

Introduction

On a sunny Sunday morning in July 1946, a public hanging took place in the Polish city of Poznań. From dawn onwards, 15,000 Poles streamed toward the grounds of the Citadel, a fortress reduced to rubble in recent German–Russian fighting for the city. Shortly before 7 a.m., a car threaded its way through the throng. A tall man, blindfolded and dressed in a suit, emerged. Guided by two guards, he mounted the gallows that had been specially built for his execution. On the scaffold, hands tied behind his back, he mumbled prayers, but otherwise showed no sign of emotion. In his last moments, he offered no defiant slogans, no pleas for forgiveness, and no words of justification. Right on schedule, the executioner, clad in black save for white gloves, set about his grim task. Quickly and efficiently, he slung the noose around the condemned man’s neck. He then sprang the wooden trap beneath the man’s feet. The man dangled in the air, his head dropped on his neck, and he was soon dead. All the while, the crowd watched in intent silence.¹ At 7:20, the corpse was taken down and placed in a coffin. The hangman took off his white gloves and tossed them away in a grand gesture of disgust.²

Who commanded such revulsion? Why did 15,000 Poles come to see this man die? The man executed was Arthur Greiser, former Nazi Gauleiter (party territorial leader) of the so-called Warthegau, a part of western Poland annexed to Nazi Germany in 1939. Headquartered in Posen (the German name for Poznań), Greiser had carried out a ruthless Germanization of the area. As his Polish judges determined, he had used ‘the new method of mass extermination of the Polish and Jewish population,’ had engaged in the ‘complete destruction of Polish culture and political thought,’ and had brought about ‘physical and spiritual genocide.’³ In a cautious formulation, they even found Greiser guilty of ‘new crimes against



the interests of humanity’—one of the first times that a phrase so similar to the International Military Tribunal Charter’s innovative ‘crimes against humanity’ charge was used in a court verdict.⁴

This biography tells the neglected story of an important Nazi leader and his brutal Germanization program in occupied Poland.⁵ In transforming the Warthegau into a ‘German’ area, Greiser even initiated the first mass gassings of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. But he also pursued an extraordinary range of other measures to remake a Polish region into ‘Germany.’ He brought in some 500,000 ethnic German resettlers, and attempted to alter the built and natural environment of the Gau (Nazi territorial area). He deployed ruthless policies against Poles, including their deportation from the Gau and, when this was not possible, their segregation from Germans in all spheres of activity. His treatment of Jews was nothing short of atrocious: Greiser expropriated Jewish property, exploited Jews for their labor, and eventually had the vast majority of them murdered. Greiser’s far-ranging Germanization program—including the importation of ethnic Germans and ‘German’ culture, the ethnic cleansing (forced removal of a people and its culture) of Poles, and the genocide (outright murder) of Jews—was the most ambitious in Nazi-occupied Europe.

Although Greiser’s program was part of a much larger Nazi project to colonize eastern Europe, only the Warthegau saw so many and such cruel Germanization policies. The Nazi program, an outgrowth of Germany’s longtime desire to dominate eastern Europe (the *Drang nach Osten*), was much more violent and exclusive than earlier attempted colonizations.⁶ The Germans, the Nazis claimed, were a people ‘without land.’ To solve this alleged problem, Nazi bureaucrats pored over maps of eastern Europe, envisioning a massive transfer of Germans to historically non-German areas. To make space for these Germans, they intended to deport, resettle, or ‘liquidate’ over thirty million Slavs, Jews, and other peoples.⁷ Save for the murder of Jews, most of these megalomaniac projects were never carried out—except in the Warthegau. Alone among eastern Nazi leaders, Greiser set in motion a wide-ranging Germanization project designed to transform a Polish province into a model of the Nazi future. His measures included everything from murder to the planting of oak trees, deportation to the changing of street names, and segregation to the designing of furniture styles.

