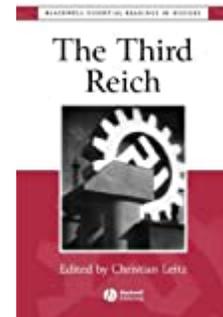




**Christian Leitz, ed.** *The Third Reich: The Essential Readings*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999. xii + 307 pp. \$41.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-631-20700-9.



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If a single idea may be gleaned from this collection, it is that the Nazi idea of sovereignty was based on a lack of cohesiveness and fragmented structure. After decades of scholarship depicting the Nazi regime as the epitome of racial coherence and administrative efficiency, many current studies emphasize administrative disorder and a widespread bureaucratic tendency to improvise as the most crucial features of the Nazi state. Even more than that, a radicalization of the system, as *The Third Reich: The Essential Readings* shows, grew out of the Nazi bureaucrat's constant internal vacillation between the personal ambition of the follower and the sober sagacity of the ideal leader whose Olympian distance functioned as a tool of control. Ian Kershaw, in his contribution, refers to this phenomenon as “working towards the Fuehrer”—a playful allusion to the Heideggerian overtones of the 1930s.

At the center of the book is the mechanism that operated a range of threats produced by the Nazi party, often implied or hinted, yet always present in the praxis of everyday life. The targets, in the order they appear in *The Third Reich*, included the lower classes, much of continental Europe, the party system as a whole, women, conservatives, and Jews, leaving no space at all for any mythology of evil. If the essays include anything remotely mythological it is a very casual Hydra, terrible

in its lethal everydayness, a lesson about the violence that “systems” often contain. The Hydra, we learn, is as much the mute mass of obedient followers and administrators as it is the Nazi elite. Several questions arise: Who stood behind this threat and how much of it was planned in advance? To what extent does it merit the term system? Through reading this book, the first question is easy to answer: little planning preceded the Final Solution and the wars that destroyed the Third Reich; orders were often verbal and contingent, or never given at all. The second question can only be answered provisionally. What structure did exist was highly ambiguous and, as a result, any reflections about the system can be assessed only against the background of results—actions and decisions (Hitler's appointment, political and judicial discrimination, racial persecution, annexations and wars, the attempted annihilation of the Jews). The system cannot be conceptualized solely by tracing the sporadic planning process, the political negotiations that preceded implementation.

The eminent historians who contributed to this collection are aware of the problem, but no comprehensive answer is provided. While conventional histories of Nazi Germany always point to one intentional, crucial center, Adolf Hitler, this collection portrays Hitler as more of a symbol than an actual leader. As Kershaw points out,

“a party leader and head of government less bureaucratically inclined, less committee man or man of the machine, than Hitler is hard to imagine” (p. 235). Setting aside the usual functionalist-intentionalist dilemma concerning Hitler’s true weight in the decision-making process, Kershaw’s “work towards the Fuehrer” (originally published in 1993 and revised for inclusion in his lauded biography of Hitler) permits him to wander a bit more widely afield, fruitfully complicating the usual either-or debate and presenting something closer to an “order of things.” While he cites instances of Hitler launching the administrative process, he concludes that most frequently Hitler was satisfied to sanction or reject proposals from his advisers, serving not as a planner but a regulator (p. 249). This state of affairs was made explicit on those occasions where limits were imposed on the image of Hitler as omnipotent. In his article on Nazi foreign policy, Hans-Adolf Jacobsen dwells on a command received by the German press in 1936 not to quote from the sections of *Mein Kampf* devoted to foreign policy: the book was to be treated as only a “historical source,” something that “had been written in 1924 and was based on the ‘political situation then’” (p. 54). Persevering in his re-evaluation of the sources on Nazi foreign policy, Jacobsen suggests that “historians have previously underestimated how important the [Rosenberg] organization was for the realization of the ideological foreign-policy objectives of the NSDAP” (p. 72). In their contributions about (conservative) resistance to Nazism and Nazi resettlement plans for the Jews, Hans Mommsen and Christopher Browning both employ a radical synthesis of “functionalist” and “intentionalist” approaches, disarming the two sides of this debate by bringing them into an unexpected alliance, and yet also preserving the shade of dichotomies behind the more appealing synthesis. In Browning’s essay, framed by the famous “Historikerstreit” debate of the 1980s, the author untangles the intricate web of interests at play in the expulsion of Jews from the west. (The essay is drawn from Browning’s *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers* [2000], itself based on six lectures delivered at Cambridge University in 1999.) In his conclusion, Browning contends “that Lebensraum and Endloesung” [“living-space” and the “final solution”] were not rigidly programmatic ... and that Jewish policy was not always the undisputed priority or centerpiece of Nazi racial policy” (p. 282). As an example, he cites the interest taken by Heydrich, Himmler and Eichmann in the resettlement of 70,000 Baltic Germans, suggesting that it may have outweighed their concern about Europe’s Jews. It appears that plans were taken up and dropped again by the hour, depending often on personal interest and other less-than-

rational or more than merely ideological considerations.

