

**Richard J. Evans, *Le Troisième Reich, 1939-1945*,
vol. III, Paris, Flammarion, 2009, 1102 p.**

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After “The Coming of the Third Reich” and “The Third Reich in Power”, the final volume of Richard J. Evans’ trilogy “The Third Reich at War” has recently been published in French. This last volume, as its title indicates, covers the six years of World War II; and, like the two previous volumes, it attempts to “give a sense to the senseless”¹.

While the first volume was chronologic, and the second thematic, the final volume conciliates the two scientific approaches. Despite the clever use of dairies and testimonies from the era, this volume, compared to the others, is surprisingly less colourful. The narrative and the choice of major events of the war are exactly as they should be – no more, no less.

As Evans himself warns his readers, “the central focus of this book is on Germany and the Germans; it is not a history of the Second World War, not even of the Second World War in Europe” (p. 9-10). Thus, Evans contents himself with describing major military battles in Europe, among others the invasion of Poland and France, the Battle of Britain, the Battle for Moscow, the defeat at Stalingrad, the D-Day and the final downfall in Berlin. Evans pinpoints three key events in the war which turned the tide against the Nazis: first, the Battle of Britain which proved that the German army was not invincible; second, the American entry into the war in December 1941 which guaranteed the Allies’ economic and technologic superiority over the Germans; finally, the defeat at Stalingrad which sealed the beginning of the end for Hitler and his henchmen.

Evans’ approach is comprehensive and multi-faceted: he explores not only political, diplomatic and military aspects, but also social and cultural life in Nazi Germany now in war – against its real and imaginary enemies. Indeed, the horrific fate that the Nazis inflicted upon their imaginary enemy, the Jew, is the leitmotiv which Evans uses to weave the narrative together.

A refreshing reassessment

In this final volume, Evans discusses many thorny questions and, dispels some persistent myths. Relying upon the latest studies and interpretations, he vividly depicts the invasion of France or rather “the greatest traffic jam known to that date in Europe”, which was in the end no less than a roll of the dice (p. 155-158). Another delicate issue is the silence of the Holy See and the responsibility of Pope Pius XII,

¹ Tribute to Theodor Lessing, *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen* [History as Sense-Giving to the Senseless], Leipzig, 1927.

who “did what he thought best in the interests of the Catholic Church both in Italy and elsewhere” (p. 645), but failed in his role as the world’s conscience. The legend of blameless *Wehrmacht* is repudiated through examples of atrocities committed on the Eastern front by the SS with the complicity of army officers.

More importantly, Evans soberly assesses Germany’s economic and human resources to fulfil Hitler’s world domination fantasies, and concludes: “But Germany’s economic resources were never adequate to turn these fantasies into reality, not even when the resources of a large part of the rest of Europe were added to them. No amount of ‘mobilization for total war’, no degree of economic rationalization, could alter this fundamental fact of life” (p. 879). Once the surprise effect was gone, Nazi Germany was doomed to lose the war. The hilarious German joke from the summer of 1944 is telling: “A naive young man [was] shown a globe, on which, it was explained, the large green area was the Soviet Union, the huge red area the British Empire, the enormous mauve area the United States and the vast yellow area China. ‘And that little blue spot?’ he asks, pointing to the middle of Europe. ‘That is Germany!’ ‘Oh! Does the Leader know how small it is?’” (p. 761-762).

Through diaries, anecdotes and jokes, Evans makes us discover the state of mind of ordinary Germans. In a vituperative review, British historian Michael Burleigh criticises Evans’ choice of witnesses: “[Diaries] written by ordinary people lack the insights that might have come from people with greater intellectual acuity. Significantly, there are no references to what exiled German thinkers or foreigners had to say about Hitler’s empire; these might have been more revealing than the observations of housewives or some poor soul expiring at Stalingrad²”. Haughty Burleigh misses the point that these passages, which help the readers demystify the everyday life under the Third Reich, are indeed Evans’ most precious contribution to the literature on Nazi Germany.

The last section of the book “Aftermath” tells how the Germans faced their National Socialist past in the aftermath of WWII. This is one of the most captivating parts of the book. It is a pity that Evans passes over the rise of historical revisionism in Germany and elsewhere. It is an even greater pity when one remembers that Evans himself confronted one of these notorious negationists, David Irving in a libel trial in 2000. Another question that Evans might have discussed more thoroughly is the post-war fate of German youth, who became adult under the Third Reich and whose world view was totally warped by National Socialism. The extraordinary example of Melita Maschmann, a former leading member of the League of German Girls (BDM), leaves us wanting more (p. 870-871).

Germany in flames: the Rashomon effect

² Burleigh seems to deeply resent Evans’ criticism of his book “The Third Reich: a New History” (vol. II, p. 11). *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 October 2008 (available on <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3562328/Review-The-Third-Reich-at-War-How-the-Nazis-Led-Germany-from-Conquest-to-Disaster-by-Richard-J-Evans.html>).

If “Aftermath” is one of the most captivating sections of the book, “Germany in Flames” and the chapter “German Moralities” compel the readers to meditate on philosophical questions: crime, individual/collective guilt and moral responsibility.

At the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, Churchill and Roosevelt decided the strategic bombing of German cities. Evans’ graphic description of the first massive air raid on Hamburg in July-August 1943 is disturbing (p. 524-532). With temperatures reaching 800 degrees Celsius at the centre of the town and people dying slowly stuck in the melting asphalt, Hamburg’s misery can only be compared to Dante’s Inferno. These bombings resulted in 400 000-500 000 deaths in Germany, most of them civilians.

