



An Iron Wind: Europe under Hitler by Peter Fritzsche.

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In this deeply insightful work, noted historian Peter Fritzsche¹ (Univ. of Illinois) explores “how people in World War II struggled to make sense of the murderous events occurring around them” (ix). Focusing on Nazi-occupied Europe, he demonstrates that, “Some people collaborated, others resisted, but most wavered in a moral no-man’s-land between the two positions” (xiii). Because the brutal German conquests “erased whole horizons of empathy,” people found it easy to ignore the suffering of their neighbors and retreat into a preoccupation with self-preservation. Fritzsche’s careful reading of numerous wartime letters and diaries as well as later memoirs and novels makes his book at once impressionistic and analytical.

Chapter 1, “Talk in Wartime,” employs the metaphor of a railway station, where the people of occupied Europe endure endless waiting for news of loved ones, scarce rationed goods, and the Second Front, while engaging in ceaseless conversation. Rumor, often fueled by wishful thinking, substitutes for knowledge, because the facts are unavailable or too horrible to contemplate.

Chapter 2, “Hitler Means War!” surveys the radically different expectations of what Adolf Hitler’s rise to power might mean for the future. For many Germans, the *Machtergreifung* (seizure of power) signaled a much-desired rebirth and resurgence of the fatherland: “less than twenty years after the start of World War I, the country looked like August 1914 again, more disciplined, perhaps, but just as ready for military engagement” (25). Clearly, the war weariness many had felt in 1918 had faded, as signaled by the suppression of Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929).

The reaction was much different for Frenchmen and many Britons. Even before the advent of the Third Reich, people dreaded the terrors they imagined any future war would entail. “The fear of ferociously destructive air raids sat as deeply in the bones of Europeans in the 1930s as the fear of nuclear attack would during the Cold War a generation later” (39). Parisians and Londoners worried that the new Germany was bent on war, but that apprehension moved more of them toward pacifism and appeasement than anti-fascism and resistance. And many overlooked “the centrality of racial thinking to Germany’s great-power ambitions” (46).

Chapter 3, “A New Authoritarian Age?” explores disorientation—from the unsettling imposition of German summer time on western Europe to the endless lines of refugees and their abandoned vehicles and belongings along the roads. Many feared France might forsake its republican traditions for Vichy-style authoritarianism. Had Hitler’s inauguration of the Nazis’ “Thousand-Year Reich” ended the era of European liberalism? Was civilization itself in peril? Even the Swiss agonized over how much to “adapt” to or “resist” the New Order. However, an enduring belief in their exceptionalism combined with the changing fortunes of war to preserve the “porcupine” federation. Outside Switzerland,

1. He is the author of nine books, most notably, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 1998) and *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (id. 2008).

Everyone in German-occupied Europe had to make sense of the “Bekanntmachung,” the black-lettered notice German authorities posted on cheap colored paper, puzzling out the words and implications of the threatening lettering that spelled out the curfew regime, market regulations, and restrictions on Jewish life. Everyone had to size up the German soldiers they encountered on the street, decide how menacing were the daggers and pistols they carried, and learn the difference between the Wehrmacht and the SS.... (89)

In chapter 4, “Living with the Germans,” we learn that in western Europe the occupation forces were under orders to behave “correctly” toward their captive populations. Short of outright collaboration, many were tempted to act civilly, even helpfully, toward their conquerors in order to restore some semblance of normal life. Some French women chalked the Allied “V” symbol on walls, others dated Germans—some did both. Some shopkeepers provided cover for the resistance, others displayed “German Spoken Here” signs and portraits of Marshal Pétain in their windows.

While Frenchmen faced agonizing choices, Poles endured real agony. The Germans intended to destroy the Polish nation, exterminating its elite and reducing the remainder to a race of helots. In the face of unstinting brutality, some Poles joined the resistance, but most were too afraid of arrest and too preoccupied with the scramble to secure the necessities of daily life. Alcoholism and crime rates soared. Even within the resistance, a nationalist-Christian ideology ignored and sometimes exacerbated the suffering of Polish Jews.