Fear and its manipulation by the Gestapo are the theme of Robert Gellately’s article about surveillance and different forms of disobedience. The Nazi party played up the myth of Gestapo efficiency to maximize the fear on which so much depended. As the civilian branch of Germany’s massive police apparatus, the Gestapo relied on the full cooperation it received from the domestic population. By assessing the statistical data on Gestapo activity now available, Gellately shows that “the population at large internalized the norms of the regime to the point where they acted as unofficial extensions of the terror by keeping their eyes and ears open” (p. 201). Omer Bartov’s essay addresses a similar duality, using “the Wehrmacht’s own effort to continue propagating its previous image of ‘Ueberparteilichkeit’” to contrast the image of shared power with the reality of a highly centralized regime (p. 143). By taking on the attributes of “both moral ‘cleanliness’ and institutional autonomy,” the army as a whole appears to have been mythologized as “the haven from the regime” (p. 143) and at the same time to have reflected indoctrinated society “by absorbing so many men into its Ranks” (p. 145); the Nazi regime responded to any given scenario by drawing from the range of contradictory images it had manufactured. After the war, the army’s image was fully depoliticized: it became yet another victim of the dictatorship, a myth supported by a highly self-interested constituency. In postwar Germany, the older generation of German historians, including Ernst Nolte, Michael Stuermer and Andreas Hillgruber, urged their readers to empathize with the individual soldier at the eastern front, fighting to preserve his *Heimat* from the claws of Bolshevism. Informed by a sociopolitical approach, Detlef Muehlberger and Albrecht Tyrell’s essays provide insights into the crucial months of 1933 and 1934. Tyrell’s article, a detailed account of the radicalization of the Nazi revolution, emphasizes the different political and social ramifications that brought Hitler to power (*Machtergreifung*).<sup>[1]</sup> Without ever referring to Carl Schmitt’s theory of the *Ausnahmezustand*, or “state of emergency,” Tyrell explains, “Hitler was able to use the presidential emergency decree of 28 February 1933 to create perhaps the most important, certainly the most characteristic basis of National Socialist rule” (p. 35). In the months following the decree, what support Nazism gained can only be called pseudo-legal, though this was certainly sufficient to protect the state from any interference. Here Tyrell shows how “at the center of Nazi ideology and their perception of people were Volk and race. These concepts were neither clearly defined nor

clearly definable“ (p. 42). This sort of fuzziness appears to have benefited the regime, giving it the necessary room to maneuver within an ideologically porous and contradictory space. Other means of control, such as taking over the old bureaucracy, were accompanied by an atmosphere of great arbitrariness. Articles by Richard J. Overy, Alf Luedtke and Adelheid von Saldern round out the book; they too exemplify the best of the current work being done on Nazi Germany.

Leitz’s real achievement has been to assemble such distinguished names without compromising on the coherence, the methodology, or even the focus of the book. One might say that a range of different forces has been drawn up where debate and scholarly ambition usually run fairly high. Leitz manages to integrate the various contributions into a sophisticated historical work, while still leaving it open, much like the “system” it describes. I shall comment briefly on three less satisfactory qualities of the book. First, in his introduction, Leitz promises “new and more complex theses” (p. 10). While the book certainly achieves complexity, the case for its novelty is partial at best. Since this is a collection of translated, adapted and republished pieces, *The Third Reich* is not quite the “new” voice in the field. Second, while the essays address many fields, others are left completely untouched. The nature of such a project precludes a very strict list of demands, but one absence is strongly felt: the cultural study and analysis of Nazi Germany. During the last decade, this area has come to occupy a growing space on scholarly shelves and has stimulated the highest level of both public and academic interest. The gravity of this omission must be admitted since nearly every article has, in one way or another, relied on the idea of myths without ever interrogating it closely; as a result, a conceptual gap has unwittingly been opened. Third, the

suggestion that the *Historikerstreit*—or other, less interesting debates—continues to occupy the most prominent position in the field must be questioned, particularly after such monumental works as those of Kershaw and Brownling, and after Bartov’s concise narrative of military symbols and myths. Looking to the future of the field sometimes means leaving the old enmities aside.

Ernst Cassirer once traced the origins of the “myth of the state” to the unity of *logos*, *nomos* and *taxis* (reason, lawfulness and order). *The Third Reich* focuses mostly on the last two Platonic categories, neglecting the importance of *logos*, or limiting it to the merely functional technicalities. As a result, when used in this book the word “myth” is mostly employed as a metaphor for everything related to propaganda, or simply to all inexplicable phenomena. Despite such a gap, this collection is a valuable tool for students of the more pragmatic sides of violence and its routinization, as well as for students who approach Nazism as a complex and multi-layered structure.

Note:

[1]. The article appeared first in German in Karl Dietrich Bracher and Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, eds., *Deutschland 1933-1945. Neue Studien zur nationalsozialistischen Herrschaft* (1992), and has been translated by the editor, Christian Leitz.

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