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Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. Pp. viii, 368. ISBN 978-0-674-02793-0.

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The face of the Third Reich was decidedly nasty.¹ Leaders like Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, Heinrich Himmler, and Reinhard Heydrich have become synonymous with evil. How could a people as sophisticated and cultured as the Germans—the people of Beethoven, Goethe, Schiller—become, in the main, such fervent supporters of these and other Nazis?

It's not as though Hitler's agenda was unknown. In *Mein Kampf* (1924), he wrote of the need for vengeance against the "November criminals," those who allegedly betrayed the German military by agreeing to an armistice in November 1918. Then Pfc Hitler, recovering in a hospital from being gassed, simply could not process the reality of the German Army's collapse in the World War. Like many others, he sought to shift the blame from the army to supposedly traitorous elements within Germany.

Acceptance of the myth that the army had been "undefeated in the field"² implied that total victory in the next war could best be achieved by neutralizing, even eliminating, traitors at the outset, including socialists, war profiteers, pacifists, and especially the Jews. In this sense, as Peter Fritzsche notes, for the Nazis the next war was to be fought backwards, with national unity and euphoria to follow internal purgation and total war.

To fight this war, Germany needed men "forged to the hardness of steel"³ in a racially cleansed and thoroughly militarized Third Reich. *Life and Death in the Third Reich* explains why so many Germans submitted to, even reveled in, Hitler's ruthless, steel-hardened vision. In four densely written chapters, Fritzsche deftly quotes many contemporary diaries, letters, and books to show how tightly the Nazi transformation took hold of Germany. A racially groomed *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community) quickly became inured to concentration camps in its midst,⁴ to the persecution of Jews and other "undesirables," and, after 1939, to ceaseless warfare and damning evidence of massive war crimes committed in its name.

Recent works by Robert Gellately and Richard J. Evans have shown how Nazism attracted millions of true believers while compelling consent from the rest.⁵ Fritzsche personalizes the story, suggesting that most Germans sought group solidarity, the comfort of being *unter uns*, "just us [Aryans]" (68–69). His first chapter, "Reviving the Nation," shows how cleverly Nazism was inserted into the lives of ordinary Germans, converting contentious citizens into racial comrades. Indeed, Fritzsche uses the word "conversion" quite often, denoting the life-changing experience of becoming Nazi. Such conversions were best effected through indoctrination in communal settings at the local level, supplemented by party propaganda transmitted in print and on radio. At the same time, the Party's monopoly of most aspects of life—education, recreation, jobs, and opportunities for advancement—persuaded the more reluctant that "to get along, you had to go along."

National Socialism, Fritzsche reminds us, "combined populism, racism, and nationalism in a youthful, energetic way" (16). It was dynamic; it looked toward a better and brighter future; it exalted the strong and the young; it called for "strength through joy." A revival of youthful communal energy, the Nazis believed, would negate their own "macabre premonitions of German death." Yet, in seeking to secure Germany's future, "The Nazis delivered upon their enemies the very destruction they imagined awaited Germans" (4–5).

1. Joachim C. Fest, *The Face of the Third Reich: Portraits of the Nazi Leadership* (NY: Pantheon, 1970).

2. Fritzsche correctly notes that "One of the great triumphs of the Nazis was the standardization of the 'Stab-in-the-Back' legend" (10) throughout Germany.

3. Hitler to Hermann Rauschning, in Fest (note 1 supra) 51.

4. "More than 100,000 Germans passed through Dachau, Oranienburg, and other concentration camps in 1933 and 1934" (42).

5. Robert Gellately, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: OUP, 2001); Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich, The Third Reich in Power, and The Third Reich at War* (NY: Penguin, 2003/2005/2009).

Fritzsche's insight here is disturbing. Along with "strength through joy," the Nazis also promoted "strength through fear." By stoking the German people's fear of various "subhuman" enemies, foreign and domestic, they justified their own fanatical wars of annihilation. Imagining an existential war against monsters, they were themselves the true monsters.

