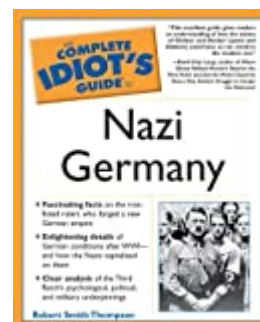


**Robert Smith Thompson.** *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Nazi Germany.* Indianapolis: Alpha Books, 2003. xxiii + 355 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-02-864475-2.



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## Not Just for Idiots: A History of Nazi Germany

Many will simply read the title and dismiss the book out of hand. That would be a shame. All of the dozen or so titles in the "Complete Idiot's Guide" series that I have encountered have been written by experts in their respective fields.[1] Robert Smith Thompson, author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Nazi Germany*, proves no exception. Holder of graduate degrees from Harvard and the University of Michigan and professor of international relations at the University of South Carolina, he has also written, among other works, *Pledge to Destiny: Charles de Gaulle and the Rise of the Free French* (1974), *A Time for War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Path to Pearl Harbor* (1991), and *Empires on the Pacific: World War II and the Struggle for the Mastery of Asia* (2002). Nor does Thompson abandon these sterling credentials in his retelling of the rise and fall of the Third Reich. The scholar may have let his hair down, or loosened his tie, as the case may be, to write this "Idiot's Guide," but he has not forgotten how to conduct research, how to arrange his material effectively, and how to delight his readers with an occasional anecdote. Thompson can tell a story. Students for whom the Nazi era may be little more than memories of flicker-

ing images from a television documentary will appreciate the author's relaxed tone and quasi-cinematic approach.

Thompson begins all the way back with the Napoleonic oppression of Germany, separating the book into five parts: "The German Colossus," "The Ascendancy of Evil," "The Nazi State," "The Rising Tide," and "The Decline and Fall of Nazi Germany." Each of these parts he divides further into five or six chapters of roughly a dozen pages, covering individual episodes leading up to Hitler and the National Socialist regime ("The Great War: 1914-1918," "The Great Depression: 1929-1932," "The Annexation of Austria: 1936-1938") or prevailing political and social conditions ("Wilhelm's Germany: 1871-1914," "The Turn of the Tide: 1943"). He finishes the account with the Nuremberg trials and his own informed conjectures as to what made Nazi Germany and Hitler possible in the first place. Histories of the Third Reich and its progenitor, of course, already occupy miles of shelf space in libraries and bookstores. Many of these volumes are more expansive and detailed than Thompson's, but few of them can be tackled over a weekend with much profit, or at

least with much enjoyment, by any but the most exceptional reader.[2] For the harried student or non-specialist scholar who needs a quick but thorough introduction to one of the twentieth century's saddest and strangest phenomena, this is not a slight consideration.

What further distinguishes Thompson's history is the ease with which he connects the many and various lines of the story to form a complete picture. Even an idiot can appreciate the way the author sketches one part of his narrative, moves across his canvas to fill another corner with broader strokes, then returns to the original outline without jarring transitions. For example, Thompson introduces Hitler through a brief biography of his early years. We learn about the future dictator's paternal troubles, about his failed artistic ambitions in Vienna, about his sense of mission as a Bavarian infantryman and postwar revolutionary, and about his ignominious attempt at a "putsch" in Munich. The author then leaves Hitler to stew in Landsberg prison, switching from a narrow focus just long enough to construct a panorama of the Weimar Republic into which he can reintroduce the unchastened fanatic and continue his story. Thompson uses this technique deftly throughout, thereby creating a sense of drama and narrative suspense despite the foregone conclusion.

Characterizing all of the "Idiot's" series volumes and not missing from Thompson's are intratextual boxes that serve as explanatory footnotes and repositories of interesting facts. The author defines a number of political science expressions ("nationalism," "reparation," "federalism") and even makes learning German fun in "Terms and Translations." We read that *Reich* means "rich," but that a *Reichsrat* is a German counselor rather than "a rich German rodent" (p. 77). In "Bet You Didn't Know," we discover that during the Weimar period, Polish law compelled Germans who "wanted to travel by land between

Germany proper and East Prussia" to do so "only in trains that were sealed with all curtains closed" (p. 206). And Thompson encourages comparative analysis in "Modern Day Parallels." "Were the Serbs who assassinated Austro-Hungarian officials before the First World War patriots or terrorists?" he asks, concluding that the answer depends upon one's point of view. He then turns the question around to our own time, inquiring whether similar groups or situations might not exist today (p. 42).

As Thompson states in the introduction, the driving question behind *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Nazi Germany* is why the Germans, "on the surface at least as civilized as any people on earth, bec[a]me swallowed up in a movement of mayhem, murder, and military aggression" (p. xxi). He does not offer a novel answer, but not many books, even much more ambitious ones, have. In the meantime, Thompson has composed a very good historical read, one that should find a far wider audience than the title might suggest.

#### Notes

[1]. For example, the principal author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding North Korea* (2004), Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones, was the first U.S. diplomat to visit North Korea between 1992 and 1997, helping to negotiate the Agreed Framework of 1994. Likewise, Allan Swenson, co-author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to the CIA* (2002), is a former U.S. Intelligence Officer who trained as an Airborne Combat Intelligence officer in the U.S. Army.

[2]. See William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1959); John Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, 2 vols. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976); Ian Kershaw, *Hitler*, 2 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998/2000); Joachim Fest, *Hitler*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1974).

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