done to him, the film shoot itself did not conclude quite so peacefully. On the final day of shooting, Harlan's Algerian assistant director allegedly broke five of Filbert's ribs. This incident cost Harlan and his crew 5,000 German marks, 1,000 for each rib. The backdrop to the injury was a discussion initiated by Harlan about a massacre of 100

Jewish men in Belarus in August 1941. Filbert had personally commanded the shooters. Harlan also notes that two prisoners managed to flee the execution and escape. The viewer sees Harlan briefing a group of six Jewish men. Filbert does not want to talk about the massacre in question, which he in any case denies being involved in. He stands up and attempts to leave the set; a physical confrontation ensues. Filbert is confronted with the men briefed by Harlan, Holocaust survivors, one of whom may or may not be one of those who fled the 1941 massacre. One of the men then rolls up his sleeve and shows Filbert a tattoo on his arm, which he says came from Auschwitz, where his entire family was murdered. Filbert responds by saying: 'My brother was in Buchenwald and he is dead.'

It was not the first time during the shooting of *Wundkanal* that Filbert had presented himself as a victim on account of the fate of his brother. On one occasion he explains his imprisonment not as a result of the atrocities *he* had committed in Lithuania and Belarus but instead as a result of his brother expressing regret at the failure of the attempt on Hitler's life in November 1939. On another occasion, Filbert weeps whilst talking about the fate of his brother. It initially appears to the viewer that Filbert's show of emotion is on account of the suffering and death of his brother, before it becomes clear that he is in fact weeping – at least in part – for himself and his damaged career in the SS. In the field of psychiatry, the failure to perceive the separateness of another person on an emotional level and the use of the other as a vehicle to express one's own needs is referred to as 'narcissism'. In Filbert's case, it was his brother Otto whom he was using as a vehicle to express his own needs.

'But the active ones, they were all National Socialists.' This is how Filbert assessed the nature of participation in the Nazi Movement almost 40 years after the end of the war. Filbert actively pursued a career in the Nazi security apparatus. He volunteered for service in the SS-Einsatzgruppen in the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, and he displayed particular radicalism in implementing his commission to murder Soviet Jewry. Filbert can be regarded as falling into at least one (and quite possibly four) of the five categories of 'ordinary people' identified by the sociologist Michael Mann in his aforementioned analysis of over fifteen hundred biographies of perpetrators of Nazi genocide: he was a 'materialist

killer' (or careerist). In the words of Dr Henry Dicks, the British psychiatrist who interviewed Filbert at length in his prison cell in July 1969, Filbert was a 'status-and-promotion seeking philistine'. His deputy in Einsatzkommando 9, Wilhelm Greiffenberger, concluded that Filbert 'only had his own advancement in mind'. Simultaneously, however, Filbert also belonged to what Michael Mann terms the 'real Nazis', i.e. those who were 'committed to extreme nation-statism radicalized into murderous ethnic/political cleansing. They were *ideological* killers.' Henry Dicks classed Filbert 'as a real fanatic. To persevere in accepting zealously and unquestioningly any assignment the Party offered him [...] seems to me the hallmark of SS dedication.' Indeed, the social psychologist Stanley Milgram has noted that '[i]deological justification is vital in obtaining *willing* obedience, for it permits the person to see his behavior as serving a desirable end'. Filbert's motivations for pursuing a career within the National Socialist system, culminating in active participation in crimes on a mass scale, were both careerist *and* ideological. In fact, Filbert's ambition and craving for recognition were strengthened and, significantly, *justified* by his ideology and his belief that he belonged to the 'master race'. His ideology persuaded him that the career advancement, status and recognition he sought were no more than his due; he felt he had a right to success. Ideology and egotism were mutually reinforcing.

The prosecutor in the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961, Gideon Hausner, was keen for the transcripts of the interviews Eichmann had given the Dutch journalist and former SS officer Willem Sassen from 1956 to 1960 to be admitted to evidence, since they included remarks revealing of Eichmann's own sense of self-importance and his anti-Semitism in contrast to his carefully crafted statements to the contrary in court. This combination of a sense of self-importance and anti-Semitism, egotism and ideology, appears decisive for explaining the mindset of many Holocaust perpetrators. It thus becomes clear that, whilst helpful, explanatory approaches emphasising generational factors – for example the aforementioned 'war youth generation', the 'dispassionate generation' or the 'unconditional generation' – have limitations and are in themselves insufficient to take into account either the various motivations of a man such as Filbert or the diversity of the perpetrators in general, and thus fall short as an explanatory model.

The conduct of the Holocaust perpetrators cannot be explained alone in terms of their ideology, and yet cannot be understood without it, for anti-Semitism provided at all

times a general absolution for the actions of the perpetrators. The unity of ideological convictions and sanctioning from above, on the one hand, and the material and career interests and opportunities, on the other, can feasibly explain the conduct not only of Filbert but of a great many direct perpetrators of the Holocaust. There is no empirical basis for dismissing or downplaying the role of ideology as a motivational factor for direct perpetrators of the Holocaust or for making the 'breezy assertion' (Klaus-Michael Mallmann) that anti-Semitism was more the exception than the rule. On the contrary, the explicit and visceral hatred of Jews exhibited in private letters sent home by *regular* Wehrmacht soldiers involved either directly or indirectly in the mass murder in the East speak a clear language. There can be little doubt, in the words of historian Thomas Kühne, of 'the crucial role of popular anti-Semitism in the Holocaust'. The case of Alfred Filbert – who displayed particular radicalism in pursuing the annihilation of Soviet Jews – furthermore demonstrates the importance of supplementing the question as to *why* people participate in mass murder with the enquiry as to how extensive and enthusiastic this participation is.

