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BEST, Karl Rudolf Werner

FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY

Dr. Karl Rudolf Werner Best, World War II German plenipotentiary in Denmark, arrived in West Germany on August 29, 1951 after deportation from Denmark, where he had served six years of a twelve-year prison sentence. Originally sentenced to death, Best saw his sentence commuted to five years by a Danish court of appeals, and subsequently raised to twelve years by the Danish Supreme Court. He was freed from prison and deported to West Germany on condition that he would never again enter Denmark without the express approval of the Danish Government. 1/

Dr. Best's qualifications and life-long interest in political and governmental questions, as well as his relative youth, indicate that he may again play a role in the German political scene. Now 53 years old, Dr. Best was reported as one of the ex-Nazis in contact with Friedrich Middelhaue, Bundestag deputy and deputy national chairman of the Free Democratic Party (Freie Demokratische Partei) in February 1953. 2/ Best was then working in the law offices of Ernst Achenbach, a powerful German lawyer who had distinguished himself at the Nuremberg trials and in his handling of the Stinnes' enterprises, but who had been temporarily discredited within the Free Democratic Party for neo-Nazi tendencies. Achenbach is presently a leader in the FDP in North Rhine-Westphalia. In June 1954 a restricted German newsletter, Politik und Wirtschaft (Politics and Industry), mentioned Dr. Best as a probable section chief for Northern Affairs in the future German "Counterintelligence Service" (Deutscher Abwehrdienst). It is probable that Best and Achenbach, both of whom were in the Nazi Foreign Office, and both of whom are lawyers with similar political views, will continue to work together toward finding a suitable forum for their ambitions. No information is available about Dr. Best's current activities.

Education and Career, 1903 - 1940

Best was born at Darmstadt, Germany, on July 10, 1903. His father, a minor official in the post office system, was killed fighting on the Western Front shortly after the outbreak of World War I. After attending humanist high schools (humanistische gymnasien) at Dortmund and Mainz, Best studied law at the universities of Frankfurt am Main, Freiburg im Breisgau, and Giessen, receiving the degree of Doctor of Laws from the University of Heidelberg in 1927. Embarking on a legal career, he worked as a court reporter, administrator, lawyer, and court assessor in Mainz before receiving an appointment as a judge in the Hessian court. He held this position until his discharge on December 1, 1931, after charges of treason in connection

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with the Boxheim Documents had been brought against him. Best's role in this abortive effort to overthrow the Weimar Republic is not clear; one source reports categorically that he was the author of the documents. 3/ Best's explanation for his actions, that the decrees were to be put into effect only in the event of a Communist revolution in 1931, were accepted and the charges against him dropped. He was not, however, reappointed to the judgeship.

Best was welcomed into the Nazi Party in 1930, for as early as 1919 he had been politically active in the French Occupation Zone, receiving a suspended sentence and a fine of 1,000 marks for his part in the German passive resistance movement of 1923. He received rapid promotions within the Nazi Party, and was elected a Nazi deputy to the Hesse Landtag in 1931, the year in which he joined the SS with the rank of Ober-Sturmabfuhrer (lieutenant colonel). In 1933 Best became State Commissioner of the Hessian Police, and on July 10 of the same year was appointed president of the Land Police (Landespolizei). After steering the Land of Hesse through the Nazi seizure of power, Best was given a leave of absence from his positions in Hesse in order to work in the investigative service of the Reichsfuehrer SS, Heinrich Himmler. In 1936 he held the dual positions of Chief of the Legal Division of the SS and First Government Counselor and Deputy Director of the Gestapo, the latter organization having been brought under SS control late in 1935. The outbreak of war found Best as Chief of Administration and Law in Himmler's Department of the Interior, a position which probably made him Himmler's assistant in dealing with high treason and espionage. 4/

Best began his wartime career eminently qualified for the important positions which he was to hold. He had written numerous Nazi books and pamphlets, among them the chapter on "The War and the Reich" in Ernst Juenger's definitive volume, War and Warriors. He held the SS rank of Obersturmbannfuhrer, and was a close personal friend of Himmler's. Best was also one of the theoreticians of the Nazi government; one of his roles seems to have been to explain the need for the Nazi police system, and in doing so he touched on the philosophical bases of Nazism.