To contemporaries, Greiser presented many different faces. Carl Burckhardt, the last League of Nations high commissioner in Danzig, where





Greiser served as senate president from 1934 to 1939, though Greiser ‘by nature soft.’⁸ Ernst Ziehm, a conservative Danzig politician, recalled his ‘soldierly nature.’⁹ Duff Cooper, the conservative British politician, labeled him ‘execrable.’¹⁰ Józef Lipski, Polish ambassador to Berlin, viewed him as a ‘well-balanced person.’¹¹ Anthony Eden remembered a ‘truculent’ Greiser.¹² Julius Hoppenrath, a Danzig Nazi, saw him as ‘thoughtful, purposeful, and ruthless.’¹³ The prosecutor at Greiser’s trial, Mieczysław Siewierski, claimed that Greiser was ‘no emotional type, he has no momentary emotions.’¹⁴ Greiser’s Polish housemaid, Danuta Groscholska, remembered that her boss ‘was so vain, so full of himself, as if there was nothing above him—a god almost.’¹⁵ And an opposition politician in Danzig, Hans Leonhardt, thought that ‘Greiser was not so much a disruptive political fanatic as a type of a somewhat maladjusted mercenary who, under normal circumstances, could have made quite a useful citizen.’¹⁶

Given these contradictory contemporary descriptions, who was Greiser really? What motivated him to carry out his nefarious deeds? In the following pages, I trace how Greiser became the man who was hanged in 1946. I explore the personal, ideological, and career dynamics that accompanied his life trajectory. This is a complicated story, and one that illustrates choices, breaks, and discontinuities in Greiser’s life history.

In trying to interpret Greiser, I looked to the major explanations of Nazi perpetrators that have emerged since World War II.¹⁷ Was Greiser a psychopath or cold-blooded monster, as early postwar views of Nazi perpetrators suggested? Was he a soulless bureaucrat trying to make a career in a totalitarian dictatorship?¹⁸ Did Greiser condone murder for seemingly rational purposes—to address food supply or other problems related to overpopulation?¹⁹ Was he one of the smart, committed security officials who belonged to the ‘war-youth’ generation and saw themselves as pragmatic realists ruthlessly dedicated to Germany’s national redemption?²⁰ Was he an ‘eliminationist anti-Semite?’²¹ Or was he an ‘ordinary man’ who, like most men, would participate in genocide if put in an actual killing situation?²²

An exploration of his behavior and passions reveals that none of these explanations fits Greiser.²³ Rather, Greiser is an example of a particular kind of perpetrator: one shaped by a *völkisch* (racialized) nationalism rooted in the ethnic tensions of borderlands regions. Hitler and other Nazi perpetrators





came from Austria; many others from Alsace, the Baltic countries, or eastern borderlands regions; and yet others witnessed the French occupation of the Rhineland.²⁴ A recent investigation of the geographical origin of Nazi perpetrators discovered that they ‘were disproportionately drawn from lost territories or threatened borders;’ it concluded that ‘the origins of mass murder lay substantially in embittered ethnic imperial revisionism.’²⁵ This book builds on this finding by closely examining how a nationalism rooted in ethnic tensions played out in the life and career of a Nazi who came to rule over a borderlands region.

Born in 1897, Greiser came from the Prussian province of Posen—the birthplace of Generals Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff and later, the rocket scientist Wernher von Braun. In Greiser’s youth, the German minority made up the province’s governing elite, but Poles constituted close to two-thirds of the population. Shortly after World War I broke out, Greiser volunteered for military service. Over the next four years, he served as a scout, aerial observer, and combat pilot. After years at the front, he saw the war end in a humiliating defeat for Germany. Moreover, in December 1918, a Polish uprising led to the de facto loss of Posen province to the new state of Poland. Greiser moved to Danzig, a port city on the Baltic Sea that, as dictated by the Versailles Treaty, had been decoupled from Germany. By the late 1920s, the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP) had secured a toehold in Danzig; Greiser joined the party in December 1929.

