

THE CRESSSET

A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs

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books



Richard J. Evans. *The Third Reich in Power*. New York: Penguin, 2006.

The historian's has become a specialized craft, and the takers are few and far between for the task of synthesis. In this age of specialization, synthesis is perhaps only for the brave and insane. Given that academia is woefully deficient in both courage and sanity, profound works of synthesis are scarce. Is it not a sad commentary of the profession that National Socialism (a subject possessing an unfathomable amount of scholarship) has gone so long without a synthetic masterpiece?

Professors have had to play the role of Dr. Frankenstein when constructing their courses on the Third Reich. A monstrous "textbook" slowly emerges from their stitching. They patch together a bit of Ian Kershaw (for Hitler), a sliver of Karl Schleunes (racial policy), parts of Detlev Peukert (everyday life), masses of Timothy Mason or Richard Overy (economy), and so on until the creation is complete. Given the ever-increasing rise in publisher rates and campus bookstore-mark ups, an unpleasant showdown pitting students against professor loomed on the horizon. It is with much relief, then, that historians have received Richard J. Evans's recent work, *The Third Reich in Power* (the second volume in a trilogy on the Third Reich). The tome covers the years perhaps least understood by a lay public that tends to forget that the evening sun of 30 January 1933 did not wait to rise until the morning of 1 September 1939.

But isn't Evans a "nineteenth-century" man? Yes. He possesses a formidable reputation within the historical community for his works on the social history of nineteenth-century Germany. His imprint on the field is enormous: one thinks of his monographs on capital punishment, prostitution, and disease, his edited collections on the German bourgeoisie and peasantry, and his essays on the practice of history among other works. But that was before the Emory historian Deborah Lipstadt called the British "historian" David Irving a "Holocaust denier." Evans became an expert witness in the consequent libel case (which Lipstadt won). Evans's participation in the Lipstadt-Irving Trial sent him on his journey into the heart of the twentieth-century darkness.

It is precisely Evans's extensive knowledge of the nineteenth century that makes his commentary on National Socialism so fresh and compelling. This is evident, for example, in *The Coming of the Third Reich* (the first book of the trilogy), where he is able to delve deeply into the question of why the Nazis came to power. In that work and now in the "Prologue" of *The Third Reich in Power*, Evans weighs the relative strengths and weaknesses of the *Sonderweg* thesis (the argument that Germany traveled down a "special" or deviant path from a "normative" Western European model). Evans does not believe that National Socialism was a foregone conclusion based on the so-called failure of a German bourgeoisie.

That being said, Evans also does not believe that National Socialism came out of the clear blue sky. In this regard, Evans provides a different answer than that recently offered by fellow *Sonderweg*-critic Steven Ozment. In Ozment's *A Mighty Fortress* (Harper 2005), the reader is presented with a "Perfect Storm" of post-War catastrophe. The message being that the devastation of the First World War and its aftermath cleaved the Germans from their historical past. Ozment's razor cuts

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too cleanly, however. Although correct that not all German paths led to Hitler, Ozment's attempt to distance the useable German past (read: the Protestant tradition Martin Luther bestowed) has diverted his attention from the very real bands of continuity that linked post-War Germany to its past.

Evans correctly points out that elements of the German past did cross the divide. For example, Evans acknowledges that "Bismarck's persecution, first, of the Catholics in the 1870s, then of the fledgling Social Democratic Party in the 1880s, got Germans used to the idea that a government could declare whole categories of the population 'enemies of the Reich' and drastically curtail their civil liberties" (3). In addition, Evans notes that anti-Semitism, Social Darwinism, and eugenics were present in German society well before the outbreak of the First World War. Despite these acknowledgements, Evans refuses to resurrect a cultural *Sonderweg* thesis. He undercuts the line of continuity by noting that "[Antisemitism, Social Darwinism, and Eugenics] were still minority strands of thought before 1914; nor did anyone weld them together into any kind of effective synthesis" (4). Like Ozment, Evans claims that the First World War did matter: "Antisemitism was widespread in German society, but overt violence against Jews was still rare. What changed this situation was the First World War" (4). But unlike Ozment, Evans does not believe that the war cut Germans from their past. Rather, the war reinforced certain, present strands of German history at the expense of others.

According to Evans, police and propaganda were reinforced at the expense of the German tradition of the rule of law. This for Evans is the key to understanding both the "coming of the Third Reich" and the "Third Reich in power." In making this argument Evans builds upon central themes of his works on the nineteenth century, for example *Death in Hamburg* (Oxford 1987). In that work, Evans read the 1892 Hamburg cholera epidemic (and the reaction of the hitherto liberal, city administration) as a metaphor for the coming National Socialist plague:

More died in Hamburg in 1892 than just people. The epidemic... was the dividing-point between the old and the new; in particular, it struck the death-knell for the old system of amateur government by local notables under which Hamburg had previously been ruled. It marked, even if it was not alone in bringing about, the victory of Prussianism over liberalism, the triumph of state intervention over laissez-faire. It formed a significant, symbolic moment in the history of the German middle classes, and set the scene for their entry into the twentieth century. (*Death in Hamburg*, viii)

The "Death" that occurred in 1892 was experienced by the country as a whole from 1933 to 1935.