As anachronistic as it sounds, the Nazis believed they were waging their very own war on terror, a defensive struggle against beastly Poles, brutish Slavs, and blood-polluting Jews. And in this war, they perfected and used industrial instruments of torture and terror to subdue or destroy their enemies. They even complimented themselves for remaining "decent" while killing millions, as Himmler did in 1943.⁶

Fritzsche's sample shows that many ordinary Germans could have written their own *Mein Kampf* as they strove to conform to Nazism. Yet conform they did, partly because they saw it as a matter of life and death—for themselves and for their nation—a theme the Nazis hammered away at ceaselessly. After the defeat at Stalingrad early in 1943, the German people needed no further convincing that resistance was a matter of survival: having sowed the wind, they would now reap the whirlwind.

In Chapter 2, "Racial Grooming," Fritzsche details the Nazi obsession with racial purity, a fetish that became normalized among the people. Germans were, in a sense, sorted and divided by their "genetic quotient," as in the science fiction film *Gattaca*.⁷ The Nazis made a (pseudo)science of discrimination, complete with arcane measurements of nose, cheekbone, and brow angles, as brilliantly captured in the movie *Europa, Europa*.⁸ Creating a "worthy" master race of hardened warriors naturally meant categorizing others as weak and unworthy. "In 1941 [Aryan] Germans could imagine living off a meager pension, or suffering incapacitating wounds in battle, or growing old and infirm. But they could not imagine being Jewish" (119).

In Chapter 3, "Empire of Destruction," Fritzsche turns to the logical consequences of Nazi racial ordering and profiling: wars of annihilation and the machinery of mass extermination. One German soldier wrote in July 1941 that "Here [in the Soviet Union] war is pursued in its pure form (151)," though, as Fritzsche notes, this "pure" or racialized war had already been rehearsed against Poland in 1939:⁹ "The Wehrmacht was an integral part of the racial war the Nazis waged. Its treatment of Polish civilians and prisoners of war was vicious, its collaboration with SS shooting parties routine" (159).

This "pure" form of eliminationist race war contributed to radical answers to the "Jewish problem," as the search for a "final solution" proceeded remorselessly to mass extermination. Some Germans blamed the victims, not themselves, for the horrific nature of the killing. Kurt Werner, an SS executioner, testified that many Jews "started screaming with fright" at places like Babi Yar. "You can't imagine what strong nerves it took to go on with that filthy job there" (197).

Chapter 4, "Intimate Knowledge," the most original in this disturbing book, examines what ordinary Germans knew about the Holocaust and other atrocities. Many Germans effectively fitted themselves with blinders; others "talked furtively but frankly about the mass shootings in the Soviet Union in the fall of 1941" (250). But how could they not see? As German Jews were shipped eastwards to ghettos and extermination camps, public auctions were held to distribute their stolen possessions. "Certainly not most Germans, but considerable numbers relaxed in chairs and slept in sheets that had once belonged to their Jewish neighbors" (259).

That said, the mass extermination of Jews in death camps was largely hidden from the German people before 1945. As Fritzsche notes, ordinary Germans on the home front imagined Babi Yar, but not Auschwitz, perhaps because, as one Jewish survivor speculated, the Nazis somehow "chopped off part of the universe and created annihilation zones and torture and slaughter areas. You know, it's like the planet was chopped up into a normal [part]—so called normal: our lives are not really normal—and this other planet, and we were herded onto that planet from this one, and herded back again" (307).

6. Fest (note 1 supra) 115.

7. 1997; dir. Andrew Niccol.

8. 1990; dir. Agnieszka Holland.

9. See also Alexander B. Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, Ideology, and Atrocity* (Lawrence: U Press of Kansas, 2003).

The German people themselves inhabited such an “other planet” or “death world” as the Wehrmacht was overmatched and overthrown in 1945. Interestingly, an American intelligence officer noted at war’s end that “Hitler is blamed for losing the war, not for starting it.” A sense of betrayal, Fritzsche concludes, was common to “former Nazi loyalists who made up the majority of the German population. Their sense of betrayal rested on a strong identification with the Third Reich right up to the moment of abandonment As a result, Germans came to perceive themselves as the victims of cruel history” (271), not heirs of their own cruelty. They were victims because they were vanquished, not because they had sought ruthlessly to vanquish others.

Awful implications are contained in Fritzsche’s measured prose. He is concerned not so much to condemn Germans of the Third Reich as to allow them to state, in their own voices, how and why they consented, actively or passively, to Nazi abominations. Precisely by showing restraint, Fritzsche offers a seething indictment of a people mobilized by joy and fear, believing they could realize their potential and their security only by denying the same to supposed racial inferiors via conquest, enslavement, and extermination.