If not before, Greiser came to espouse a xenophobic German nationalism during his first years as a Nazi. Greiser’s nationalism was neither sophisticated nor intellectual; he never moved in university or other circles that read and discussed chauvinist German screeds. Instead, he harbored a nationalism that was inchoate, visceral, and personal. It was also deeply anti-Polish. And it was very simple: above all, Greiser strove for Germany’s national redemption. Germany, he hoped, would recover its former glory, along with its lost lands, especially those ceded to Poland. Greiser even believed that he would play a personal role in the restoration of German greatness. As he wrote to his mistress (and later wife) in 1934, ‘I feel it ever more clearly . . . yet greater tasks will fall to me . . . My life doesn’t belong to me, it belongs to Germany.’²⁶ Five years later, in the Warthegau, Greiser’s ‘greater task’ became explicit. Hitler wished the Gau—now overwhelmingly Polish—‘to become flourishing German land in ten years.’²⁷





Greiser's experiences help illuminate why the Warthegau became a site of such dramatic ethnic-cleansing and genocidal policies. Some historians, though, doubt whether biography can teach us anything at all about genocide. As they argue, numerous studies support the conclusion that virtually anyone can and will become a murderer—provided that he finds himself in a situation in which he is called upon to kill. To such historians, the key to understanding why men murder lies in the concrete killing situation, not in individual men's biographies.²⁸ But such analysis cannot explain how and why genocidal situations arise in the first place. For this, leaders are necessary, leaders who incite others to murderous actions. And such leaders—like Greiser—are shaped by their experiences. They come to their hatreds and prejudices through real or perceived slights and injuries, all too often reactions to historical developments in which they found themselves on the 'losing' side. Biography, then, helps to explain the genesis of genocidal circumstances. Perhaps even more important, it ascribes responsibility for heinous crimes—to individuals, not just to impersonal situations.

While a brief summary of Greiser's life might suggest a straightforward radicalization from Posen youth to war veteran to anti-Polish Nazi zealot, this was not actually the case. In fact, right up to when Greiser joined the NSDAP, his life might have taken a very different direction. This biography underscores the notion that there was nothing inevitable about the rise of the Nazis or Germans' attraction to them. At the same time, while historians have long analyzed the factors that led individuals to join the NSDAP, they have only more recently focused on how Nazis underwent a 'cumulative radicalization' within the movement.²⁹ Greiser, for one, was probably radicalized more by his experiences within the party than those beforehand. In large part, this was due to a bitter power struggle in Danzig.

In 1930, Hitler sent Albert Forster, one of his young favorites, to be Danzig's Gauleiter. For the next nine years, Greiser served as deputy Gauleiter to Forster. For Greiser, this was galling: he had to play second fiddle to a man five years younger and much less tied to Danzig. Their rivalry was exacerbated after May 1933, when the Nazis won elections and thus ruled the city. While Forster controlled the Danzig NSDAP, Greiser became senate president and thus chief executive of the tiny Free City state in November 1934.



The Greiser–Forster rivalry is key to understanding the Nazi that Greiser became. This aspect of the Greiser story underlines the personal nature of politics in the Nazi regime. Greiser’s career was fundamentally shaped by his fierce jockeying for power with Forster. Unfortunately for Greiser, the Danzig Gauleiter always had the upper hand: whenever necessary, Forster could turn to Hitler for help and support. Greiser, by contrast, was handicapped by the fact that he had joined the NSDAP relatively late for a high-ranking Nazi. Since he never enjoyed the sort of trust that Hitler placed in his old cronies, he sought to raise his profile in other ways. First, he found other patrons, most notably Heinrich Himmler, leader of the SS (*Schutzstaffel*, literally Protection Squad). Second, in hopes of distinguishing himself, Greiser sometimes advocated policies at odds with those of his rival Forster. In the late 1930s, he thus supported ‘moderate’ Nazi policies such as not insisting on the immediate removal of the Jews from Danzig. It was only after this moderation brought him political defeat—Greiser lost his Danzig positions in August 1939—that he played up his Nazi zeal by espousing ‘radical’ Nazi policies. All this complicates the man. How deep were Greiser’s ideological passions? Was he just a rank opportunist? Or did he marry a pragmatic ambition with nationalist fervor?