Chapter 5, “Journey to Russia,” draws on the diaries of a volunteer Swiss Red Cross team on the Eastern Front to explore the thinking of the German occupiers. One Wehrmacht soldier bluntly told a Swiss nurse,

The Jews, they are fast disappearing. We already bumped off 1,600. There are just thirty left, mostly shoemakers and handymen. For now, they have to work for us, then it will be their turn. They are rounded up, have to dig deep ditches, and then “piff-paff.” All of them, the elderly and children. (141)

Fritzsche judges that “The Germans whom the Swiss encountered were completely absorbed in their own national drama. Indeed, the narcissism they displayed was instrumental to their use of extreme force” (145). The evidence he has compiled shows that ordinary German soldiers, not just SS-men and Nazi officials, were deeply imbued with Hitler’s ideology, notwithstanding the arguments to the contrary by several scholars.²

Chapter 6, “The Fate of the Jews,” examines why so many Germans accepted Hitler’s Social Darwinist view that perceived existential threats to the Fatherland necessitated preemptive invasions of other countries. Their letters and diaries show that Germans accepted “deportation and mass murder as completely normal and acceptable aspects of the war...” (164). Theresienstadt, the “model” concentration camp, allowed Germans who had Jewish friends and acquaintances to feel that mass deportation was not so bad after all.

Nonetheless, many Germans were horrified by the rumors of mass murders of Jewish women and children. They tended to blame the SS, not their own sons in the Wehrmacht. In the occupied

2. E.g., Richard Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (NY: Penguin, 2008) 500, and Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939–1945* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Pr, 1982) 163. Supporting Fritzsche’s analysis are Omer Bartov, *Hitler’s Army: Soldiers, Nazis and War in the Third Reich* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1991) 166–67, and Stephen G. Fritz, *The German Soldier in World War II* (Lexington: U of Kentucky Pr, 1995) viii.

lands, many non-Jews erected psychological boundaries between themselves and the persecuted “others”—Jews, national minorities, and refugees. In Poland, the underground press reported the Holocaust, but in a vocabulary and “grammar of witnessing characterized by an ‘us,’ who inhabited ‘our’ country, versus ‘them,’ who just happened by be in it” (179). Many Poles profited from the Holocaust by acquiring the property of its victims. Fritzsche also challenges the widespread notion of Jewish “passivity,” noting that many Polish Jews resisted their destruction by hiding or even fighting back.

In chapter 7, “The Life and Death of God,” the author addresses matters of conscience and faith. During the Holocaust, some Jews lost their belief in God, but even the majority who did not found it hard to believe in an omnipotent, just God active in the affairs of human beings. The horrors of 1939–45 simply could not be accounted for in the framework of Jewish history and theology. In the most poignant passages in the book, Fritzsche pores over the musings of thoughtful Jews awaiting their fate.

The Nazis, by contrast, had no such qualms, not only because, until 1943, they were winning, but also because they wanted to destroy both Christian³ and Enlightenment ethics. Most German Christians managed to reconcile their faith with National Socialism. Christian army officers imagined themselves as God’s warriors on a holy crusade. Although Christian enlisted men were more likely to see the gulf between their values and those of the Third Reich, few of them expressed any sympathy for their Jewish victims.

Chapters 8 and 9, “The Destruction of Humanity” and “Broken Words,” concern the effects of Germany’s heinous violations of every notion of common humanity and empathy on the populations of occupied countries. In the Nazi view, there was no such thing as “mankind,” only races competing in a life-and-death struggle for the survival of the fittest. The Germans were proud, not ashamed, of the atrocities they committed in order to impose a new era in world history. Phalanxes of photographers, documentary filmmakers, historians, artists, and writers commemorated even their most grisly actions. Only as defeat loomed in 1945 did many Germans seek to distance themselves from the Nazi project.

As for the occupied peoples, they adapted quickly to the Germans’ “us” versus “them” mentality. Some shopkeepers, for example, put up signs assuring passersby that they were “Christian” or “Aryan.” Identifying with the victors seemed a matter of self-preservation. Refugees and national minorities were seen as dangerous aliens. “Degrees of separation multiplied, while bonds of fellowship and coresidency disintegrated” (243). Denunciations to the authorities, whether for spite or profit, were common. Even in the Warsaw Ghetto, dividing lines separated inmates. Some practiced a savage individualism, though more engaged in mutual aid.

An Iron Wind is a most welcome addition to the literature on occupation, collaboration, and resistance during the Second World War. It usefully supplements important existing studies of German occupation.⁴ Most of the frightful events Fritzsche recreates have been well described elsewhere, but no other author has so carefully explored the *feeling* of those tribulations. Both specialists and general readers will profit from reading this book.

3. I.e., Protestant. Fritzsche does not adduce Roman Catholic sources.

4. E.g., Mark Mazower, *Hitler’s Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe* (NY: Penguin, 2008), and Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (NY: Basic Books, 2010).