

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Neil Gregor, ed. *Nazism, War and Genocide: Essays in Honor of Jeremy Noakes*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005. vii + 226 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85989-745-7.

Reviewed by Bruce Campbell (Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, the College of William & Mary)

Published on H-German (March, 2006)

In Honor of Jeremy Noakes

Jeremy Noakes is one of the most important historians of modern Germany. He has made a number of signal and definitive contributions to our understanding of how the Nazi system functioned. This collection is meant to honor Noakes and to provide a critical discussion of the current state of research on a number of topics prominent in his work. The result is a series of strong and well-crafted essays by leading historians, all of whom are internationally recognized specialists.

Because of Noakes's dual importance as both researcher and pedagogue, the participating authors made a conscious choice to write broadly-based critical essays rather than more narrow works of original research. The book is indeed a success in that the articles are uniformly of high quality and all give masterful critical discussions of the current state of research. But not all of the areas most favored by Noakes are included: there is a distinct lack of the kind of local studies of the organizational workings of the Nazi Party which were pioneered by Noakes in his classic study of the Nazi party in Lower Saxony, *The Nazi Party in Lower Saxony, 1921-1933* (1971). Instead, the Holocaust, Nazi persecution and broad questions of the degree of popular support for the regime take center stage in the topics selected.

Nine essays follow the short preface. Also included are an index and a very useful bibliography of works by Noakes, but no general bibliography. Neil Gregor, the editor of the book, sets the tone in the first essay. He first gives a good summary of several of the most im-

portant trends in current historiography on the Nazi period, which stress the role of ideology, knowledge and participation of ordinary Germans in Nazi crimes and widespread support for the National Socialists among the German population. He then proceeds to dismiss the revival of the concept of "political religion" to explain Nazism, arguing that it is incapable of grasping and explaining the heterogeneity of the National Socialist movement. In the third part of his essay he makes recommendations for future interpretations of Nazism and research. He calls for a more thorough examination of the historical and ideological background of the period, particularly the role of violence in German politics in the twentieth century and the varieties of German nationalism, racism and antisemitism. He makes a particular point of stating that we must not ignore the importance of the regime in the period. He states that it is one thing to stress popular support and the involvement of "ordinary Germans" in Nazi crimes, but we cannot forget the fact that this involvement occurred in the context of a strong, even terrorist state regime under which individuals did not enjoy unlimited alternatives. The regime pursued concrete and definite goals and determined the context in which ordinary individuals acted.

Jane Caplan looks at the development of the first concentration camps and their mutation into the formal camp system by the mid-1930s. She performs a great service in summarizing important German research not previously available in English. She shows how the older notion that the SA constructed a vast system of "wild"

concentration camps in 1933 and 1934 is no longer valid. Rather, the state was involved in nearly every camp, but local authorities (removed from the central government) played a major role. More importantly, Caplan shows how the camps and the legal framework for police “protective” custody developed out of already existing models and concepts. Thus, the overlap between existing institutions and the new, developing concentration camps—the conversion of the familiar into something novel—provided the concentration camp system with an important kind of legitimation. She stresses the ways in which the long-standing conceptual link between work and order justified and shaped the camps and blurred the distinction between political and social repression. This conflation would continue to be a hallmark of the camp system as it was later systematically developed under the SS. One of Caplan’s most surprising findings is the fact that many of the first concentration camps were based on existing state workhouses and semi-private labor camps originally established to deal with the Great Depression. While the role of the SA, and in particular, the infiltration of the state by SA and Party officials (which made the local state authorities less than independent actors) may be a little neglected here, this is a fascinating and important article.

Richard Geary provides a balanced and critical summary of our current understanding of the hoary question of working-class support for National Socialism. Though he accepts much of the recent research that stresses worker acceptance—even support—for the regime (partly due to a rise in living standards and partly due to a putative “destruction” of class solidarity), Geary remains critical of this interpretation. He argues that a better understanding of context is necessary, and he is mindful that there never had been a single, monolithic German working class. He advocates a differentiated view of the question, acknowledging that the Nazis did make great headway among younger workers and among those who stood outside the socialist tradition, but insisting that they had much less success among the older generation of former socialists and communists. Among other arguments, he points to strong electoral support for both the KPD and SPD after the war as proof that the working class was not as effectively transformed by the Nazis as some often argue today.

Robert Gellately examines how Nazis treated social outsiders, detailing how such outsiders were identified, ostracized and often eliminated. He argues that the draconian approach taken by the Nazis towards such outsiders “immensely facilitated” the consolidation of the

dictatorship. In short, Nazi measures against groups already marginalized in German society helped to cement support for the regime. As a result, Gellately takes a much more categorical stand on the issue of popular support for the Nazis (one that differs from some of the other essays in this volume). Gellately states unequivocally that “[t]he silent and not-so-silent majority backed the regime and a large number of people, including the great majority in the professions and in the educated elite, were very enthusiastic” (p. 74). He does not discount the impact of terror in the National Socialist system by any means, but does put the emphasis here on popular support.

