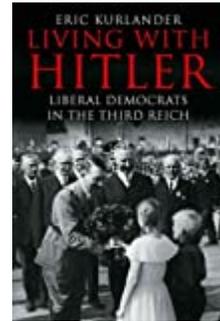




Eric Kurlander. *Living with Hitler: Liberal Democrats in the Third Reich.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. 292 S. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11666-3.



Reviewed by Rüdiger Graf (Ruhr-University Bochum)

Published on H-German (March, 2010)

Commissioned by Benita Blessing (Oregon State University)

What Did the Liberals Do?

Eric Kurlander has written an important book that challenges conventional wisdom and significantly extends our knowledge of both the history of German liberalism in the twentieth century and what it meant for bourgeois Germans to “live with Adolf Hitler.” *Living with Hitler: Liberal Democrats in the Third Reich* is the product of substantial research into the lives and works of German liberal democrats in the Third Reich, most, but not all, of whom had been closely affiliated with the German Democratic Party (DDP) in Weimar Germany that, in 1930, became the German State Party (DStP). Moreover, Kurlander also looks at some members of the German People’s Party (DVP) and independent intellectuals. His study is not only well argued, but also highly readable, especially when he succeeds in bringing his objects of study to life, closely examining their perceptions, opportunities, and choices under the National Socialist Rule. The focus on the liberals under National Socialism is particularly valuable, because they do not fall into the easy categories of victims, perpetrators, or speculators. Thus simple concepts like “resistance” or “col-

laboration” are not suitable for describing their behavior. Instead, Kurlander prefers to use the terms “passive resistance”—alluding to Martin Broszat’s notion of *Resistenz*—“nonconformity” (*Verweigerung*), and “accommodation” (*Anpassung*).

In general, Kurlander puts forward four main theses: first, there were intellectual affinities between National Socialism and German left liberalism that “made political accommodation—and in some cases collaboration—more attractive than one might expect” (p. 9). Second, these affinities were “not necessarily reactionary, but often ‘progressive’ in nature” (p. 9). Third, before the beginning of the Second World War, German liberals had plenty of space to express intellectual dissent or perform “everyday opposition” against National Socialist practices. Since the regime’s pressure on them was not very high, their behavior can—to a large extent—be interpreted as voluntary accommodation. Fourth, most liberals who “at first acquiesced in aspects of the Nazi ‘revolution’ eventually rejected it because of their individual experience of National Socialism” (p. 9).

In order to establish these claims Kurlander scrutinizes in five chapters “The Liberal Resistance to Hitler,” “The Struggle for Liberal Ideals in Cultural and Intellectual Life,” “Gertrud Bäumer, Social Policy, and the Liberal Women’s Movement,” “Liberal Nationalism and Nazi Foreign Policy,” and “The Liberal Answer to Hitler’s ‘Jewish Question.’” This systematic arrangement of the material has advantages as well as disadvantages. On the one hand, while concentrating on individual biographies, Kurlander never develops full biographical narratives, but his character portraits are dispersed over several chapters, since most of his central figures occur in more than one context. On the other hand, the chapters can be read as autonomous studies of the respective aspects of liberal life in the Third Reich. Drawing on materials from a great number of liberals, Kurlander can compare their attitudes and behavior in similar circumstances and thus arrive at convincing conclusions regarding the opportunities and constraints of bourgeois life in the Third Reich.

Despite his cogent argument in the introduction that categories like resistance and collaboration are not helpful when examining liberals in the Third Reich, Kurlander only partly succeeds in overcoming these categories in his first chapter on liberal resistance. In March 1933 the DDP deputies in the Reichstag voted for the enabling law (*Ermächtigungsgesetz*), Kurlander argues, not only because they were afraid of persecution, but also because they acknowledged the electoral success of the Nazi Party and did not want to be lumped together with the Jews and the communists. Yet, several groups, such as the Bosch and the Weber Circles, the Wednesday Society, or the Robinsohn-Strassmann Group, continued to constitute small spaces of liberal critique against the destruction of personal freedom. Since liberals were neither very prominent nor numerous in the well-known resistance circles, Kurlander is more concerned with the opportunities for nonconformity and dissidence in everyday life. One of his paradigmatic cases for a liberal who refused to change his life according to National Socialist demands is Hermann Dietrich. The former co-chairman of the DStP, vice chancellor, and finance minister did not openly resist the Third Reich. Working as a lawyer, however, he refused to attend meetings of the National Socialist Legal Association, and continued to employ his Jewish secretary. Although Kurlander tells the story of a courageous refusal to change one’s private and professional life according to National Socialist demands and directives, one may be skeptical about his judgment that Dietrich’s actions “verged on active *Widerstand* [resis-

tance]” (p. 41). This claim appears particularly doubtful as Kurlander later states that “Dietrich took advantage of Hitler’s early victories to obtain a Polish slave laborer to help maintain his family farm” and even “ordered a second one” (p. 141). Still, Kurlander’s portrait of Dietrich is highly convincing, and he manages to elaborate the difficulties of a man trying to live up to his own ethical standards under conditions he disliked but could not change. However, it is unclear why Kurlander feels the need to apply categories that he later rejected at the beginning of his analysis.

