THE

CONNELL GUIDE

TO

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE THIRD REICH

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JULIAN FELLOWES

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW
IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Caroline Sharples

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Introduction

Between 1933 and 1945, Germany was under the grip of the Third Reich. Headed by Adolf Hitler, this National Socialist state endeavoured to control every aspect of the nation's political, social, economic, religious and cultural life, and indoctrinate every German citizen in its ideology. The aim was to enact a thorough social revolution, eradicating both "weak" democratic institutions and old class divisions in order to establish a new "People's Community" constituted upon common blood ties. This intrinsically racist regime also embarked upon an expansionist foreign policy that, at its peak, brought most of continental Europe under Nazi control. The resulting war – and genocide – killed millions of soldiers and civilians and its effects continue to be felt to this day.

Nazism was not the only fascist movement to emerge in interwar Europe, but it harbours a unique, public fascination due to its peculiar racial character and levels of violence. Likewise, while the Holocaust was neither the first, nor the last, example of mass atrocity to take place in Europe, it was unprecedented in terms of its transnational reach and its industrial-scale killing methods, with purpose-built extermination centres constructed in occupied Poland. It was the Holocaust that bequeathed us the legal definition of "genocide" and "crimes against humanity" and the model for an international criminal court.

Furthermore, it is the Holocaust that stands at the forefront of contemporary genocide research, education and commemoration. These days, we have an international day of remembrance for the victims of Nazism, plus countless Holocaust memorials all over the world. Many countries have made studying the Third Reich a compulsory element of their school history curricula, offering a clear-cut morality tale for future generations about the dangers of racial intolerance. As historian Richard Evans has suggested, it is Nazism that is perceived as "the ultimate embodiment of evil".*

More than 70 years on, the Third Reich also continues to generate intense scholarly interest. There are continued questions about the roots of National Socialism, the workings of the Nazi state, the particular role of Hitler, the extent of popular support for Nazism, and the origins of both the Second World War and the Holocaust. In short, ever since 1945, historians have been grappling with one fundamental question: how was any of this possible in a modern, cultured nation at the heart of 20th century Europe?

The earliest accounts, based upon the documentary evidence submitted for the prosecution at the post-war Nuremberg trials, concentrated firmly on the Nazi leadership, state processes and key diplomatic events. By the 1970s, the wider development of social history saw this top-down

* Richard Evans, "Why are we so obsessed with the Nazis?", *The Guardian* (6 February 2015).

approach give way to new interest in *Alltagsgeschichte*, the history of everyday life under Nazism. Regional case studies began to flourish, along with investigations into the experiences of key social groups such as women and workers. Consequently, our understanding of the impact of Nazism started to become more nuanced, and scholars were able to engage in more in-depth studies of popular consensus and resistance.

Meanwhile, a revival of war crimes trials, especially that of former SS bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961, helped to generate a new, critical investigation into the persecution of so-called "racial enemies". Historians began to make greater use of survivor testimonies and the very term "Holocaust" started to gain currency. Studies were undertaken into the complicity of key German institutions including the army, big business, the medical profession and the churches, and, by the 1990s, historians such as Daniel Goldhagen and Christopher Browning were engaging in a lively debate about the involvement of "ordinary Germans" in the crimes of the Third Reich. Today, there still remain numerous avenues for original research, with scholars tackling everything from the German public's knowledge of the pre-war concentration camps to cultural life under the Nazi regime.

As this volume will illustrate, much of the literature has crystallised around the so-called

THE GERMAN REICHS

The literal translation of the term "Reich" is "realm", but has typically been used to denote a particular empire across three distinct periods of German history.

The first of these was the Heiliges Römisches Reich – the Holy Roman Empire which lasted from the Middle Ages to the Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century. This stretched across central Europe including the areas that make up modern-day Germany, the Czech Republic and Northern Italy.

Later, the Deutsches Reich (literally, German Realm), also known as the Deutsches Kaiserreich (German Empire), was established in 1871 with the unification of Germany under Wilhelm I of Prussia; prior to this, the area we know today as Germany was actually a proliferation of numerous kingdoms, principalities and duchies. Technically, this "Deutsches Reich" persisted even after Germany's defeat in the First World War and the abdication of Wilhelm II (grandson of the original emperor).

The Nazis, though, refused to describe the Weimar period of 1918-1933 in these terms, denouncing the Republic as "un-German" and arguing that there had been a devastating break with the nation's noble history. Consequently, the period of Nazi rule from 1933 to 1945 was deliberately styled as the Drittes Reich (Third Reich). It was a title indicative of the Nazis' sense of nostalgia for a lost past, and fuelled the recurring motif of Hitler being the latest in a long line of strong, heroic German leaders, someone who could restore the country's fortunes. That is why the Nazi regime continues to be labelled as the Third Reich. But while the Nazis would have described the earlier realms as the "First" and "Second" Reichs, historians generally prefer to avoid these terms, being understandably unwilling to perpetuate the Nazi vision of history. ■

Intentionalist-Structuralist debate. The former school of thought, typified by the likes of Karl-Dietrich Bracher, Eberhard Jäckel and Lucy Dawidowicz, emphasises the totalitarian nature of Nazi Germany, presenting Hitler as the omnipotent leader who possessed a consistent set of ideological goals and a clear programme for implementing them. The latter group of scholars, typified by Hans Mommsen and Martin Broszat, rejects this, arguing that the structure of the Third Reich was fundamentally confused, with ad hoc decision-making and intense power rivalries generating a "cumulative radicalism" that eventually brought the entire regime tumbling down. A third way, posited by Ian Kershaw in the early 1990s, fuses elements of both the Intentionalist and Structuralist arguments, acknowledging the inherent confusion within the Nazi state, but still presenting Hitler as the ultimate source of authority.