As Evans points out, these dead were not what we call today mere “collateral damage”. However, should one denounce the Allied strategy as a war crime? Evans’ answer to this delicate question is discreet: “Even if one does not accept that the entire bombing campaign was unnecessary, then it is at least arguable that it was continued longer than was strictly necessary, and conducted, especially in the final year of the war, in a manner that was too indiscriminate to be justifiable” (p. 545-546). Wars are extraordinary situations which require extraordinary measures. It is only too easy for us today to judge the Allied strategy. Even if the bombing campaign against Germany was definitely in breach with *jus in bello*, it made the Normandy Landings possible. “Allied bombers were able to pulverize the roads, bridges and railways behind the Normandy beaches in 1944, making it impossible for the German army to bring up adequate reinforcements” (p. 545). This is one of many Rashomon-like stories of the war.

Evans is right to sweep aside as unrealistic the Allies’ hope that the bombings would spark off a popular uprising against the Nazis. The bombings physically exhausted the Germans and made them apathetic, nervous, irritable, desperate or even suicidal. Indeed, the general indignation that arose from these bombings was not directed to Allied bombers, not even to the English people as a whole, but to the Nazis. Yet, that was a different kind of indignation. Evans mentions widespread SD reports from 1943 of people demanding reprisal attacks on London; “But this was not so much in anger, rather in the belief that only this could prevent further raids on Germany and even defeat in the war in general” (p. 547-548). Evans underlines the lack of anger among ordinary Germans towards the Allies. However, he should also point out the fact that these Germans were angry with the Nazis not only because they had triggered a war which “proved the greatest self-inflicted disaster in modern history³”, but also because they were losing the war. In Bremen, a woman who lost her son, her daughter-in-law and her granddaughter in an air raid shouted in anger at two SA men who were trying to console her: “The brown cadets are to blame for the war. They would do better to have gone to the front and made sure the English don’t come here” (p. 531). The popular anger towards the Nazis emanated from mixed feelings.

Germans and the Holocaust

³ Antony Beevor’s review of Evans’ final volume at *The Times*, 9 October 2008 (available on http://www.entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article4915271.ece).

This final point leads us to the question of guilt and responsibility of the German people with regard to the Holocaust. Evans asserts that from the end of 1942 at the very latest the mass murder of the Jews became “a kind of open secret” in Germany (p. 654). However, Evans is careful not to label all Germans as enthusiastic supporters of the regime’s radical anti-Semitic measures⁴. Apart from convinced anti-Semites, the Germans reacted negatively to the introduction of the mandatory yellow badge for Jews (p. 647-649). Later, Goebbels’ fear propaganda revealed “deep-seated feelings of guilt that they had done nothing to prevent the Jews being killed” (p. 655). Paradoxically, fear and guilt did not only urge the Germans to fight harder and until the bitter end, but also to deny all knowledge of the genocide after the end of the war.

On the one hand, for a person who had eyes and ears it was always possible to learn about it if he ever wanted to. On the other hand, it was also possible to look the other way. Indeed, Goebbels’ colossal entertainment machine offered the Germans many way outs. Some of them preferred to believe Hitler’s self-fulfilling prophecies. Others behaved more professionally. The fictional defendant judge Friedrich Hofstetter from Stanley Kramer’s brilliant film *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961) explains the duty of a judge as “[the] sacrifice one’s own sense of justice to the authoritative legal order, to ask only what the law is, and not to ask whether or not it is also justice”. Given the German tradition of treating law as a creation of the state (vol. II, p. 246), many Germans must have reasoned likewise. If a Rudolf Höss could claim to have merely followed orders and an Ernst Kaltenbrunner denounced the crimes “in which he had no share⁵”, how easy it must have been for ordinary Germans to plead selective amnesia after the war (p. 881).

Evans is right: the Germans knew it. However, to know is one thing, to react is another matter altogether. “Who could judge a man who does not want to die for others?” asks Kurt Gerstein in Rolf Hochhuth’s famous piece *The Deputy* (act I, scene 3). Genocide is the crime of crimes, for it is a state-run, premeditated and systematic joint criminal enterprise. In order to defy a state whose laws legitimise mass murder, the inner resistance must organise like a shadow-state. War, however, fatally equates resistance with high treason and, weakens its cause. In Nazi Germany, there were individual though isolated heroic acts; there was indifference; there was ideological commitment as well as political opportunism. That is why a nation should accept the responsibility for its past while guilt must be ascribed to individuals.

In the end, the Third Reich is not only a German question, but ours as well. In this regard, Evans’ conclusion is to the point: “[The legacy of the Third Reich] extends far

⁴ Regrettably, Evans tends to generalise when it comes to other peoples. After having related the Ustaša genocide, he concludes: “In the longer term, the Croatian genocide created memories of deep and lasting bitterness among the Serbs. It still had not been forgotten by the time Serbia and Croatia eventually regained their independence after the collapse of the post-war Yugoslav state, in the 1990s” (p. 197). Not a specialist of Yugoslavia, Evans is probably unaware that it was Slobodan Milošević’s propaganda which deliberately awakened, distorted and manipulated war memories to sow the seeds of ethnic hatred between Serbs and Croats.

⁵ Rudolf Höss, *Kommandant in Auschwitz: autobiographische Aufzeichnungen*, München, 1963; “Final moments of Nazis executed at Nuremberg”, *The Guardian*, 11 September 2009.

beyond Germany and Europe. The Third Reich raises in the most acute form the possibilities and consequences of the human hatred and destructiveness that exist, even if only in a small way, within all of us. [...] It poses in the most extreme possible form the moral dilemmas we all face at one time or another in our lives, of conformity or resistance, action or inaction in the particular situations with which we are confronted” (p. 883-884). Hitler was not the devil, and mankind is still not immune to the temptation of hatred and violence. And this makes the whole story all the more frightening.