The Third Reich was a police state. Quickly upon Hitler's ascension in 1933, the National Socialists began to clamp down on German associational, professional, and political life and stamp out all possible agents of resistance (within both society at large and the party itself). Evans's Third Reich is brutal and relentless. "In 1933 a huge apparatus of surveillance and control was rapidly brought into being to track down, arrest and punish anyone who opposed the Nazi regime, including a good third of the electorate who had voted for the parties of the left in the last free German elections" (113). The window of opportunity for any organized resistance to the regime quickly closed. "By the end of 1935," Evans argues, "organized opposition had been completely crushed" (113). After shutting down the traditional oppositional parties and purging potential rival forces within its movement (on the "Night of the Long Knives" of 29–30 June 1934) the regime could then turn the screw on isolated groups: "[F]rom 1936 onwards, overt terror was directed increasingly against relatively small minorities such as persistent or committed Communists and Social Democrats, the asocial and work-shy, petty criminals and... Jews and homosexuals" (113–114).

Evans is critical of historians who have tried to undermine the notion that Germans were held against their will in a terror state, such as Robert Gallately in *Backing Hitler* (Oxford 2001) and Gerhard Paul and Klaus-Michael Mallmann in *Die Gestapo* (Darmstadt 1995). He believes that recent scholarship has suffered from a myopic view of repression. By focusing solely on the repression of minorities, scholars have built an overly neat dichotomy between repressed minorities on the one hand and cooperative Germans *en masse* on the other. Evans argues that "to focus exclusively on [the placement of minorities into concentration camps] ignores the much larger number of political and other deviants condemned by the courts and put in state prisons and penitentiaries" (116). In short, Evans (as the title of his first chapter suggests) believes that Nazi Germany was a police state. Terror was real and should not be seen as solely focused on minorities, nor as universally accepted by a monolithic German populace of Gestapo agents or, worse yet, by those who Daniel Goldhagen referred to as "*Hitler's Willing Executioners*" (Vintage 1997).

For Evans, if one wishes to see whether or not the German populace accepted National Socialist ideology, one cannot limit the search to Gestapo records, rigged elections, or the killing fields of Eastern Europe. Rather, one must examine the

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interface between population and party ideology: namely, propaganda. For this reason, Evans's chapters on culture are his most important. National Socialism was no ordinary political movement. Rather National Socialism strove to "mobilize the spirit" and "convert the soul" of the populace.

It becomes obvious that Evans believes that if one wishes to fully understand Germany of the years 1933–1939, then the protagonist must be Goebbels rather than Hitler. It is thus fitting that after establishing that the Third Reich was a police state, Evans turns immediately to Goebbels. In this sense, Evans provides counterpoint to Ian Kershaw's two-volume biography of Hitler (Penguin 1998, 2000). Goebbels wished to spark a revolution in the German masses. Evans points out that Goebbels's revolution:

...was not a social or economic revolution along the lines of the French Revolution of 1789 or the Russian Revolution of 1917... It was a cultural revolution. It envisaged the deepening and strengthening of the Nazis' conquest of political power through the conversion of the whole German people to their way of thinking. (120–121)

Evans demonstrates how Goebbels (and the National Socialists more generally) failed to "convert" the German populace to the cultural movement. This thesis underpins "The Mobilization of the Spirit" (Chapter Two) and "Converting the Soul" (Chapter Three).

In "Mobilization of the Spirit" Evans incorporates recent scholarship on music and art (120–121). His treatment of the art world of the 1930s is fresh and readable. His brief biographical vignettes of German artists infuse his cultural discussions with human drama. His portrait of the sculptor Ernst Barlach aches with sadness, for example; that of the composer Richard Strauss sizzles with scorn. Most delectable of all is Evans's description of the National Socialist in-fighting between Joseph Goebbels (head of the Ministry of Propaganda) and Alfred Rosenberg (leader of the Fighting League for German Culture and editor of the *Racial Observer*) over control of the cultural sphere. Evans balances the biographical sketches and art-world gossip with an appropriate amount of historical contextualization. It remains clear to the reader that the discussion is not all simply "Art for Art's Sake" but connected to Evans's larger point that ultimately Goebbels's revolution was a failure.

Goebbels's failure to spark a popular revolution in culture was replicated in religion and academia as well. Evans's negative conclusion could not be blunter: "Nowhere was there any clear evidence that the Nazis had succeeded in their ambition of sweeping away alternative sources of moral and cultural identity amongst the great mass of Germans and replacing it with unqualified enthusiasm for their own world-view" (320). When it came to the minds of the German people, Evans's argument begins to come closer to Ozment's (probably closer than either author would like to admit). Both Ozment and Evans provide more positive portraits of the Germans than one usually finds. Although the two historians may differ in how and where the break came, they both believe that there was a disconnect between National Socialism and the German people.

Given the synthetic nature of his work, Evans's source-base is heavy on secondary literature. The secondary sources span broadly through and deeply within English- and German-language publications. In describing his themes, Evans has mined the monographs of specialists as opposed to reflecting on the points made in other synthetic works. Evans complements the secondary sources with running commentary from the diaries of ordinary Germans. In addition to seeing the National Socialist transformation of Germany through the eyes of Joseph Goebbels, Hermann Goering, and Heinrich Himmler, the reader gets the perspectives of Victor Klemperer (a politically-conservative Jewish professor, who is married to an "Aryan" woman), Luise Solmitz (a conservative Hamburg schoolteacher), and Jochen Klepper (a former Social Democrat, who was married to a Jewish woman). Evans's use of these primary documents of Klemperer, Solmitz, Klepper, and others gives a human face to the themes he presents. This is a quality that undergraduates (and everyone else, for that matter) will find extremely helpful about the book. Having used the text twice for the instruction of undergraduate students, I say this from experience. Students have voiced overwhelmingly praise for the book. Many students have even admitted to reading *beyond* the syllabus (selections and schedule) because they "couldn't put the book down"! Furthermore, as far as I can discern, there have been no complaints about cost. With the publication of this fine work of historical synthesis, the time has come for the Dr. Frankensteins in history departments to put down their scalpels and sewing needles.

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