



The German War: A Nation under Arms, 1939–1945 by Nicholas Stargardt.

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Seventy years after its self-destructive collapse in spring 1945, Nazi Germany still attracts intense scholarly interest. So much, in fact, that after decades of study one wonders how many stones are now left unturned. In his important new work, Nicholas Stargardt (Magdalen College, Oxford) dispels these doubts and fills a crucial gap in this vast historiography by investigating why Germans continued to support a lost war.

This inquiry had already begun during World War II, when expatriate intellectuals like Franz Neumann¹ and Allied military officials² attempted to explain the Third Reich's astounding resilience in the face of around-the-clock bombing raids and reverses on all fronts. Three generations of scholars have since proposed explanations ranging from the seductive power of Adolf Hitler's charismatic image to pervasive German anti-Semitism.³ Stargardt now seeks to understand the war from the perspective of the Reich's citizens:

As I followed the public soul-searching in Germany which accompanied the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in 2005, I realized that the contemporary need to draw the right didactic lessons from this past has led scholars as well as the media to neglect one of the essential tasks of historical enquiry—first to understand the past. Crucially historians have not been asking how Germans talked and thought about their roles at the time. (3)

The author's approach reflects research done for his previous book on German children during World War II, which tapped private contemporary sources.⁴ In recent years, other scholars have used personal correspondence to understand how Germans conceived of a racially exclusive *Volksgemeinschaft* (People's Community),⁵ but Stargardt more rigorously exploits the sources in weaving individual lives into the fabric of the larger wartime narrative.

Drawing on materials at the Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte (Library for Contemporary History), the Field Post archive at the Museum for Communication in Berlin, and the Deutsches Tagebucharchiv (German Diary Archive), Stargardt assembles a cast of sixteen characters in a microcosmic sample of German wartime society. They include well known figures like the German-Jewish literary scholar Victor Klemperer and Nobelist (for literature, 1972) Heinrich Böll alongside "ordinary Germans" like Fritz Probst, an infantryman from Thuringia, and Liselotte Purper, a photographer from Hamburg.

1. In *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1942).

2. See *The United States Strategic Bombing Surveys—European War, Pacific War* (1945; 7th reprinting, Maxwell AFB, AL: Air U Pr, 1987).

3. E.g., Ian Kershaw, *The "Hitler Myth": Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2001); Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (NY: Vintage, 1997).

4. *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives under Nazism* (NY: Knopf, 2007).

5. E.g., Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2009); Michael Wildt, *Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung: Gewalt gegen Juden in der deutschen Provinz 1919 bis 1939* (Hamburg: HIS Verlag, 2007); Thomas Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's Community, 1918–1945* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2013).

Stargardt finds that Germans responded to the outbreak of war in September 1939 with a healthy sense of pessimism and apprehension—“Everyone in Germany saw the Second World War through the lens of the first, whether or not they lived through it” (16). The prospect of food rationing in particular preoccupied many people who had endured a crippling Allied blockade during the First World War. Their government shrewdly capitalized on these anxieties by casting its aggression against Poland as a defensive effort to save the country from a repeat of the privations of the infamous “Turnip Winter” of 1916–17 (26–27). In their successive campaigns of expansion, Nazi leaders justified their own brutal policies by portraying Germans as victims, not perpetrators. “Such arguments appropriated victimhood, justifying all subsequent German actions. They worked not by denying German violence but by making it, comparatively, insignificant” (45). This deception worked well—by late September 1939, Liselotte Purper had set aside her camera and joined a nurses’ association, while Fritz Probst’s letters from the front admonished his young son to “do your duty too as a German boy is meant to.... Think of our soldiers standing before the enemy” (64). Even the most mundane daily affairs were quickly saturated with notions of patriotism, community, and shared sacrifice in the face of perceived Allied aggression (64).

Along with the regime’s promotion of victimhood came careful efforts to manage home-front morale, in particular by offsetting the effects of rationing. As Stargardt reveals, by the end of 1940, the Reich’s government faced growing civilian discontent with shortages of food, fuel, and, above all, luxury items. To bolster civilian morale, after conquering France in June 1940, the regime allowed Germans with relatives serving in France to send money to purchase consumer goods at rock-bottom prices. By the end of the year, these soldiers had received a staggering 34 million Reichsmarks and converted the defeated country into a massive department store supplying the wants and needs of German citizens (132). Like other historians,⁶ Stargardt finds that the campaign in the west, though less brutal than the invasion of Poland, conditioned Germans to embrace their regime’s smash-and-grab approach to conquest.

The easy victories of 1939–40 and the cultural chauvinism they generated led to deadly hubris. In June 1941, Germans confidently celebrated the Wehrmacht’s invasion of the Soviet Union, indicating how much public opinion had changed since the apprehensive opening days of the war (159–61). Billed as another preemptive strike to secure the nation’s survival, this campaign was a turning point for the German people, since it marked their tacit approval of the Reich’s genocidal policies. Despite attempts to prevent news of the *Einsatzgruppen*’s efforts to wipe out the Jewish population of the Soviet Union from reaching Germany, rumors of the atrocities nonetheless reached the home front. In response, the Nazi leadership stressed Soviet cruelties and a putative Jewish conspiracy to exterminate the German people. In one radio address to the nation, Josef Goebbels chillingly claimed that, if they were victorious, the Allies intended to sterilize all adults, “leading to the elimination of Germanism and its carriers” (237). Such language eerily evoked the regime’s own rhetoric about the need to snuff out the followers of so-called “Judeo-Bolshevism,” exposing the Reich’s policy of cloaking its atrocities as measures to protect the German *Volk* in a no-holds-barred struggle for survival.

