



*Under a Darkening Sky: The American Experience in Nazi Europe: 1939–1941* by Robert Lyman.

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American expatriates, diplomats, and journalists worked and played in Europe before the war and during its first phases. They observed up-close the Third Reich's words and actions and took a dim view of its intentions, ideology, and concerted barbarity. In *Under a Darkening Sky*, British historian Robert Lyman quotes the February 1920 "Program of the National Socialist German Workers' Party" to prove a point—that Adolf Hitler and his supporters were not hiding their plans. Hitler played his diplomatic double game of arming for war while claiming to want only peace. He published his intentions for a once victimized, now re-armed, "purified," and expanding German *Volk*.

The book's virtue lies in quotations of a contemporary "cloud of witnesses," some famous like Edward R. Murrow, Janet Flanner, and ambassador William Bullitt, others obscure and forgotten. Its vice lies in its repetitive statements reminding readers of the vicious premeditated evils of National Socialism and the glories—and devastating dilly-dallying—of democratic states on both sides of the Atlantic. These positions are incontrovertible but not in need of reiteration in every chapter. Monday-morning quarterbacking becomes tedious, even though Hitler always exceeds any conceivable denigration and condemnation. Sample: "Like a rabid dog, Hitler would keep on slathering [*sic*; read "slavering"] and biting until he was destroyed" (24). Ambassador Bullitt heard in 1939 that the French would need ten thousand American fighter aircraft to meet Hitler's Luftwaffe (121). Such did not exist.

Paris, London, and Berlin are the settings for most chapters. Some thirty thousand Americans lived in Paris before the war.<sup>1</sup> In 1934–40, the French elected twelve "separate" premiers (two of the twelve served twice) (29) and failed to respond to the Germans' seizure of the Rhineland, Czechoslovakia and Poland (35) or their annexation of Austria. Would blindness, stupidity, and venality, along with property-owners' fear of advancing Stalinist bolshevism determine a bolder French course?

Hitlerland propaganda harped on the Leader's apoplectic twin fears of communism and the Jews, mixing them together whenever convenient (e.g., 48). Hitler's surprising "diplomatic" victories (79) attested to his uncanny sense of the major powers' willingness to let him invade and despoil countries far away and little known. Yugoslavia followed Czechoslovakia and Poland. The German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact (23 Aug. 1939) took many by surprise, but Hitler's invasion of the USSR (22 June 1941) marked the bloody beginning of the end of the Thousand-Year Reich. German exceptionalism, watered by hate, had carried the seeds of self-destruction (289).

Lyman often mentions anti-Semitism but never dwells on any of its murderous indignities. The restrictions on Jews, petty one day and ferocious the next, their persecution, deportation, and

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1. Not surprisingly, that figure shrank to about five hundred during the occupation (208).

attempted “extermination” (261–62), as observed by indifferent or appalled Americans,<sup>2</sup> deserve at least a chapter. Jewish doctors and lawyers lost their right to practice, Jewish shops were smashed, and Jews could use only yellow park benches. “Aryan” men looted or confiscated Jews’ property, while their Aryan spouses strolled to the head of rationed food and clothing lines. The author barely touches on the suppression of German unions (99) and ignores Italy and Benito Mussolini’s sideshow Fascist aggressions against France, Tunisia, Albania, and Greece.

An exciting chapter, “Eagles at Dawn,” evokes the doughty fly-boys of the book’s dust jacket. Lyman reports on pilot Art Donahue’s service—after only eighteen days of fighter training—among eleven Americans in the crucial early days of the Battle of Britain.<sup>3</sup> Blackout-inducing dives to evade “bouncing” Messerschmitts, reaching speeds of 700 mph, induced both fear and elation. Donahue parachuted from a burning Spitfire at least once, and exceeded the average pilot life-expectancy of four weeks, but died in combat in September 1942. Unlike W.B. Yeats’s “Irish Airman,”<sup>4</sup> a member of an oppressed minority indifferent to the British patriotism he served, Donahue volunteered to risk his life for Britain. Meanwhile, from afar his American nation watched the Germans try to crush the last free state fighting in Europe.

The French lacked both “the military wherewithal” (93) to support Poland in the east, and the political will to attack Germany’s western flank. President Franklin Roosevelt’s inclinations were clear, but he eschewed joining the conflict and imperiling his 1940 election chances (123). Germany attacked Holland, Luxembourg, and Belgium (10 May 1940). Within a month, France too had fallen. The Germans brilliantly used air support to storm through Sedan north of the Maginot Line<sup>5</sup> and in the ensuing chaos, Panzers had a clear path to Paris. The best British and French forces were deployed in the low countries (135), but were cut off from the Channel ports. While 300,000+ men of the British Expeditionary Force successfully evacuated Dunkirk, they left behind their guns and tanks. Escaping south from Paris along roads jammed with horses, antiquated autos, and thousands of pedestrians was next to impossible. Dive-bombing Stukas strafed men (many elderly), women, and children. Unlike other embassy staff directors, William Bullitt stayed at the American embassy in Paris to meet the conquerors. Some intrepid American reporters, for example William Shirer and A.J. Liebling,<sup>6</sup> followed the Germans into their target countries (157), whose forces were paralyzed by the Wehrmacht’s speed and logistical preparations. The French declared Paris an “open city” to save it from bombs and bloodshed.

