



Fred Siegel

The German Century

Many of the ideas that inspired World War II live on in postmodernist thought.

6 November 2015

[*The German War: A Nation Under Arms 1939-1945*](#), by Nicholas Stargardt (Basic Books, 704 pp., \$35)

The great Anglo-Welsh memoirist Gorowny Rees was infatuated with Weimar Germany. Like many young intellectuals in England and America during the 1920s, Rees took Keynes's misconceived *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919) as gospel and so minimized Germany's responsibility for World War I. Historians such as John Rohr had yet to illustrate the striking continuities between the Kaiserreich and the Third Reich. Rees and his like were beguiled by the artistic creativity and sexual adventurism of Weimar, where "morals had been discarded as a bourgeois prejudice." Rees's assumptions were shaken by a stay in East Prussia. There, living among the Junkers, he discovered a cry for Germany to avenge its heedless defeat in the war by reverting to the "mysterious life of nature" and the "ideal of soldierly violence" that "required a periodical bloodletting," led by the natural leaders of a hierarchical state.

Many of the Junkers went on to be mainstays of the Hitlerian state. But as Nicholas Stargardt demonstrates in his masterly *The German War: A Nation Under Arms 1939-1945*, even those members of society who were not Nazis whole-heartedly supported Germany's war effort. The German public was convinced, in part thanks to Western liberal censures of their own societies, that they had been forced to fight a defensive war initiated by the Jews, British, French, and the barbarian Judeo-Bolsheviks from the East. The Nazis drew on British authors such as John Ruskin—who like the Junkers extolled hierarchy and organicism—Aldous Huxley, H. G. Wells, and "above all George Bernard Shaw." Cribbing Shaw, "The Nazi regime," writes Stargardt, claimed that it was "fighting the same 'plutocracy' that had ruined Weimar and was stifling social progress in England."

Books on Nazi Germany are nearly too numerous to count. What makes Stargardt's well-written study a valuable addition is his use of diaries and letters to depict how ordinary Germans' rationalized standing by as mass killings of Jews became common knowledge. Even among non-Nazis, hatred of the Jews was overwhelming. Berliners joked: "Who are the greatest chemists of world history? Answer: Jesus, because he turned water into wine; Göring because he turned butter into cannons; and Himmler because he turned Jews into soap."

Confronted by mass murder, educated Germans retreated into the "inner" moral certainties of Friedrich Hölderlin's nineteenth-century lyric poems on "fate," and the stirring literary depictions of battle found in Ernst Jünger's post-World War I writings, including *Struggle as Inner Experience*. These writers, says Stargardt, helped Germans depict the war as akin to an "elemental force"—an act of nature. In both cases they allowed Germans to avoid "questions of causation and responsibility." A few—like the anti-Nazi bank clerk Willy Peter Reese, who endured five tours on the Eastern Front—rebelled privately. He penned a light verse:

Murdered the Jews

Marched into Russia
As a roaring horde
Muzzled the people
Sabered in blood
Led by a clown
We are his envoys
Of the one everyone knows
And we are wading in blood

Willy Peter Reese was a rarity and he kept his dissent to himself. Similarly, the Germans failed to react against their government even in 1945, when Stargardt estimates each day of hopeless fighting “cost the lives of 10,000 German soldiers.” Unlike the “turnip winter” of 1916-17, when hunger and suffering sent revolutionary, anti-war crowds into the streets, German solidarity held. The welfare state Hitler had created, in part with confiscated Jewish wealth, kept the masses reasonably well fed. And Joseph Goebbels kept the home front entertained. “Whatever you do,” Goebbels instructed, “do not broadcast tedium, do not present the desired attitude on a silver platter, do not think that one can best serve the national government by playing thunderous military marches every evening.”

By late 1944 and early 1945, the “defensive war” notion took on a new valence in Germany. Germans, Stargardt found from their letters, “justified” the Holocaust as revenge for Allied terror bombing, supposedly performed on behalf of the Jews. As the war’s tide turned, Germans feared not only punishment for their slaughters, but that they themselves would be exterminated by the Judeo-Bolshevik barbarians from the East. As they understood it, Germany had to fight on or face extinction. In its closing years, the war lost popularity among Germans, but, explains Stargardt, “it still remained legitimate—more so than Nazism itself.”

Seventy years after the allied Victory, many of the anti-bourgeois and nihilist ideas that first attracted Gorowny Rees and helped motivate World War II live on in the post-modern creed, which denigrates causation and responsibility in favor of seemingly exalted states of being. As Nietzsche explained in *Daybreak*:

When some men fail to accomplish what they desire to do they exclaim angrily, “May the whole world perish!” This repulsive emotion is the pinnacle of envy, whose implication is: “If I cannot have something, no one can have anything, no one is to be anything!”

Intellectually, it seems, Germany lost the war but won the peace among the Western allies.

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