In the Warthegau, Greiser joined the ranks of the Gauleiters, the leaders of the forty-one (later forty-two) Nazi Gaus.³⁰ Hitler viewed his Gauleiters as his most trusted lieutenants; unlike Greiser, many came from among his earliest and staunchest supporters. Given his late entry into the party, the fact that Greiser became a Gauleiter at all testifies to his political tenacity and to the fact that Hitler wanted a Gauleiter with borderlands experience in the Warthegau. While the Führer allowed all of his Gauleiters considerable free rein, those who served in the Old Reich (areas belonging to Germany before annexations began in 1938) held circumscribed powers.³¹ In the annexed eastern Gaus, this was not the case. There, Hitler gave his Gauleiters extraordinary powers to Germanize their regions. In the Warthegau, Greiser was not only Gauleiter, but also Reichsstatthalter or governor, thus combining the top party and state positions in his person. By claiming that Hitler had granted him ‘special powers’ to Germanize the region, Greiser came to thwart virtually all meddling by Reich ministries in his Gau’s affairs.³²

Hitler reportedly once stated that ‘every Gau should have its own face according to the personality of its leader and the particular problems of the population.’³³ Often, developments at the Gau level can be explained



only with reference to the Gauleiter in charge. Among the annexed eastern Gaus, for example, Greiser set policies that differed significantly from those of his peers in Danzig–West Prussia, Upper Silesia, and East Prussia. While these differing policies partly reflected the unique conditions of individual Gaus, they also resulted from the Gauleiters’ preferences. The Gauleiter in a particular region made a definite difference, often all the difference. As I argue throughout this book, Greiser—and no other individual or institution—was responsible for much of what happened in his Gau.

Shortly after coming to the Warthegau, Greiser declared that ‘our distant goal . . . is to become a model Gau of the Great German Reich.’³⁴ He was not the only Gauleiter to entertain this ambition; many others claimed or aspired to ‘model Gau’ status.³⁵ Their Gaus, they hoped, would show the way to the Third Reich’s future. But Greiser faced formidable challenges in meeting this goal. Although close to five million individuals lived in the Warthegau, almost 4.2 million of them were Poles, 400,000 were Jews, and just 325,000 were Germans.³⁶ To Greiser, however, the population’s makeup was a source of opportunity: ‘Here we are able to construct a truly National-Socialist Gau. Before us, we have a “virgin territory” in which the ideology of National Socialism must have a total breakthrough. What happens here is a drill for the Reich and a visiting card for the German East.’³⁷ Greiser neglected to spell out that the Warthegau could only become a ‘virgin territory’ if draconian methods were deployed to remove the Polish and Jewish populations. Precisely because it was so far from the Nazi ideal, Greiser’s Gau did become a model—a model of Nazi brutality.

As the Nazi occupation unfolded, some of Greiser’s policies and administrative practices were copied elsewhere. Greiser’s mode of rule—by decree, free of Berlin ministerial interference—was emulated by other eastern Gauleiters. Many of his policies toward Poles were replicated in the other eastern Gaus. Perhaps most important, Greiser’s Warthegau served as a model for the developing genocide of Jews. In early 1940, Gau authorities established the first major ghetto in Nazi-occupied Europe in Lods (soon renamed Litzmannstadt). The Litzmannstadt ghetto pioneered the systematic exploitation of Jews for their labor; eventually, it became the most industrialized of the Nazi Jewish ghettos. The Gau also saw the largest network of Jewish forced labor camps in occupied Europe. On Greiser’s initiative, the first Nazi extermination camp—Chelmno—was built in the



Warthegau. In early December 1941, the first mass gassings of Jews took place there, some six weeks before the Wannsee Conference.³⁸ In all sorts of ways, then, Greiser's Gau proved to be a 'model.'

Why did Greiser end up leading with such a radical bent? No doubt, this reflected a hyper-nationalism incubated in his borderlands youth and his personal competition with Forster in Danzig. But there was more. Greiser's need to present himself as a zealous Nazi was also a response to deep-seated personal insecurities. From his youth onwards, Greiser craved attention and admiration. But for a Nazi, Greiser's pre-movement years, as well as the first part of his party career, contained shortcomings. To make up for these imperfections, I argue, Greiser as Gauleiter tried to act as a super Nazi by promoting the most extreme Nazi solutions to alleged problems. Indeed, while he explicitly aimed to make the Warthegau a 'model Gau,' he also tried to fashion himself into a 'model Nazi.'³⁹ To him, an exemplary Nazi leader was tough, radical, and brooked no compromise. In no small measure, then, this is a book about the self-conscious making of a mid-level Nazi actor. As the following pages show, Greiser expended much psychic and other energy to turn himself into what he believed his movement demanded.