The chips were down, Pétain surrendered, and France became a rich, lootable province of Nazi Germany in three weeks. Economic slavery and ritualized humiliations were inflicted on the French, beginning with the act of Surrender, re-enacted in reverse at Compiègne. German troops swaggered through the capital, and the conquerors sent many Frenchmen to man war-making machinery in Germany. The egg-ration for French citizens was two a month and defacing a German poster was punishable by death (215, quoting Walter Kerr). The Resistance had no coherent voice or strategy for years, until the irascible but impressive Charles de Gaulle in 1943 briefly unified his countrymen’s various factions (225).

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2. Such as the brave Varian Fry of the Emergency Rescue Committee, rescuer of over two thousand Jews and anti-Nazi intellectuals from Vichy France (xix).

3. See, further, Donahue’s *Tally-Ho! Yankee in a Spitfire* (1941), rpt. under Amazon’s CreateSpace imprint (2016).

4. See his “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” (1919).

5. Regrettably, Lyman includes no maps or timelines.

6. While Lyman quarries Liebling as a source, he ignores his droll sense of humor and calls him “Abbott” throughout.

Across the Atlantic, US citizens and their representatives were determined to remain aloof from Europe's problems and avoid being drawn again into a European war. Ambassador and bon vivant Bullitt argued against that position in his daily telephone calls to President Roosevelt. The French, to judge by quotations gathered here, once their misguided defense strategy collapsed, reluctantly realized the Americans were leaving them on their pitiable own. The US economic system had simply not yet geared up for all-out war. The battle-free fall of Austria and Czechoslovakia, and even the Blitz of Poland were not sufficiently persuasive to survivors of another brutal World War only twenty-five years earlier. Even after the fall of Denmark, Norway, Holland, and Belgium, isolationist Americans protected by broad seas, particularly Republican congressmen, were slow to learn that their putative cost-free policy was a mirage. The Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and the concomitant German declaration of war on the United States changed that. The United States' neutrality could survive Hitler's destruction of European civilization, but not attacks on American property and lives.<sup>7</sup>

Willful ignorance kept the United States out of war for over two years. American witnesses to Nazi aggression recorded the Germans' welcome arrival in Austria and the invasions of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and elsewhere well beyond *Grossdeutschland*. In occupied Paris, several Americans joined Free French operatives to help downed Allied airmen evade capture (233–39). They included Josephine Baker, the celebrated African-American dancer and singer.

Germany's aerial bombing campaign against British cities and ports began 7 September 1940 with 348 Luftwaffe bombers and 617 fighters. It lasted for fifty-seven days and nights. Nightly bombardment did less damage than one might have imagined; the darkness protected the aggressive scoundrels from the defenders' guns but also complicated their efforts to land bombs on targets. But whole sections of many cities large and small (London, Birmingham, Coventry, Plymouth) were obliterated.

Berliners were mistakenly assured they would not need their air-raid shelters. As early as August 1940, the "British Air Criminals" launched retaliatory raids on Germany; however limited, they had a dramatic psychological effect on the "master race." By 1943 the hell of massive Allied raids had become commonplace and steadily exacerbated the Germans' war-long shortages of food and other necessities, deprivations that affected despised and bullied groups even more grievously. The country began to starve—vegetables were luxuries and soap disappeared. The Wehrmacht's millions needed to be fed (250) and Operation Barbarossa drained the life out of Berlin, as Howard K. Smith reported from the city (253). No more Coca-Cola, and ersatz imitations did not "hit the spot." Lyman argues that the German people did not want war but could not prevent it. Their war-weariness only increased, of course, as the tide turned against them. In Berlin, Quakers helped Jews emigrate, when a host country could be found. For a time, before the murderous "final solution," Jewish citizens who could afford the bribes might buy their way out.

Joseph Kennedy, the future president's father, became Ambassador to Britain in March 1938. He aligned himself with British appeasers, convinced that the United Kingdom by itself could not withstand the German onslaught. He opposed American intervention with troops or materiel. His policy position and advice to FDR were locally known and resented. His Irish heritage and authoritarian predilections made him less sympathetic to the British cause. He told Churchill to his face that Americans did not wish to save the British Empire (269). That the United States profited from supplying the British seemed fine to him but ugly to those doing the fighting and dying.

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7. Lend-Lease (March 1941) replaced "cash and carry" of the previous year, a good idea for provisioning Britain, the sole government still fighting fascism and the German war machine, given that the British Empire was out of cash (281).

Roosevelt chose other men as channels for diplomacy with Britain. In May 1940, still only 7 percent of American voters believed the United States should declare war on Germany (274). Despite his known interventionist sympathies, Roosevelt promised to keep the country out of war. Americans in Europe grasped what many of their compatriots could or would not: liberty required the defeat of German totalitarianism. In the event, a rash Japanese strategy on the far side of the world broke the stalemate.<sup>8</sup>

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8. Some errata: the author misattributes Vegetius's Latin epigraph ("si vis pacem ...") to Plato. For "George Keenan" (passim), read "George Kennan." For "in hoc to Moscow" (116), read "in hock to Moscow." The statement that Hitler's attack on a free state "represented a threat to the very foundation stone of all free states" (83) suggests an absence of proofreaders.