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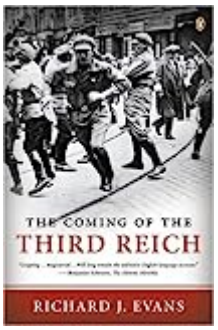

Richard J. Evans. *The Coming of the Third Reich.* New York: Penguin Books, 2005. xxiv + 622 pp. $18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-14-303469-8.

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A Long Trek to the Third Reich

Richard J. Evans's *The Coming of the Third Reich* is the first volume of a projected three-volume opus on the history of National Socialist Germany. This first installment takes up key issues and political trends during the Bismarck era, the *Kaiserreich*, the First World War, the chaotic and tension-filled "Weimar Republic," and the crucial year 1933 when Hitler "seized" power and began to build the Third Reich.

As Evans makes clear at the outset, this work is designed not for the specialist but for the lay reader–for "people who know nothing about the subject, or who know a little and would like to know more" (p. xv). One has to wonder whether even the most curious general reader will be willing to accompany Evans on his long trek through modern German history knowing that what awaits him is not just a literary mountain but a veritable mountain *range*. Our prospective traveler would be well advised, however, to lace up his most durable walking shoes and set off on this journey, which will be full of valuable information and insights–if not necessarily packed with high excitement.

"Is it wrong to begin with Bismarck?" (p. 2), asks Evans at the beginning of his effort to locate the wellsprings of the Third Reich. On the whole he makes a good case for starting the story in the Bismarck era rather than in more remote epochs like the Reformation or the "enlightened absolutism" of the eighteenth century. He points out quite rightly that there were elements of continuity between some of Bismarck's policies and practices and those of Hitler, though he is careful to caution against drawing a direct line between the two figures or concluding that the foundation laid by Bismarck mandated the edifice constructed by Hitler. His discussion of Bismarck's problematic legacy includes brief analyses of the role of the military, the emasculation of liberal political institutions, the *Kulturkampf*, the isolation of the SPD, the Iron Chancellor's opportunistic use of racism, and his government's campaign for the Germanization of ethnic minorities within the Reich. There is nothing new in any of this, but of course originality is not what we should demand of a synthetic work for general readers.

Evans's analysis of developments under Kaiser Wilhelm II, culminating in World War I, also proceeds

along well-trod historiographical paths, with the expected stops at markers like pan-Germanism, increasing class discord, and the buildup of the German military. When he comes to the war itself, Evans pauses rather longer, for it is his contention that Nazism was forged in the "cauldron of war and revolution" (p. 58). "Without the war," he says, "Nazism would not have emerged as a serious political force, nor would so many Germans have sought so desperately for an authoritarian alternative to the civilian politics that seemed so signally to have failed Germany in its hour of need" (p. 59). I think that few historians would object to this insistence on the centrality of World War I in the evolution of National Socialism, but if the misery engendered by the war was indeed so crucial, Evans could possibly have done a better job making the reader feel and appreciate the horrors of that conflict. He says nothing about developments on the battlefield, while his examination of the home front sticks to the bare political outline, ignoring such crucial issues as food riots, coal shortages, watered beer, and ersatz tobacco. We don't even see the future FÃ¼hrer getting gassed at Ypres. In my view it is precisely the curious general reader, hungry for meaty and pithy detail, who will feel let down here.

The same is true for the Evans's discussion of the revolution of 1918-19. We learn what happened but not how it felt to the people caught up in the chaos–and traumatized by it. The treatment here could have been enlivened by letting the reader hear first-hand from some of those on the scene. Why not some apt quotations from the diaries of Harry Kessler (for Berlin) or those of Thomas Mann (for Munich)?

With respect to the much-troubled Weimar period, Evans warns the reader not to conclude that the republic's traumatic birth and infancy doomed it to an early death. Fair enough, though few reputable historians these days would try to take our reader down that primrose path in the first place. More troubling is the fact that as Evans winds up his own path through this thicket, one is left with the impression that the Weimar Republic did not have much of a chance after all. There is little serious discussion of contingency, of places where twists and turns in the road might have led in a different direction. And at the risk of harping too insistently on the problem of bloodless prose, I think that an episode like the Beer Hall Putsch deserves more than a perfunctory summary of what went on in the beer hall and the streets of Munich; a few deft quotations from eyewitness accounts could have enlivened this narrative without unduly expanding it.

The Coming of the Third Reich is not a biography of Adolf Hitler, so it is reasonable that Evans does not devote a great deal of space to the future FÃ¼hrer's upbringing and early life. Still, he might at least have let the reader know something of the myriad theories that try to connect the crimes of the mature politician to Hitler's alleged personality disorders (or supposed homosexuality) and the travails of his efforts at a first career in the arts. Of course, what interests Evans in any case is not the intricacies of Hitler's personality but the political and social circumstances in Germany that facilitated the rise to power of his political movement. In his analysis of these conditions, Evans gives the reader a good sense of the atmosphere of desperation among the German people that was so crucial to the Nazi Party's ability to become the largest group in the Reichstag in the early 1930s. He also manages to convey at least some of the behind-the-scenes drama that attended Hitler's final climb to the top.

Having gotten Hitler into the chancellorship, Evans devotes the last part of his book–some 150 pages–to the process by which he and his Nazi colleagues consolidated their hold on power and began establishing the institutions of the Third Reich. His analysis of such milestones as the Reichstag fire and the Enabling Act is as comprehensive and detailed as could be expected of a study of this scope. The same can be said for his treatment of Hitler's "cultural revolution," though Evans does not really take us into the debates about how popular the cultural purge was within the general population or how much it contributed to the Nazis' consolidation of power.

The greatest contribution of *The Coming of the Third Reich* lies in its consolidation in a readable and accessible form of the latest scholarship on Germany between the Bismarck era and Hitler's seizure of power. The general reader may not care too much about all the scholarly spadework that has clearly gone into the preparation for this first leg of Evans's ambitious tour through some seventy-five years of modern German history, but he can rest assured that the volume at hand is the most scrupulously researched and reliable guidebook now available.

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