As a start, Greiser manipulated his life story to shore up his Nazi credentials. He played up, altered, or even fabricated elements of his past life.⁴⁰ He touted a heroic war record, but his military career was subject to doubt. He supposedly fought in Free Corps units after the war, but his para-military activity was quite minimal. He joined several right-wing political groupings in Danzig, but his membership was all but nominal. While each such newly characterized detail might seem trivial, together they added up to a new autobiography.

But even more was at stake in these manipulations. The politics of biography were crucial in the Nazi regime. Biographical details served as excuses to both reward and discipline longtime Nazis.⁴¹ Many Nazi 'old fighters' reaped the rewards of their revolutionary pasts with jobs and sinecures after 1933.⁴² But for Greiser—and not a few other longtime Nazis—their past lives had the potential to derail their political careers. In the 1920s, for example, Greiser had been a Free Mason; Hitler absolutely detested Free Masonry. Greiser also joined the party very late for a high-ranking Nazi. And in 1934 he created a scandal by abandoning his wife and cavorting with his mistress, a professional pianist, shortly before the



Nazis needed to win an important election. That same year, the NSDAP undertook an investigation into his past life; nine years later, in 1943, another took place. Although cleared both times, Greiser remained vulnerable. At any time, he worried, some aspect of his past life might resurface, and he would be subject to another humiliating party investigation.

Greiser was not the only one to manipulate his life story. Shortly after World War II, West German revanchists circulated rumors about him to foment anti-Polish sentiment; they aimed to ratchet up calls for the return of lands taken by Poland in 1945. They claimed that prior to his hanging, Greiser was put in a steel cage and paraded around Poznań while angry Poles pelted him with rotten eggs and other noxious objects.⁴³ Although not true, it is the story that is best known about Greiser, and it has found its way into many of the brief biographical summaries published about him. Both during his life and after his death, Greiser's life story was the object of political manipulation.

In writing this biography, I have been able to use some remarkable—and previously untapped—sources. During World War I, Greiser wrote hundreds of letters home; in the 1930s, he wrote dozens of letters to his mistress and later wife; over the years, he wrote some letters to his children; and lastly, he wrote two letters to his wife from his Poznań prison cell in 1946. (Unfortunately, there are almost no personal papers pertaining to the years 1939–45, just when Greiser was at the height of his power. For these years, I have had to treat Greiser with a certain distance.) I was also able to interview four individuals who knew Greiser personally, including his daughter, his niece, his cousin, and his personal adjutant in 1945. The letters and interviews humanize Greiser; they bring out his sense of humor, his lively mind, and his sometimes rather pleasant qualities.

The more intimate sources also suggest that Greiser embodied the contradictory impulses that have now become a cliché about Nazi perpetrators—the oft-found combination of decency and cruelty, culture and barbarity, sentimentality and brutality.⁴⁴ To the world, Greiser was a cruel Nazi leader, but in his private life, he was a dutiful son, loving father, amorous husband, and good friend. To the world, he thundered his hatreds, but he was generally even-keeled and respectful in private interaction. To the world, he presented himself as a hard, soldierly Nazi, but he was always prone to anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic illnesses. To the world, Greiser projected himself as a man of culture, but he rarely





read a book and he never finished secondary school. All this, however, is not really so peculiar. Like most Nazis (and, indeed, most of us), Greiser had a deep capacity to engage in contradictions, tolerate ambiguities, and compartmentalize his life.

Although he made a heady Nazi career, Greiser was surely not a man at peace with himself. He was not only torn by personal doubts and career ambitions, but also by conflicting political aims. Although a hard-bitten enemy of Poles, he could, when necessary, be a realist in his policy toward them; some of his policies thus complicate his reputation as a Nazi ‘racial fanatic.’⁴⁵ Moreover, despite his eagerness to ethnically cleanse the Poles, he did not always want them deported; he needed Poles as workers. For the same reason, he sometimes tried to ameliorate Poles’ situation. Greiser was also torn about his policy toward Jews. He wanted to maintain a Jewish workforce to carry out his Germanization projects and to otherwise generate funds for his Gau. Yet he also wished to have Jews killed so as to satisfy Himmler’s murderous cravings. Greiser thus felt burdened by his crimes—but for all the wrong reasons.