These efforts to influence public opinion bore fruit: many Germans saw the vicious fighting on the eastern front as epitomizing the brutality of the war and the need to see it through to the end. This notion appears most starkly in soldiers’ letters home. Fritz Probst remarked to his wife, “I have already seen terrible images of destruction and can only tell you, you should thank the Führer that he has liberated us from this danger” (181). Widely held perceptions of Eastern Europe as a diseased and primi-

6. See, esp., Götz Aly, *Hitler’s Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State*, trans. Jefferson Chase (NY: Metropolitan, 2008).

tive wilderness⁷ made it more acceptable to fight a ruthless racial war “over there” rather than on one’s own doorstep.

Liselotte Purper’s writing echoes such concerns about cultural, spiritual, and physical contamination emanating from the “Wild East.” During her travels through Poland, she obsessed about lice and disease, and felt truly safe only once she reached “civilized” Vienna (136–39). Such distorted popular perceptions allowed the Germans’ resolve to dovetail with the Third Reich’s notions of “hardness,” a word “now acquiring something of the meaning Hitler gave it in closed briefing sessions, when he used ‘hard’ as a metaphor for genocidal measures. Hinting at the process of self-brutalization, ‘hard’ and ‘harsh’ increasingly complemented the sacralising language of heroic self-sacrifice used in both official and private accounts” (209). After the disaster at Stalingrad, Germans recognized that their own survival depended on their ability to destroy the Reich’s enemies without mercy.

Besides the specter of Soviet invasion, the Allied air assault encouraged civilians and soldiers alike to support the war effort unconditionally. In particular, the Hamburg firestorm (July 1943) convinced many Germans that their enemies meant to obliterate them. Consequently, the People’s Community became a “community of fate” as Germans came to see the conflict as apocalyptic, justifying any measure, however extreme, necessary to stave off defeat.

Stargardt writes that this shift allowed the Reich’s citizens to discuss openly the elimination of Europe’s Jewish population. As the bombing continued, Germans in crowded air-raid shelters whispered that the attacks were revenge for their treatment of Jews earlier in the war. “Talk of the ‘Jewish’ character of the ‘terror attacks’ broke the tacit spiral of silence which had shrouded the Europe-wide deportation and murder of the Jews throughout 1942” (362). The comparison of the bombing campaign with the Holocaust reinforced prevailing notions that Germans were victims of Allied atrocities and inspired them to fight all the harder.

This process of self-victimization continued in late 1944 and early 1945, when the regime called upon its “racial comrades” to defend the Reich. To drum up support for a last ditch “final battle” inside Germany, Josef Goebbels warned that Jewish *Einsatzgruppen* would accompany the invaders, once again projecting the regime’s own obscene barbarities onto its victims (506). Liselotte Purper’s last letters to her husband on the eastern front convey a palpable sense of desperation and impending doom—“Rage fills me! ... Think of the brutality with which we will be raped and murdered, think of the terrible misery which the air terror alone is already bringing down on our country” (469). No wonder some Germans fought to the bitter end, whether or not they believed in National Socialism. Still, many others had to be coerced, and groups of SS, Gestapo, and military personnel violently forced civilians across the country to join militia units and dig defenses.⁸

When the Allies invaded the German homeland, resistance faded as concern for family trumped duty to the nation. After the war, Germans rapidly pieced together their shattered lives and rebuilt the country (at least in what became the Bundesrepublik). Stargardt concludes that these efforts completed the long process of self-victimization, allowing the wartime generation to avoid examining their complicity in the disastrous events of the Third Reich—“While the next generation began to ask why Germans had unleashed such a calamity on the world, the older one was still locked into the calamity that they had themselves suffered” (570). Historians did not rigorously challenge this remarkably du-

7. Vejas Liulevicius, *The German Myth of the East: 1800 to the Present* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2009), and Paul Weindling, *Epidemics and Genocide in Eastern Europe, 1890–1945* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2000).

8. Ian Kershaw, *The End: The Defiance and Destruction of Hitler’s Germany, 1944–1945* (NY: Penguin, 2012); Stephen Fritz, *Endkampf: Soldiers, Civilians, and the Death of the Third Reich* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 2004); Sven Keller, *Volksgemeinschaft am Ende: Gesellschaft und Gewalt 1944/45* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2013); Bernd-A. Rusinek, *Gesellschaft in der Katastrophe: Terror, Illegalität, Widerstand: Köln 1944/45* (Essen: Klartext, 1989).

rable sense of victimhood till the 1990s, during the controversial “Crimes of the Wehrmacht” exhibition and the coinciding debates about the role ordinary Germans played in the Holocaust.⁹

The German War's greatest strength is its author's painstaking use of personal correspondence to reveal the willingness of everyday Germans, even those opposed to Nazism, to see themselves as targets of aggression and so to rationalize their own horrendous crimes. In a grim and forceful reminder of the human costs of war, the voices of Fritz Probst and many others abruptly fell silent as they died at the front or were taken prisoner. We see, too, their spouses' and other relatives' anguished years of searching for lost loved ones. In a well crafted and lucid prose style that will please scholars and general readers alike, Nicholas Stargardt has vividly evoked the thousands of personal tragedies that, sadly, go unmentioned in most general histories of World War II.

9. Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (NY: HarperCollins, 1992); Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann, eds., *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: HIS Verl, 1995); Eric A. Johnson and Karl-Heinz Reuband, *What We Knew: Terror, Mass Murder, and Everyday Life in Nazi Germany* (NY: Basic Books, 2006).