The behavior of the liberals in the Third Reich is particularly interesting, as Kurlander correctly points out, because there was no immediate repression or persecution that forced them into resistance. As they had the opportunity to continue their careers or even to join the movement, resistance was a much more challenging act. Analyzing the case of the Heidelberg sociologist Alfred Weber, Max Weber’s younger brother, who resolutely resisted attempts of National Socialist students to put up a swastika flag at his institute, Kurlander shows that liberals had a fairly large room of maneuver and were not attacked as viciously as social democrats or communists. After his voluntary resignation, Weber was even allowed to continue teaching. Also, in the chapter on liberal publications and periodicals in the Third Reich such as Theodor Heuss’s *Die Hilfe* and Gertrud Bäumer’s *Die Frau*, Kurlander shows that liberals—unlike communists or social democrats—continued to enjoy a comparatively large freedom of expression at least until the beginning of the war. However, *Die Hilfe* decided to abstain largely from articles on politics and confined itself to liberal critique in the realm of cultural and intellectual life. Kurlander concludes that “for those who cared to explore it, there was sufficient room for liberal thought and expression after 1933” (p. 79). Yet, as most of the liberals decided not to explore this space in the areas that were essential for the National Socialists and the functioning of the dictatorship, one might doubt that the space was really there. In other words, while there was plenty of room for the self-expression of former liberals, there may not have been very much space for liberal expression criticizing the fundamentally illiberal rule.

Particularly telling for liberal attitudes towards the Third Reich is the case of Gertrud Bäumer, a central figure of the bourgeois women’s movement, former head of the Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine, and member of the DDP Reichstag faction. Bäumer, whose political aspirations before 1933 had been disappointed, was critical of the repressive aspects of National Socialist rule, but

at the same time discerned positive aspects in the National Socialist policy towards women and particularly motherhood. Above all, however, like most of her liberal colleagues she was excited about the success of Hitler's foreign policy. Kurlander argues that there was a fairly large congruence between liberal and National Socialist foreign policy goals already in Weimar Germany. Going back to Friedrich Naumann's visions of a German-led "Mitteleuropa," he shows that until the war, liberals could interpret Hitler's actions as a realization of older liberal ideas. Convincingly, Kurlander elaborates the broad consensus for a revision of the Versailles Treaty among the Germans in general and the liberals in particular. Even intellectuals who were unsuspecting of leanings towards the extreme right, such as the peace activist and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize Ludwig Quidde, supported Hitler's revisionist program. According to an article he wrote in 1934, Hitler's plans were in line with pacifist and democratic principles to eliminate the unjust treaty. However, several liberals criticized Quidde's article and, Kurlander argues, after the beginning of the war many liberals became more critical of Hitler's foreign policy. Yet, as Kurlander shows, it was one thing to be critical of the war, but quite another to wish for a German defeat, since liberals viewed Russian communism as the far larger evil and still considered themselves to be patriots.

In the fifth chapter, Kurlander argues that liberals did not see themselves as either Jews or antisemites. Although he quotes several antisemitic statements that liberals such as Theodor Heuss had uttered in the Weimar Republic, Kurlander carefully distinguishes this moderate antisemitism from its more radical forms. Although many liberals did not want to be associated with the Jews, and for a long time failed to recognize the "eliminationist impulse of Nazi Jewish policy" (p. 160), Kurlander suggests that most of them rejected the anti-Jewish measures and thus belong to a loose category of anti-antisemites. In several cases, as in the well-known one

of Hjalmar Schacht, one may ask if Kurlander does not overstate his argument and is a little too well-meaning with the protagonists of his book. When, for example, the right-wing liberal Heinrich Schnee, the president of the German Colonial Society, pointed out in his denazification trial that he had once sent a semi-official birthday card to the Jewish Democrat Bernhard Dernburg, Kurlander argues that this suggests how "noteworthy this simple gesture must have been" at the time it was made (p. 167). On other occasions, too, Kurlander exhibits a tendency to take ego documents at face value, as in the cases of Getrud Bäumer and Marie Baum. Yet, his readings of the reflections of liberals who were suddenly not allowed to be Germans anymore because Nazi policy defined them as Jews are very thoughtful and sensitive.

Explaining the behavior of liberal democrats in the Third Reich, Kurlander generally uses two different strategies: On the one hand, especially in the chapters on foreign policy, he develops an intellectualist argument. He summarizes the ideological development of German liberalism, suggests that it differed from its counterparts in other European countries because it contained a "völkisch, exclusionary element" (p. 117), and argues that liberals, therefore, developed an intellectual affinity to National Socialist thought. In this perspective liberals did what they thought and had thought all along. On the other hand, Kurlander shows that the actions of liberals living with Hitler can only be understood properly if we pay close attention to the concrete circumstances of their lives, their objective and perceived constraints and options. To some extent these interpretations are at odds with each other and, in general, Kurlander's arguments concerning practical life options are more convincing than his intellectualist arguments. In its nuanced analyses of the opportunities and actions of liberals after 1933, Kurlander's book is highly interesting and, at times, even an innovative model for how historiography on life in the Third Reich should look like.

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

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

Citation: Rüdiger Graf. Review of Kurlander, Eric, *Living with Hitler: Liberal Democrats in the Third Reich*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=29810>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.