Greiser’s biography presents numerous absences, gaps, twists, and contradictions. But as we know from other biographies, individual lives do not always, or even usually, add up to a coherent whole. Greiser experienced deep ruptures in his life, largely brought on by circumstances beyond his control: World War I, Germany’s loss of Posen province, Danzig’s curious interwar situation, the rise of Nazism, World War II, and finally, Nazi defeat. The different pieces of his lived experience created a jagged life narrative, at least until he arrived in the Warthegau. There, the disparate parts of his biography coalesced into a dreadful Germanization project. But this, too, may impose too much unity on what in many ways remained an inconsistent biography. For Greiser, like most individuals, faced competing pressures that he responded to in different ways, at different times, and in different situations. At one time or another, he privileged ideology over pragmatism; ambition over ideology; and pragmatism over passion. As the historian Simone Lässig has written, ‘heterogeneity is typical of every person.’⁴⁶ Greiser was no exception.

Like all biographies, this one is a product of its times. In recent years, historians of Germany have shifted their interest from the Nazi rise to power and the genesis of World War II to a preoccupation with the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes committed in occupied Europe. Decades





ago, a biography of Greiser might well have included an extended discussion of Danzig affairs in the 1930s and how these contributed to the outbreak of World War II. While these matters are touched on, they are not the main focus of this book. We live in an era obsessed with the Holocaust and other cases of ethnic cleansing and genocide. I thus emphasize how Greiser became a Nazi leader eager to carry out vicious ethnic-cleansing and genocidal measures. I also devote considerable attention to the details of his Germanization project.

Greiser's life offers considerable insight into how some Germans became Nazi perpetrators. In Chapters 1 and 2, I describe Greiser as a young man and newly minted Nazi. These chapters illustrate how formative experiences flowed into Greiser's later political views; how longstanding resentments, insecurities, and personality traits fueled Greiser's Nazi persona; and how Greiser changed through his encounter with the Nazi movement. Chapter 3 recounts his tenure as Senate President in Danzig, including how his rivalry with Forster led him to adopt some 'moderate' Nazi policies. Chapter 4 offers an overview of his position in the Warthegau, and begins to explore how Greiser accumulated the powers that made it possible for him to carry out a radical Germanization program. Together, these chapters suggest how mid-ranking Nazi perpetrators were shaped by their experiences both inside and outside of the Nazi movement: their motives, their values and sensibilities, and their strategies for forging a career.

The heart of this book lies in Chapters 5–7. Here, I describe Greiser's policies toward Germans, Poles, and Jews. Rather than exploring the story of each of these groups in separate chapters (and thereby suggesting separate stories as most other historians have done), I present an integrated history of Greiser's Germanization program.⁴⁷ Examining the Holocaust in the context of a more general Germanization program may strike some readers as controversial or even loathsome. By definition, it would seem, this strategy must detract from the extreme suffering that Jews experienced. But as I hope readers will come to understand, the specific forms of persecution that Jews endured in the Warthegau had much to do with Greiser's more general Germanization policy. Policies toward incoming Germans led to the deportation of Poles, the removal of Poles prevented the deportation of Jews, and the impossibility of evacuating Jews led to their continued ghettoization and subsequent murder. Discrimination against Poles demanded an intricate system of ethnic classification that deeply affected Germans living in the Gau; it also underscored the very





real difference between the discriminatory treatment of Poles and the murderous treatment of Jews in the Gau. Finally, transforming the Gau's natural, built, and cultural environment to make it 'German' depended on resources generated in large part through the expropriation of Polish and Jewish property, and the exploitation of Jewish and Polish labor.

An integrated approach exploring Greiser's policies toward Germans, Poles, and Jews holds many benefits. We can only appreciate the totality of his Germanization program by exploring these interconnections. Such an approach also reveals the ambition, minutiae, and inconsistencies of the Germanization project. Moreover, it makes clear that some Nazis, at least, saw non-Jewish 'foreign' population groups as just as threatening as Jews. It further reminds us that Nazi plans for the 'cleansing' of Nazi-occupied Europe went well beyond the Holocaust. Had the Nazis triumphed in World War II, the Third Reich would have seen a wholesale slaughter of many non-German peoples. For Nazis of Greiser's ilk—those imbued with a hyper-nationalism stemming from their experiences in borderlands areas—the Nazi project was about much more than 'just' the de-Judaization of continental Europe.

