Peter H. Merkl, Political Violence under the Swastika. 581 Early Nazis, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey 1975, XIV, 735 pp., clothbound, $ 37.50.

Much historical writing depends for its interpretative cogency upon a high degree of generalisation and systematisation of evidence. This in no way reflects on its methodological soundness — indeed it might be argued that generalisation is the very stuff of history — but in the process, the smallest participant element in the historical chain, the individual, is frequently abstracted into oblivion. It is this problem which preoccupies Peter Merkl in his work *Political Violence under the Swastika* as he sets out »to reveal the motives of the ordinary, pre-1933 Nazis [. . . . .] precisely at their moment of triumph« (p. IX).

Good fortune provided Merkl with a manageable body of material upon which to base his survey in the form of 581 political autobiographies of early Nazis collected in 1934 by Theodor Abel. Abel obtained these autobiographies by organising an essay contest within Nazi Germany in which he invited early Nazis to give detailed accounts of their personal lives and political development. The response provided Abel with a remarkably frank collection of accounts which varied greatly in length, scope and detail, but nonetheless enabled him to postulate the grounds for mass support for the early Nazi movement. His findings were first published in 1938 and republished in New York in 1965 under the title *The Nazi Movement*.

However, Merkl does not set out to question Abel's findings, or to compare his own results with them. Instead, he perceives implicitly the main reason for re-working the Abel evidence as lying in the advent of that mightly tool of analysis; the computer. And truly, in terms of volume, the results of his computer analysis are overwhelming. Seventy-nine questions are asked of each of the 581 autobiographies with the results set out in seventy-nine tables (frequency distributions), while forty-three further tables shed light on the massive range of cross-tabulations designed to explain the motives of the early Nazis. Almost seven hundred pages of script accompany and amplify the statistical presentation, probing in the minutest detail into the attitudes and experiences of the Abel respondents whose replies are further illustrated by frequent citations from their original accounts.

In this way, Merkl proceeds from an examination of the range of factors leading individuals into the Nazi movement, to a study of individuals within the movement itself. This broad survey does not stand in complete conceptual isolation. Merkl briefly sets many facets of discussion in an historical context, whilst occasionally using his findings to question or confirm a wide range of economic, social, psychological and historical interpretations of fascism. However, this approach is never pursued far, or to any great depth, since for Merkl the placing of his own work in a wider context, whether within the framework of a general historical narrative or within the bounds of a methodological debate, is only of secondary interest. His main thrust lies in the massive and detailed presentation of the material itself. Nor does he regard his voluminous work as a prerequisite for, or precursor of, wider debate, perhaps to be joined at a later date, for although stressing that *Political Violence* lays no claim to finality, he foresees its supplementation by further work of a similar nature.

These markedly restricted aims in so extensive a survey pose substantial problems for the reader. At times the detail can fascinate, and there are some highly enlightening glimpses of bewildered, angry, or sometimes frightened German citizens who sought salvation in the Nazi movement. However, these revealing portraits are swamped in a mass of detail which, through page after page, does not necessarily lead anywhere in particular. Even in his summary, Merkl is prone to indulge in essentially descriptive narrative, as illustrated by his account of the activism of Weimar youth:

»The likes and dislikes of the different groups mirrors their changes in orientation. The war

generation, and especially the members of quasi-military groups, like comradeship, marching, and violence best — a simile of the *Fronterlebnis.* They dislike the advocacy of class struggle and ›un-national views‹. The postwar generation prefers hiking, folk culture, marching and ideology and dislikes a lack of leadership and political direction. Among them, the Youth Movement groups tend to give the edge to hiking and cultural appreciation, while the young stormtroopers and those in other *voelkisch* youth groups prefer proselytising. But they join in their desire for violent action or ›struggle‹.

There are also striking differences in location experiences: The great ›urge to march‹ on which even Hitler comments derisively in *Mein Kampf* [. . .] seems to have come more naturally to young respondents from the occupied areas, the borderland, rural-urban migrants, the urban upwardly mobile, and families in social decline. The spatially immobile, who play such a central role, instead love group comradeship and glory in the cultural traditions.« (pp. 675—676).

Even some of the briefer snippets of information seem to be of uncertain overall significance. For instance, Merkl writes of extreme activists that »business and the professions, blue- and white-collar men, and the military-civil service predominate among them« (p. 683). Quite what this combination of utterly disparate social groups might signify, if anything, is left for the reader to guess. Later, Merkl's declared aim to »examine the random occurrence of beliefs and attitudes« (p. 686) leads to some extremely random categorisation of analytical groups: »respondents from the border areas, women, and persons in social decline combined the Nordic-German line with the Hitler cult« (p. 687) — whatever the significance of that may have been.

Of course, Merkl does not aim to provide a conventional historical interpretation for the rise of Nazism, but the reader, swamped by the vast range of biographical material, might still ask why this disgruntled collection of early Nazis should or could have amounted to anything. For a cogent, systematic answer he must look elsewhere, for in his conclusion Merkl is only able to venture the suggestion that the lapsing of the *Republikschutzgesetz* in 1929 unleashed a totalitarian torrent on Germany. As he so rightly says: »The rest is history« (p. 716).

However, although the work lacks any coherent analytical strand, it could arguably serve as a source of reference on the veteran Nazi membership. To a certain degree, Merkl succeeds in producing such a volume, in which the student of the social sciences can find plausible substantiation of, or telling challenges to his own ideas. This notwithstanding, a crucial test of the survey's overall usefulness as a basic reference source would lie in the degree to which it was representative of the phenomenon under consideration. Clearly, if the Nazis presented in the book were atypical of the early movement as a whole, the survey's conclusions would have to be treated with reserve.

In fact, Merkl is aware of, and takes account of his material's unrepresentativeness in terms of age, occupational background and geographical location. One might add other factors to the list, such as the overly large proportion of functionaries and leaders of one kind and another in the source material. Therefore the work is not a reference source on the Nazi veteran membership in any general sense; but rather, performs a limited role in providing information on certain biographical characteristics of early Nazis, both in their progression into the Nazi party and their existence within it.

So all in all, Merkl's complex and extensive work must be regarded with some reserve. Perhaps the critical shortcoming is his tendency to take empirical observation to extraordinary lengths, sometimes almost for its own sake. On the other hand Merkl does remind us that behind many of the broad sweeps of interpretative historical writing on Nazism, there was a reality which was exceptionally complex, and as the book — perhaps involuntarily — demonstrates, virtually defies systematisation even at the hands of the computer. Whether