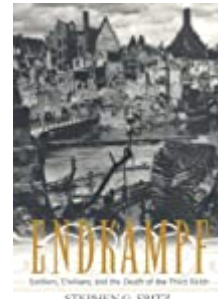




**Stephen G. Fritz.** *Endkampf: Soldiers, Civilians, and the Death of the Third Reich.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004. xvii + 382 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2325-7.



**Reviewed by** Bianka Adams (U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C.)

**Published on** H-German (July, 2005)

The views expressed in this review are solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect official positions or the views of the Department of the Army or the Department of Defense.

#### All War is Local: *Endkampf* in Franconia

House Speaker Tip O’Neill observed some years ago that all politics are local. That famous quote applies not only to politics, however, but also to war. Stephen G. Fritz demonstrates this claim with his moving narrative of the last days and weeks of fighting in World War II in the Franconia region of Germany. In eight chapters, he explores what motivated the shattered remains of the once mighty Wehrmacht and SS, as well as ordinary citizens to fight to the last—even when all hope for *Wunderwaffen* (miracle weapons) that would bring about the *Endsieg* (final victory) was gone. Fritz lets the reader experience the harrowing final weeks of fighting and Nazi rule in the towns and villages that line the way from Wrzburg to Nuremberg.

This area of Germany was the cradle of Nazi ideology, and the Wehrmacht, supported by militias and Nazi fanatics, defended every centimeter of it against the inexorable advance of U.S. forces. Using vignettes principally from the 22d Infantry of the 4th Division and the 17th Armored Infantry Battalion of the 12th Armored Division as they battled against elements of Panzer Kampfgruppe XIII and the 17. SS Panzer-Grenadier-Division “Gtz von

Berlichingen,” Fritz traces the path of American GIs over hills and through valleys, across rivers and in the forests. His description of the fighting is even more compelling when he gives a village-by-village, street-by-street account of bitter fighting that pitched American GIs against regular German *Landser* (front soldiers), fanatical members of the Hitler Youth, and the bewildered boys and old men of the *Volkssturm* (militia).

The heart of Fritz’s book, however, is the fifth chapter entitled “Running Amok against the Reality of Defeat” (pp. 115-158). Here the author breaks new ground. Based on extensive research in local newspaper archives, German lower court papers, and personal diaries and remembrances, he portrays the agonies of German civilians in the days, and in some cases hours, before the American attackers reached their town. He describes, in vivid detail, the desperate attempts of average citizens to convince local mayors, *Ortsgruppenleiter* (local Nazi Party officials), or Wehrmacht commandants to allow them to hang white flags from their houses and to surrender their towns.

Over and over again, he describes incidents such as one in Ochsenfurt, where a delegation of women went

to their local party official to demand he surrender the town and save it from certain destruction. Meanwhile, at the other end of the town, another group of women began to dismantle tank obstacles that German soldiers had erected. The National Socialist authorities, unwilling to give up, called out the police to arrest some of the rebellious women. These women escaped certain death through hanging because American troops arrived before their sentences could be carried out (p. 120). In Bad Windsheim, only a few miles to the southeast, the leader of the so-called *Weibersturm* (“women’s storm,” a raw pun on the name for the male militia) was not so lucky (p. 146).

With these and other examples, Fritz skillfully illustrates how the terrible organism the Nazis had created continued to function—even took on a life of its own—after its head was severed. Local party functionaries, town officials, and German soldiers perpetuated the reign of terror out of a sense of duty that bordered on a moral imperative and that rendered them blind to reality. When mostly women and older men began to oppose the senseless adherence to the dying regime, they did so not for ideological reasons but to save what little they had left. They knew that the National Socialist regime had ended and just wanted to survive.

Fritz’s last chapters deal with the aftermath of the war. Here he covers well-cultivated territory—from the failure to build up an effective insurgent movement against foreign occupation, the so called *Werwolf*, to resentment in local populations against fraternization be-

tween German women and American GIs, to marauding bands of displaced persons (DPs) that caused headaches for the occupiers.

After a general account of conditions in DP camps and crimes committed by their inmates, however, Fritz narrows his focus and concentrates exclusively on camps for Jewish Displaced Persons. He describes the frustrations of many Jews forced to live in these camps and how they gave rise to groups seeking vengeance against their former oppressors. One such group, *Nakam*, led by Abba Kovner, tried to kill hundreds of imprisoned SS officers held at Langasser camp by surreptitiously poisoning their food, but only succeeded in sickening several dozen (pp. 255-264). Reading the chapter left me with the clear impression that the outcome of this Jewish vengeance group was hardly a singular case, but instead one of many with the same goal. The treatment that Fritz affords it in *Endkampf*, therefore, seems hurried and incomplete—even more so considering he describes events in his previous chapters in such riveting detail.

While Fritz’s book is not the first study of the final phase of World War II, it stands out from the crowd because it allows the reader to relive the fighting experience on both sides, American and German, at the individual level. *Endkampf: Soldiers, Civilians, and the Death of the Third Reich* is a meticulously researched account of the final battles of World War II in Franconia and an important scholarly contribution to the growing body of social and military history of that era.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Bianka Adams. Review of Fritz, Stephen G., *Endkampf: Soldiers, Civilians, and the Death of the Third Reich*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10715>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).