The final two chapters recount Greiser's downfall. In Chapter 8, I relate how Greiser lived and ruled as Gauleiter, particularly during the last war years; and how his power came to an abrupt end with the Red Army's arrival in his Gau in January 1945. In Chapter 9, I examine Greiser's Polish trial. In yet another reinvention of his past life, Greiser adopted an implausible defense strategy in which he claimed to have never been a 'true' Nazi. The trial made legal history: because Greiser was indicted after the Nuremberg proceedings began, but convicted before those verdicts were announced, he was the first person ever found guilty of 'crimes against the peace.' Finally, in a short Afterword, I locate this biography in the context of how historians' views of Nazi perpetrators and their regime have evolved.

In writing this book, I have often felt a deep discomfort. In small part, this is due to parallels between my own family history and that of Greiser and his family. Like Greiser's father, my great-grandfather was a German Protestant civil servant in a borderlands area—in this case not Posen, but Alsace. After World War I, my great grandparents and their children were expelled from what had become their homeland. Always nostalgic about their beloved Alsace, they were very bitter about Germany's loss of the





province. Like Greiser, one of my grandmother's sisters became a very committed Nazi. While this great aunt didn't initiate the murder of Jews or the persecution of Poles, she nonetheless believed deeply in the Nazi cause. My grandmother, meanwhile, married a man of Jewish origins, and she and my grandfather left Nazi Germany, emigrating first to England and later the United States. Greiser's sister, too, married a man of Jewish origins, and that couple left Germany, first for Shanghai, and later for the United States. As all this suggests, the distance between the two families is not so great: members of both harbored the same resentments and shared the same fates. Could someone in my family have become Arthur Greiser?

Much more troubling is a whole other set of concerns. I have often been asked: 'How could you devote so much time to a person who created so much suffering?' Or 'Can you write a biography of someone without getting close to your subject?' Those working on perpetrators frequently face the objection that the very act of trying to explain perpetrators somehow justifies or even forgives their subjects' conduct. Understanding, in this view, becomes empathy. Alternatively, others fear that trying to explain human evil inevitably leads to contamination—that at the very least, I, as the biographer, will become callous or numb to my subject's deeds.⁴⁸ These are legitimate objections and fears. I have regularly needed to remind myself of all the awful crimes that Greiser committed—especially when writing about other parts of his life. Beyond such objections, I also wonder whether Greiser might best be forgotten by history. Why grant him the dignity of a biography? Nevertheless, despite misgivings, I believe that we should confront the lives of those who create enormous evil. The Nazi regime was not a unique example of barbarous crimes. Too often, genocide is perpetrated, only too recently in Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Darfur. Understanding perpetrators should be viewed as a critical process: one that heightens our sensitivity to the circumstances (political, economic, social, and even psychological) in which people create great evil. Greater sensitivity toward those circumstances, I hope, will allow us to better see and contain the threat of genocide, before millions more have died.

Last but not least, I am left with a nagging doubt that may bedevil all biographers, but surely those working on perpetrators. The historian Volker Berghahn, for one, has suggested that 'the perpetrator ultimately may well remain impenetrable.'⁴⁹ Put otherwise, do I really 'know' Greiser? Do I have him right? After years of working on Greiser, I believe I do. Yet who can know for sure? Greiser is long since dead. Those who knew





him as a family member—as a father or uncle—knew him as such, not as a merciless Nazi perpetrator. Those who knew him as a boss must have known or suspected some of his crimes, but they will not speak of them, lest they incriminate themselves. I know Greiser mostly through the extensive paper trail that he left behind. After working through reams of documents and listening to those who knew him, I have aimed to write a biography that is true to the man. I hope to have captured Greiser as he was—his strengths and weaknesses, his passions and interests, his motives and inclinations. Through much of my writing, I have tried to suspend judgment about him. But ultimately, Greiser and all other perpetrators must be explained and evaluated. Greiser's life trajectory, I believe, was bound up in a complex knot of xenophobic nationalism, career ambition, and personal insecurity. This, to be sure, is a miserable tangle. But within that knot, I believe, lies the explanation for how and why Arthur Greiser's life ended on the gallows that July morning in 1946.

