Few of those who stood on the defendants’ dock at the trial of the major war criminals before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in 1945–1946 inspired more revulsion than Ernst Kaltenbrunner, erstwhile chief of the Reich Security Main Office (Reichssicherheitshauptamt — RSHA). Born in 1903, in Ried im Innkreis, Austria, this tall, hulking, scarfed lawyer joined the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP) in 1930 and the elite Schutzstaffel, or SS, in 1931. In 1937, he was appointed chief of the underground Austrian SS; after the Anschluss of Austria into the German Reich a year later, he arrived in Vienna to take command of all SS and police forces in Vienna, Upper Austria and Lower Austria. On January 30, 1943, Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler summoned Kaltenbrunner to Berlin to succeed the notorious Reinhard Heydrich as chief of the RSHA in Berlin. In this position, he directed the operations of the Nazi Secret State Police (Geheime Staatspolizei — Gestapo) and the Security Service (Sicherheitsdienst — SD). These operations involved the murder and mistreatment of prisoners of war and the civilian populations of occupied Europe; they also included the implementation of the so-called Final Solution, a program that called for the
physical extermination of the European Jews. In view of Heydrich's assassination in 1942 and Himmler's suicide in 1945, the victorious Allies chose Kaltenbrunner to represent the SS on the dock at Nuremberg. Even when comparing him with his codefendants, observers found Kaltenbrunner particularly unappealing. Author Evelyn Waugh noted in his diary that "only Kaltenbrunner looked an obvious criminal."

What makes a man like this tick? Kaltenbrunner came from the German-Austrian professional middle class of the Habsburg Monarchy. His father and his grandfather had been highly respected lawyers: the latter had been the mayor of the Upper Austrian town Eferding, while the former had been a partner in the most prestigious law firm in Linz, the Upper Austrian provincial capital. A Linz schoolteacher, whose part Jewish ancestry and affiliation with the Austrian Social Democratic Workers' Party rendered him unlikely to be sympathetic to Kaltenbrunner by nature, remembered the future RSHA chief as a pleasant and wellbred middle class youth. In fact, a quick glance at Kaltenbrunner's social and intellectual background reveals no propensity towards socially aberrant or criminal behavior, no hint at all at the future development of his career.

Yet perhaps we should take a closer look. The German-Austrian middle class of the Habsburg Monarchy formed part of a German ethnic group that was accustomed to enjoy political and cultural dominance in a multinational state. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, as the other Habsburg nationalities (Italians, Hungarians, Croats, Czechs, Slovaks, Serbs, Romanians and Jews) pressed (and as the state yielded to) claims for equal civic status, linguistic parity, equal economic opportunity and political patronage, many members of the German ethnic group, particularly from the middle classes, sought refuge in a sullen and later militant obsession with their national identity. Seizing upon an old German Romantic nationalist theme, they found compensation for their eroding political and social status in a yearning for German national unity. Incorporating the then popular Social Darwinist theory of the inequality of the races and their absolute struggle for survival into the vision of a united German nation, German nationalists in Austria called for a national union of the German speaking provinces of Austria with the German Reich on the principle of racial purity. Discarding the other Habsburg ethnic minorities as culturally and biologically inferior, these obsessed souls denounced as mortal enemies those who opposed their utopian ideal. These "enemies" — Catholics and Marxists, Slavs and Italians, and, above all, Jews — all had international affiliations that they allegedly used to undermine German national aspirations.

The Jew represented a unique threat to German-Austrians insecure