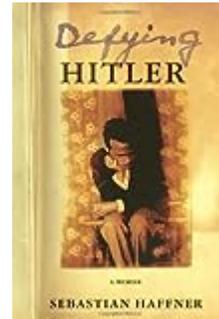




Sebastian Haffner. *Defying Hitler: A Memoir.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000. 309 pp. \$15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-42113-7; \$24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-16157-6.



Reviewed by David Crew (University of Texas at Austin)

Published on H-German (April, 2003)

Sebastian Haffner fled Germany in 1938. After the war, he returned from England to his homeland to become a prominent historical journalist and author. He died in 1999 at the age of ninety-one. Haffner hated the Nazi regime, but he was not a member of any organized political resistance to Hitler. When he left Germany, he was living with a Jewish woman who was expecting his child. This relationship certainly made him a potential victim of Nazi racial persecution. Yet Haffner's reasons for eventually leaving his country were more personal than political. Or perhaps he would have said that because Nazism had abolished the distinction between politics and private life (p. 219), the personal had now become political. "Today the political struggle is expressed by the choice of what a person eats and drinks, whom he loves ... what he reads, what pictures he hangs on his walls" (p. 185). *Defying Hitler*, which was written in exile in 1939 but not published until after Haffner's death, is not the memoir of a political emigre or a persecuted victim but rather the story of an individualistic young man from a solid middle-class family of Prussian bureaucrats, who opposed Hitler because he found it impossible to breathe mentally, morally, or spiritually in the Third Reich.

In chapter 26, Haffner interrupts his narrative (somewhat late in the day some readers might think) to ex-

plain why he believes that "the private story of just one, not particularly important or interesting, young person in the Germany of 1933" is significant (p. 182). He knows that many of his potential readers (in 1939) will think that "real" history consists of "what happened between Hitler and Blomberg or Schleicher or Roehm behind the scenes, who really set fire to the Reichstag." Consequently they will not want to be "fobbed off with the private experiences of a young man who was not much better informed than [they] are" (p. 182). Haffner's response to these objections is quite simple: "If I were more important, I would be less typical" (p. 186). Haffner presents himself as one of the "anonymous others" who often seem to be merely the "objects of history." He argues, however, that it is precisely these "anonymous masses" who actually make history. As evidence, Haffner cites the First World War which Germany lost not because Foch and Haig were better military leaders than Ludendorff but because ordinary German soldiers no longer wanted to fight.

Haffner argues that his experiences were shared by millions of other Germans who were still children when the First World War began, who grew up, as he did, during the troubled years of the Weimar Republic and were just beginning adult life when Hitler came to power. Yet there are obvious reasons to doubt the representa-

tive quality not of Haffner's experiences but of his responses to them. Take for example a key passage in which Haffner describes one of his first direct encounters with Nazi anti-Semitism after Hitler came to power. Haffner is preparing for his legal exams. Appalled by the violence of the Nazi movement, he takes refuge in the comforting normality of a law library where the Civil Code, and, more generally, the rule of law, seem still untouched. Suddenly, the news spreads through the reading room that the SA has entered the building to evict Jewish judges, lawyers, and trainees. An SA man comes to the table where Haffner is working and demands to know whether he is an "Aryan." Without hesitation, Haffner says that he is but immediately feels guilty that it has been so easy to capitulate to Nazi racism. Why didn't he refuse to answer? Why didn't he challenge the very premise of the question itself? These moments of individual moral failure torment Haffner. In the end, he was driven to leave Germany by the constant contradictions between the ways he felt he should behave and the ways he had to behave in order to survive in Nazi Germany. Only in exile could he "defy Hitler" by speaking the truth. But this response put Haffner in a small minority of his fellow citizens. How many other Germans felt, at the very least, uncomfortable, let alone morally disgusted with themselves because they could claim the privilege of being "Aryans"? How many others, by contrast, breathed a sigh of relief that they were not the victims of Nazi racial or political persecution? And how many others actually enjoyed their newly acquired "racial" superiority?

Some of Haffner's observations are all the more impressive for their having been committed to paper in 1939, before Nazism fully revealed its darkest pathologies in a genocidal war. One of the most compelling parts of the book is Haffner's extended description of his experiences in a Nazi camp to which all the young candidates for higher civil service posts were sent before they were allowed to take their legal exams. Here Haffner does not find what he expected, namely heavy-handed ideological indoctrination, but rather the insistent cultivation of comradeship. The comradeship of the camp suppressed individual will and identity: "Things were quite deliberately arranged so that the individual had no room for maneuver" (p. 279). Yet this comradeship was a source of contentment: "a certain kind of happiness thrives in such camps; it is the happiness of comradeship. We were all the same. We floated in a great comforting stream of mutual reliance and gruff familiarity" (p. 284). The Nazis knew all too well how to profit from this sense of com-

radeship: "They have made all Germans everywhere into comrades, and accustomed them to this narcotic from their earliest age: in the Hitler youth, the SA, the Reichswehr, in thousands of camps and clubs.... The general promiscuous comradeship to which the Nazis have seduced the Germans has debased this nation as nothing else could" (p. 285). Haffner recognizes that comradeship "relieves men of responsibility for their actions.... They do what all their comrades do" (p. 287). When combined with the "typically German ... idolization of proficiency for its own sake" (p. 272), the dulling moral effects of comradeship could have quite murderous consequences, as Christopher Browning has argued in his study of the participation of German Order Police in the mass shootings of Jews in Poland during the war.