The War Years

With the collapse of France, Best was sent to Paris as chief military administrator with the SS rank of Brigadefuehrer (brigadier general). He acted as Otto Abetz' personal assistant and earned for himself the nickname "Bloodhound of Paris". 5/ The famous "telegram crisis" of 1942, in which Hitler expressed his indignation at the perfunctory reply which King Christian of Denmark sent to a birthday telegram from Hitler, gave the German government

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a good opportunity to withdraw its envoy to Denmark, Renthe-Fink, and replace him with Dr. Best. At the same time, the German military commander was replaced by General Hermann von Hanneken, a man more in accord than most with Josef Goebbels' concept of total war.

Best and von Hanneken disagreed violently from the very beginning of their joint tenure in Denmark. It was apparently Best's desire to pursue a moderate course in Denmark, using the Danish press, the Danish police, and respected Danish authorities whenever possible to enforce the German occupation. Von Hanneken, on the contrary, espoused from the start a policy of extreme severity and repression. Although Best's conciliatory policy turned out to be a failure, he had by 1942 established connections among the Nazi hierarchy in Berlin which allowed him to keep the upper hand, even in the face of criticism by Hitler. 6/ 7/ Best is reported to have been close to Joachim von Ribbentrop, 8/ Martin Bormann, 9/ and Reinhard Heydrich. 10/

Best's desire for moderation in Denmark was doomed to failure, for the Danes accepted their role in the "New Order" no more readily than other Europeans. The free elections that Best persuaded Berlin to accept in Denmark, resulted in a severe defeat for the Danish Nazi Party, which received only 2 percent of the votes cast, the other 98 percent going to the democratic fronts. The period between the election in March 1943 and the state of emergency declared by von Hanneken in August 1943 saw a growing increase in acts of sabotage and strikes. After August 1943 Denmark was under de facto military rule, although a crisis of July 1944 was again met with moderate repressive measures, the striking workers even receiving their wages for the period of the strike. It may be said that Dr. Best, perhaps more than any of the other German governors of occupied countries, attempted to win an ally for Germany, and that this policy, pursued by him to the end, proved to be a total failure.

Best, von Hanneken, and Himmler apparently agreed not to persecute the Danish Jews. In this desire, however, they were overruled by Hitler, 11/ and on October 1, 1943, they arrested some 400 Jews, who were subsequently deported to Germany. Best and von Hanneken appear to have been largely responsible for the successful escape of most Danish Jews to Sweden in direct violation of Hitler's wishes. 5/

Personality and Views

Best was unquestionably a roughneck politician in his university days, and could take care of himself in the rough-and-tumble of the Weimar political scene. He appears, however, to have changed completely in the years following his marriage in 1930 to Hildegard Regner. 4/ Benedetto Capomazza, First Secretary of the Italian Legation at Copenhagen during Best's service there, described him as "a person of broad and moderate mind, with a touch of human sense which makes him different from the other Nazi chiefs. He has many children; he is a happy husband, and he loves his family life". It was

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Capomazza's opinion that Best possessed considerable diplomatic skill which enabled him to come close to success in his objectives in Denmark.

The quality which endeared Best most to his Nazi chiefs in Berlin was probably his unswerving loyalty to the Nazi ideal. A Danish refugee described him as "a handsome, polished, well-mannered, elegantly dressed fellow who will stop at nothing to carry out the orders of Himmler, his master." 12/ Another quality mentioned frequently in connection with Best is frankness; there exists the apocryphal story that, upon being reproached for having assured King Christian that the Germans had no intention of assuming control in 1943, one day, in fact, before the German Army did so, Best answered with complete cynicism, "But I am a man without honor." 12/ These qualities must have been highly prized in Berlin, for Best, in spite of his failure in Denmark, retained his position until the end of the war, receiving in 1944 a promotion to the grade of Obergruppenfuehrer (lieutenant general), the highest rank of the SS.

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