Nikolaus Wachsmann treats legal terror during the war years in Germany, and considers how the ordinary legal system helped to create the Nazi racial state. He points out that National Socialist repression was exercised not only by the police and the SS, but also by many other institutions, including the regular legal apparatus. He identifies “racial aliens,” habitual criminals and leftists as the main target of legal terror on the part of ordinary courts, but also emphasizes that “ordinary Germans” could and did become the targets of the legal system, mainly for economic crimes. He paints a picture of a society where ordinary courts and judges gained greatly expanded powers, and were constantly pushed by their superiors and by competition with the police to use such powers proactively. That they did so is demonstrated through statistics on the prison population and number of death sentences. Punishment was selective, and marginal groups, particularly “racial aliens,” were prominent targets. Wachsmann argues that the ordinary legal system was a central part of Nazi racial persecution, and was deeply implicated in racial crimes. In wartime, legal terror intensified, but as long as faith in victory was high, racial Germans were generally treated leniently, even for such crimes as listening to foreign radio broadcasts. A turning point came in 1942, with the intensification in legal terror. This change was due to the military situation and the intensification of Nazi racial measures, but also to a “crisis in the judiciary,” whereby the court system felt itself increasingly overshadowed by the police and SS apparatus. To demonstrate its continued importance, the court system reacted by intensifying repression. The ordinary legal system turned its attention more and more to the German population. The final months of the war saw an attempt at further radicalization of the legal system, but also greater chaos, so that the end effect was mixed. Wachsmann cautions that, although ordinary Germans were not the prime target of legal ter-

ror, the impact of the courts should not be underestimated, since their power was widely known. He concludes that once the war turned against Germany, the so-called *Volksgemeinschaft* was increasingly held together through mistrust, fear and terror—and not support for the regime.

Jill Stephenson contributes an article based on her research into foreign forced labor in southern Germany. She provides a differentiated view of the treatment of different nationalities and categories and the ways they were viewed by the German population. While she cautions that foreign forced laborers could never be said to have had an easy time and were always the potential subjects of the repressive legal system, she also points out that the severe need for their labor often gave them a certain amount of leverage which could result in concessions. She pays special attention to the situation in rural areas and contends that German peasants did not tend to subscribe to the Nazi hierarchy of racial values, concluding: “rural communities operated on a pragmatic and often rough-and-ready basis which did not accommodate the luxury of an ideological imperative” (p. 108). This conclusion is true enough, but the potential for violence or death made it a very one-sided pragmatism, despite the instances Stephenson cites of forced laborers’ ability to obtain better treatment or concessions. This view of German peasants must also be seen in light of the participation of (male) peasants as perpetrators during their military service. Still, despite these caveats, Stephenson’s is a welcome contribution that stresses the wide range of treatment possible for foreign forced laborers.

Ian Kershaw asks the question of whether Hitler “missed his chance” in 1940 to find an alternative to the invasion of the Soviet Union that might have had a better chance of German success. He concludes that the “Mediterranean Strategy” favored by the German Navy and diplomatic establishment was not a real alternative, given the small size of the German fleet, the impossibility of reconciling Italian, French and Spanish interests and (most important of all) Hitler’s clear subjective preference for a direct showdown with “Jewish Bolshevism.” Nevertheless, the article gives the reader a good sense of the many options theoretically available to the Germans, and thus constitutes a good demonstration of historical contingency. The presence of a short section offering counter-factual speculation may offend some purist historians, but does provide a clear idea of the stakes involved should Germany and Hitler have postponed a reckoning with the Soviet Union in favor of a policy of weakening Great Britain by attacking its colonial empire.

The article shows that diplomatic and political history continues to be important in the study of the Third Reich.

Mark Roseman takes up the debate about the importance of the Wannsee Conference in the larger context of the Holocaust. Thanks to much recent debate and research around the question of just when the Nazi decision to move to a policy of genocide was made, he concludes that the Wannsee Conference took place after the decisive line had been crossed in German policy and action, but before the exact shape of the Holocaust had been decided. The conference was a signpost that genocide had become the official policy; Roseman concludes that its most likely purpose was to serve as a collective acknowledgment from other German agencies that the SS would take precedence in the Final Solution.

Norbert Frei’s article is written very much in the spirit of current interest in history and memory, and examines the role of Auschwitz in the consciousness of Germans both during and after the war. He points to the need for further research into the many different ways in which Auschwitz is remembered and the role of different interest groups in shaping the symbolic status of the name. He states that current attempts to create a general European history of the memory of the Holocaust are laudable, yet cautions that so many different memories of Auschwitz persist that such a pan-European version may be impossible to produce in this case.

Not only do these essays engage in fruitful dialogue with the life work of Jeremy Noakes, they also often can be read against and with each other in useful ways. The essays by Wachsmann, Caplan and Gellately all revolve around similar issues of legal persecution, and complement each other by showing differing faces and facets of Nazi repression. Gellately’s essay on social outsiders argues more strongly for working-class support for the Third Reich than does that of Geary, while Gellately and Wachsmann take very different views on the relative importance of terror in holding the Nazi system together. The book thus offers a good illustration of the contingency of historical scholarship, which will make it particularly good reading for advanced students.

Taken together, the essays presented in this collection do a splendid job of summarizing and criticizing the state of our knowledge of the fields they cover. All are further characterized by a very accessible style and great readability. Be it a better appreciation of the role of violence in twentieth century politics, or a greater consciousness of the power of the Nazi regime to set priorities and limit the context in which individual choices

were possible, all the essays call for a greater appreciation of the historical context in which the Third Reich was located. Though there is some room for concern that the summaries of current knowledge they present will soon become dated,[1] the authors' call for greater contextualization of the Third Reich is likely to remain a necessity long into the future. For now at least, this book is an ideal way for undergraduates, graduate students, lay people or specialists in other fields to quickly learn the essentials of our current knowledge of some of the central issues sur-

rounding the history of the Third Reich.

Note

[1]. For example, the most recent book by Götz Aly, *Hitlers Volksstaat: Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2005), which makes an important—if controversial—argument about popular support for the Nazis, is not mentioned in any of the essays.

Co

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

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

Citation: Bruce Campbell. Review of Gregor, Neil, ed., *Nazism, War and Genocide: Essays in Honor of Jeremy Noakes*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11591>

Copyright © 2006 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.