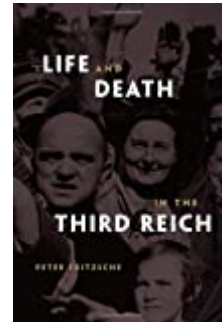




Peter Fritzsche. *Life and Death in the Third Reich.* Cambridge/Mass.: Belknap Press, 2008. 384 S. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02793-0.



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The Intimacy of Complicity

A decade ago Peter Fritzsche published his very popular and still widely assigned *Germans into Nazis*. In that book, he focused on the process by which a sizeable minority of the German population came to agree with Adolf Hitler and his early followers that Germany needed a new politics that would bring “the idea of the nation to life,” as the call to arms in 1914 had done.[1] Now Fritzsche provides us with a book in which we see the implementation of that ideology once the party gains power. Process remains critical to his analysis. Though the NSDAP enjoyed a meteoric rise to prominence in the early 1930s, Fritzsche argues in *Life and Death* that much work remained to be done, starting in 1933, to convince large sections of the population that Germany was on the right course—indeed, the only course.

That the regime succeeded in amassing and maintaining broad support even through the darkest days of the war is not a new idea. What is original and ultimately very powerful about Fritzsche’s analysis is his ability to unravel the ways individuals wrestled with *becoming* (and I would add *remaining*) Nazis—among close friends and family members, and within their own minds and

hearts. As the book approaches German military defeat, Fritzsche assesses what Germans knew of the genocide, and here again he traces the emotional struggles of surviving Jews and non-Jewish Germans. While the workings of memory have been central to scholarship on the postwar era for some time now, Fritzsche’s concluding chapter offers insight into the construction of these very memories—the psychological roots of the miscomprehension and willful amnesia regarding the crimes committed by Germans that plagued the first post-war generation.

The book is chronologically organized around four long chapters. Surprisingly perhaps in this age of digital reproduction, the text is unaccompanied by photographs. He relies heavily on letters and diaries, which, along with the graceful prose we have come to expect from Fritzsche, provide dramatic evidence and a level of narrative coherence that make the book eminently readable from cover to cover. As he explains in the introduction, these sources are most useful to his overall argument, because they “transcribed the strain of conversion” (p. 10).

The first chapter, “Reviving the Nation,” discusses the early years of the regime and individuals’ attempts to

come to grips with the new situation. He centers his chapter around three personal narratives: one whose author welcomed the revolution; one who resisted it; and one who reconciled himself to it, even “surrendering himself [at times] to the embrace of the national community” (p. 35). While Fritzsche notes that some Germans converted for reasons of fear or because of social pressure, and many continued to distrust, dislike or simply misunderstand individual policies or principles, he chooses to focus on the vast majority of Germans who came to believe that “National Socialism had healed German history” and that it “offered them a new, improved version of national life” (p. 37). Seeking therefore to understand the attractions of the National Socialist future, Fritzsche turns his discussion to the *Volks-gemeinschaft* and revisits the allure of 1914, the catastrophe of 1918, and the failure of the republican era to recapture a sense of unity torn asunder by defeat and the ensuing instability. After 1933, the party won converts not simply through its rhetoric of national revival or by the force it used to undermine the myriad local class- and confessional-based cultural activities throughout the country, but by involving millions as volunteers in the collective effort. “Coordination,” writes Fritzsche, “was a process of dissolution *and* affiliation” (p. 51). He emphasizes affiliation with a glimpse into the audiovisual spaces of the new era—the way film, radio, advertising, and magazines created a common culture (*unter uns*) within Germany that marked the boundaries of the exclusive people’s community. Moreover, Fritzsche argues that the camera-ready staging of major and minor political events, from party rallies to the broadcasting of speeches, reinforced the sense that history was being made, indeed remade, and that the individual too was a participant in this heroic mission.

Fritzsche’s insights in this chapter are twofold. On the one hand he argues that the very discomfort that came with conversion was so common an experience that it actually contributed to the construction of a shared community. On the other hand, the desire of most non-Jewish Germans to accept the *Volks-gemeinschaft* “as a workable ideal” meant that they became eager consumers of the “images of acclamation” (p. 75) that flooded the audio-visual landscape.

In “Racial Grooming” we learn how this more general *unter uns* mentality was cast in racial terms and see the tasks that lay ahead for both ordinary Germans and the movement’s “racial warriors,” who were writing and implementing policy. Turning Germans into “Aryans” was a monumental task, and once again ordinary Ger-

mans were enlisted in the project. Fritzsche recounts the process by which members of the people’s community assembled their own “Aryan” passports and visited a variety of reeducation camps. Everyone from young members of the Hitler Youth and their older siblings performing their labor service to professionals and civil servants in their forties and fifties were commanded to spend time away from home to learn their new roles. Undoing bonds to other milieus was the aim, and learning to fit in was the assignment. Those not welcome in this new environment, of course, were sorted and shunted off to their own camp system: communists and socialists, “asocials,” and the disabled. In these pages and the last section that follows on the major antisemitic legislation and events of the prewar years, readers don’t receive much in the way of new analysis, but the concise treatment of the timeline and the inclusion of diary excerpts to personalize the narrative make for engaging reading.

