

German Voices: Memories of Life During Hitler's Third Reich

Frederic C. Tubach

University of California Press (May 2011)

Hardcover \$26.95 (275pp)

978-0-520-26964-4

Historians have long speculated about the extent to which the German people supported or colluded with the ideology of the Third Reich. While the devastating economic effects of the Versailles Treaty and a centuries-deep well of anti-Semitism partially explain why ordinary Germans aided or averted their eyes from the ravages of World War II and the Holocaust, this book weaves a rich cloth from German voices past and present, the letters of the dead, and the personal recollections of the living. It presents an evocative challenge to conventional assumptions of a monolithically complicit nation.

Tubach grew up during the years of the Third Reich, and his memories provide the impetus and foundation of his research. For example, his in-depth analysis of the party's vast network of youth groups includes recollections of their colorful events but also candidly admits the popularity of warlike competitions that transformed a young person's "normal geography ... into territory to be defended or attacked by the young, beyond the control of our elders."

Germany's leaders conditioned Tubach's generation to view life as a valiant struggle for survival and reinforced this image by claiming that Poland invaded Germany. However, the invasion of the Soviet Union proved problematic for many soldiers, as did wholesale murder of Jews and other civilians. Many letters describe violence, and their tone ranges from nightmarish depictions of suffering to numbed accounts of fact: "First Lieutenant M. sets fire to the barn. The Russians inside are burned alive. The weather is calm." Many soldiers saw confirmation of their youth-group indoctrination when the Soviet military mowed down civilians in its way. One young man prayed, "God save Germany from ever falling into the hands of these beasts."

As the war progressed, many soldiers unknowingly wrote their last letters home, exulting about abundant food in France or hoping for a swift return. Some writers are anti-Semitic, calling Jews "the cause of this war," while still others either exult in the military life or lament the loss of all that is good and true in the world.

Tubach's extensive research included many personal interviews with Germans who survived the war, as well as forays into German archives that are only now being explored. He honestly presents both the good and the bad, illustrating above all else the persistence of individuality despite crushing pressure to conform. This book is a valuable contribution to the still-emerging analysis of humanity's most deadly conflict.

ELIZABETH BREAU (July / August 2011)

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