A further factor in explaining Filbert's participation in Nazi mass crimes was the – real or perceived – threat to his brother, which made him a 'fearful killer'. He was less fearful for the welfare of his brother, however, and more fearful for his own jeopardised career chances. In fact, it was the feeling that his own commitment to the regime might be called into question that spurred Filbert not only to volunteer to lead a commando in the East but also to implement his tasks with particular zeal. As the social psychologists Roy F. Baumeister and W. Keith Campbell have concluded, people with favourable views of themselves who feel these views are being questioned, undermined or attacked are the most likely to behave aggressively in response. The results of studies carried out by Baumeister and Brad J. Bushman confirm the 'threatened egotism' theory:

The highest levels of aggression were exhibited by narcissists who had been insulted. Moreover, this aggression was directed only toward the source of the insult. Narcissists were not made generally aggressive by the insult, as shown by their lack of aggression toward an innocent third person. [...] Such aggression defends the favorable self-image and discourages others from questioning it, and people who are strongly invested in sustaining a favorable image may be especially prone toward such violence.

This description fits Filbert closely, who felt insulted by having his commitment to the Nazi regime called into question as a result of his brother's actions. The discrepancy cannot be overlooked, however, between the target of the aggression in the results of the Bushman/Baumeister studies and Filbert's own reaction: he did not direct his aggression 'toward the source of the insult' but precisely 'toward an innocent third person'. This can again be explained with reference to the twin factors of ideology and egotism: Filbert's ideological commitment to Nazism allowed him to perceive – or, more accurately, substitute – an innocent third party, namely the Jews, as the ultimate source of the insult, whilst his careerism persuaded him that the only way to put his career back on track and not lose favour with his superiors was to demonstrate ever greater commitment to the cause. Bushman and Baumeister furthermore regard it as 'plausible that narcissists perceive social life as a series of struggles for dominance, and so they may attack others regardless of direct threat, simply as a means of establishing themselves in a superior position by conquering or intimidating other individuals'. In Filbert's case, narcissism converged with ideological conviction and careerism to form an explosive mix that resulted in the radical pursuit first and foremost of Soviet Jews, the alleged pillars of the Jewish-Bolshevik system.

The victim complex described earlier also informed Filbert's post-war mindset. Significantly, the psychiatrist Henry Dicks recognised that Filbert 'felt uniquely singled out'. This victim mentality was evident throughout Filbert's trial, during his imprisonment and indeed subsequent to his release. To this end, he utilised first and foremost the fate of his elder brother Otto, who served a prison term, was incarcerated in a concentration camp, spent time in a penal battalion and, ultimately, failed to survive the war, leaving his wife without a husband and his three sons without a father. The appalling fate of his brother became a constant and decisive factor in Filbert's post-war portrayal of himself as a victim.

The appropriation of victim status by perpetrators is a rather widespread phenomenon. As the historian Timothy Snyder concludes: 'No major war or act of mass killing in the twentieth century began without the aggressors or perpetrators first claiming innocence and victimhood.' In the mindset of Holocaust perpetrators, they – and their families back home in Greater Germany – were the victims of a global Jewish conspiracy, which was responsible for unleashing the world war. This is clearly demonstrated by letters

sent home from the killing fields of the East, one of which I'd like to quote here for illustrative purposes. The police official Walter Mattner from Vienna wrote to his wife on 5 October 1941 regarding the massacres in the Belarusian city of Mogilev:

When the first truckloads [of victims] arrived my hand slightly trembled when shooting, but one gets used to this. When the tenth truck arrived I already aimed calmly and shot assuredly at the many women, children and infants. One must bear in mind that I also have two infants at home, with whom these hordes would do the same, if not ten times worse. The death we gave them was a nice, quick death compared with the hellish torture of thousands upon thousands in the dungeons of the GPU [Soviet secret police]. Infants flew in a wide arc through the air and we shot them down still in flight, before they fell into the pit and into the water. Let's get rid of this brood that has plunged all of Europe into war and is still stirring things up in America. [...] I am actually already looking to the future, and many say here that [after] we return home, then it will be the turn of our own Jews.

The ingredient that made it possible for Filbert to portray himself as a victim, both to himself and to others, even *after the war* was, as we have seen, first and foremost the persecution and death of his own brother at the hands of the very regime that Filbert himself so loyally and fanatically served. If ideology and egotism are the main ingredients in explaining why Filbert became an enthusiastic genocidal perpetrator, it was the fate of his brother Otto that served as the pretext of a mass murderer, long after the war and the Holocaust had ended.

Filbert is, of course, only one of an estimated total of between 200,000 and 250,000 Germans and Austrians – predominantly, though not exclusively, men – directly involved in the mass murder of European Jewry. This estimate is limited to those involved in the *killing* of Jews and does not include the perpetrators of other, related crimes, such as theft. If we take into account all those with functions in the machinery of annihilation, then we're looking at a total of more than 500,000 people. Despite Alfred Filbert being only one of a quarter of a million killers, his biography provides helpful insights into the role of ideology, the importance of egotism and a craving for recognition, and the self-perception and self-

projection of the perpetrator as victim. What the example of Alfred Filbert also demonstrates, however, is the importance of individual choice. Filbert made the conscious decision to pursue a career in the Nazi intelligence service when other options were open to him. Despite the fate of his brother – or rather because of it – he volunteered to serve in the SS task forces deployed in the campaign against the Soviet Union, although he knew what this would entail. Once in the field, he then chose to be particularly rigorous in his approach to the murder of the Jewish population. In the vast majority of cases, every one of us can make a choice whether to kill or not to kill. Whilst there is no indication that Filbert actively set out at the beginning of his career to become a state executioner as the commander of a mobile killing squad or to exercise some similar function, by repeatedly placing himself at what we might call ‘the sharp end of the stick’, it became ever more likely that he would receive such an assignment.