In “Empire of Destruction,” the author frames the war as an imperialist project. Though the Nazi leadership had no detailed plan or set boundaries in mind, Fritzsche notes that its priorities for the East and “the demands of war forced the Germans to adopt more modest approaches” (p. 165). In the first years of the war, hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans were repatriated into the expanding empire, and Fritzsche does well to devote a section to this aspect of Nazi hubris. Of course, this population transfer was made possible by the enslavement and slaughter of Jews and Slavs in these same areas, inspiring the local *Baedeker* to advertise Cracow and Lublin as “(now Jew-free)” (p. 176) and leaving thousands of apartments fully furnished and ready for new tenants. His arguments about the radicalization of policy toward Europe’s Jews and Germans’ enduring loyalty to Nazism work as one: since National Socialist ideology positioned Germany as the victim of history, military setbacks after 1941 reaffirmed the extent of the so-called Jewish menace, necessitating the annihilation of that threat and tying Germans ever more closely to the do-or-die message of the war. This chapter is the most historiographically minded in the book. Students and instructors alike will appreciate Fritzsche’s analysis of key recent and classic scholarship, including work by Elizabeth Harvey, Christopher Browning, and Omer Bartov. Without forgetting that local inhabitants across the continent were often eager participants in the hunting down and killing of Jews, Fritzsche emphasizes the metropolis in his discussion of the Nazi empire. He includes a lengthy section on the deportation of German Jews, and he reminds the reader that Auschwitz lay within the ex-

panded borders of the Reich, with a direct phone line from Berlin to the rail station's sorting platform.

The absence of Jews from most Germans' lives (soldiers and civilians alike) by the end of 1942 was critical to their understanding of the last years of the conflict and the early postwar period. In his final chapter, Fritzsche depicts how, as civilians began to see themselves as victims of Allied aerial bombardment and flagging military fortunes after Stalingrad, the Jews remained only as an abstraction. Non-Jewish Germans' stories of bombings, deprivation, and fear of impending catastrophe, which arrived for some in the form of expulsion and rape, were told and retold and faced no competition, no counter-narratives from Jewish neighbors who had by the end of the war been gone for years. The sense of victimhood among Germans on the home front made it easier not only to forget deported neighbors but also to blame the abstract image of the Jew for the destruction. "When it came to the Jews," writes Fritzsche, "many Germans let themselves be bombed into a clear conscience" (p. 260). Moreover, if the bombings were retribution for the brutal treatment of Jews, then, many Germans concluded, further retaliation would follow defeat. So just as the process of *becoming* Nazis, though difficult for some, had united the nation, in the war's final years Germans overlooked any pangs of guilt or shame to fight on together, because they feared the non-Nazi future that awaited them. Fritzsche concludes that the regime allowed German civilians and soldiers to witness, participate in, or at the very least know enough about the genocide to produce an "intimacy of complicity" (p. 286) that successfully bonded them to the fate of the regime.

So what did Jews and non-Jews in Germany know about the extermination that was proceeding not so far away? In sum, Fritzsche argues that many Germans on the home front in the early 1940s knew about mass shootings of civilians, including women and children, and the participation of the Wehrmacht in this brutality. Without specific details about Auschwitz and other death camps, however, "the Holocaust was largely contained by the knowledge of mass murder on the military front" (p. 264). In other words, even the most pessimistic, including Victor Klemperer, could grasp atrocities like

Babi Yar but continued to see the rumors of mass death among evacuees, including the use of gas, as "events and episodes" (p. 264)—retaliation by a defeated army rather than part of a well-planned and orchestrated campaign of genocide. Among non-Jews too, the information remained vague, though the belief that the bombing runs were the vengeful actions of international Jewry should be viewed as an admission that unspeakable crimes had been committed.

Life and Death in the Third Reich is a subtle, analytic text, rather than a survey of Nazi Germany. No sustained treatment of women or family policy is included, and resistance too is left out. The book presumes a fair amount of knowledge about the party and state bureaucracies and Adolf Hitler's role in these structures. Some readers may find that non-Jewish victims of the regime do not receive enough attention. I suspect as well that the complexity of the argumentation will be beyond all but the best undergraduates. However, the strength of chapters 1 and 4 alone should make this book a standard on graduate syllabi and reading lists. In these two chapters, the book convincingly demonstrates how an overwhelming proportion of non-Jewish Germans came to hold the goals of the regime in such high regard, and why they continued to believe in the Third Reich even once defeat was unavoidable, if anything "blaming the Nazis for destroying Nazism" (p. 272). It shows ordinary Germans as they most likely were: at times conflicted, ebullient, ashamed, disappointed and fearful, and it illustrates how these emotions (both the good and the bad) could unite the population behind National Socialism in ways not easily undone by the collapse of the regime or even by the full disclosure of the facts of the Holocaust at war's end. No monograph does a better job of dwelling in the complexities of individual experiences in the Third Reich and connecting those lived experiences to the big issues that still fascinate scholars and students: the attractions of community and the extent of complicity, the will to survive and to forget, and the blind spots of reconciliation.

Note

[1]. Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3.

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