Haffner thus offers compelling reasons why openly defying Hitler was not much of an option for most Germans after 1933, except from abroad. That makes it all the more important to ask whether the Weimar Republic had any real chance of establishing a democracy that could have prevented Hitler. Looking for answers to this question, historians have recently turned their attention from Weimar's death agonies (1930-1933), when the main issue was what type of dictatorship would replace the republic, to the early years of the republic when there still seemed to be real possibilities for democracy. The public response to Walther Rathenau's assassination in 1922 provides one important point of access to the problem. Rathenau, the Jewish industrialist, intellectual, and Foreign Minister of the Republic, was murdered by a right-wing death squad, which believed that he was betraying Germany by pursuing a policy of "fulfillment" of the terms of the hated Versailles Treaty. Haffner sees the popular response to Rathenau's murder—mass processions and demonstrations—as "an overwhelming flood of wrath and mourning" (p. 51). Many Germans clearly regarded the assassination as an assault upon the republic itself and were prepared to mobilize in its defence. Was this a chance to stabilize and expand democracy in Germany? Historians have barely begun to research this question. But, for Haffner the answer is obvious. He insists that this opportunity, like so many others, was squandered by the too-cautious Social Democratic leadership, intent, as ever, upon maintaining order: "What the short-lived Rathenau epoch left behind was the confirmation of the lesson already learned in the years 1918 and 1919: nothing the left did ever came off" (p. 51).

At the same time, however, Haffner argues that the possibilities for democracy were sabotaged by the needs, desires, and inclinations of his own generation of Ger-

mans. Early in the book, he suggests that “[t]he truly Nazi generation was formed by those born in the decade from 1900 to 1910, who experienced war as a great game and were untouched by its realities” (p. 17). This game consisted of keeping score of German wins and losses at the front, of advances and retreats. After the war was over the competitive mania was satisfied, at least briefly, by a surrogate, the sports craze (pp. 72f). Now young people talked endlessly about the achievements of individual athletes, about which German runner would break which records next instead of how many prisoners had been taken, how much ground gained on the western front. But the sports craze lasted just three years. Eventually, it was Nazism that profited from this need for excitement.

At their best, Haffner’s generalizations about the Germans and the Nazis are brilliant, if unsubstantiated insights. At their worst, his pronouncements can be extremely simplistic. For example, he argues that Nazism provided an antidote for “the great danger of life in Germany ... emptiness and boredom” (p. 70). He claims that an entire generation of young Germans had become dependent upon the public spheres of politics and war to give meaning to their lives. This was extremely dangerous in a country where, unlike France or Britain, “the capacity for individual life and happiness is, in any case, less developed” (p. 69). The mass spectacles and violent public rhetoric of Nazism gave many Germans what they could not find in their private lives. This critique culmi-

nates in what is possibly the most unrestrained, certainly the most vitriolic of Haffner’s sweeping statements about the Germans: “As a nation they are soft, unreliable and without backbone.... At the moment of truth, when other nations rise spontaneously to the occasion, the Germans collectively and limply collapsed” (p. 135).

Like several other memoirs of the Third Reich that have been published in recent years, Haffner’s book is the story of a relatively ordinary individual in extraordinary circumstances. *Defying Hitler* is not as compelling as the secret diary of Victor Klemperer, a Jewish professor who survived Nazism because his non-Jewish wife refused to abandon him. Nor is it as troubling as the reminiscences of Traudl Junge, one of Hitler’s secretaries who was with the Fuehrer during the last days in the Berlin bunker. Yet, like these other recent memoirs, Haffner’s book invites readers to think about the moral choices that Nazism forced relatively ordinary individuals to make. It allows, perhaps even requires, us to put ourselves in the author’s shoes: What would I have felt? What would I have done? How would I have responded? Little of what Haffner has to say will come as a surprise to scholars of Weimar and Nazi Germany. The professional historians have already constructed much more solid and convincing explanations of Nazism than can be found in Haffner’s book. Yet academic historical writing rarely manages to offer the moral connection with the past that many readers seem to find in a personal memoir like *Defying Hitler*.

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

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

Citation: David Crew. Review of Haffner, Sebastian, *Defying Hitler: A Memoir*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7478>

Copyright © 2003 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.