As these competing theories show, there is no easy way to sum up the Third Reich but therein lies its enduring fascination. It is a period of history that shocks and appals us, but also challenges our thinking about human behaviour. Consequently, the rise and fall of the Nazi regime will continue to occupy our historical consciousness for many years to come.

Germany before Hitler

What was the impact of the First World War on Germany?

When war was declared in August 1914, it was greeted with great public enthusiasm. Across the country, large crowds gathered to cheer the news, generating a display of national unity that would become much mythologised amid the political and economic instability of the post-war years. As Germans rushed to the colours, there was widespread belief that victory would soon be at hand.

In reality, of course, the First World War dragged on for another four years. Germany did enjoy notable success on the eastern front and made some early advances in the west, but the latter theatre of war soon developed into a stalemate. In 1916, the navy was humiliated at the Battle of Jutland and remained in harbour for the remainder of the conflict. Unrestricted submarine warfare had the primary effect of bringing the United States on to the opposite side of the war in 1917, while an Allied blockade of German ports resulted in desperate food and fuel shortages, declining public morale and political unrest. Hopes for a renewed offensive in spring 1918 proved costly and eventually, on 11 November 1918, the Armistice was signed. Negotiations for a

peace settlement then began in Versailles in January 1919.

Most narratives of the Third Reich necessarily start with this earlier chapter of German history because it had such a profound impact on the country's political and economic landscape. Some two million German soldiers were killed in the conflict, creating a demographic imbalance. The post-war government would have to find the means to support the war-widowed and the war-disabled, while also contending with the rampant inflation caused by financing the war effort through a series of loans.

The notion that the country had been defeated in the First World War was unbelievable to many people, particularly since Allied troops had not even entered the country. Immediately, a myth sprang up that Germany had not lost the war in any military sense, but had been "stabbed in the back" by pernicious enemies at home. Most of the blame was attached to the Jews who were falsely accused of shirking their duty in the conflict. Such legends would endure throughout the interwar period, appropriated and exaggerated by the Nazi Party in propaganda that provided a convenient scapegoat for all of the nation's ills.

The post-war peace settlement produced even more bitterness. The German delegation was excluded from the negotiations at Versailles and merely handed a list of terms to sign. This immediately prompted accusations that the settlement was a

Diktat – a dictated peace and nothing more than an act of vengeance on the part of the victors. The terms themselves seemed devastating. Germany was stripped of her overseas colonies (which would now be administered by Britain and France), and lost swathes of territory on her east and west European borders. Alsace and Lorraine, annexed after the Franco-Prussian war in 1871, were restored to France, while the Rhineland that separated the two countries was to be demilitarised.

The industrially-rich Saarland was also to be administered by France for a period of 15 years. Elsewhere, northern Schleswig was given to Denmark, parts of Upper Silesia were given to the newly-formed Czechoslovakia and a "Polish corridor" was created between east and west Prussia. Danzig was to become a free city. Disarmament clauses, meanwhile, restricted the German army to 100,000 men and the navy to just six battleships. Submarines were prohibited, as was the use of an air force or conscription into the armed forces.

The most notorious part of the treaty, though, came with Article 231: the so-called "War Guilt" clause which attributed all of the responsibility for the conflict to German aggression. This, in turn, enabled the Allies to impose a hefty reparations bill on the Germans. But the notion that Germany should bear all the blame for the conflict rankled immediately with the German delegation at Versailles. Count Brockdorff-Rantzau was emphatic as he declared "such a confession would be...

a lie".* Back in Germany itself, crowds demonstrated in the Berlin Lustgarten while Prime Minister Philipp Scheidemann described the settlement as a "horrific and murderous witch's hammer".** A petition was sent to the Allies on 22 June 1919, arguing that the conditions proposed were beyond anything Germany could hope to achieve. The protest, however, went unheard and Germany was forced to sign the Treaty of Versailles on 28 June.

The outcome of the First World War would remain a popular grievance among the German people thereafter and, while various political parties campaigned on an anti-Versailles platform and a pledge to make Germany great again, it was the Nazis who proved most adept at channelling public outrage into mass support. In 1927, a still relatively unknown Adolf Hitler stressed the sheer propaganda potential that was bound up in this hated peace treaty, exclaiming that "this instrument of boundless blackmail and the most humiliating degradation could become the means... for the whipping up of national passions to boiling point!"***

Given the subsequent rise of Nazism, the Treaty of Versailles has been duly subjected to intense scholarly scrutiny over the years. Was it too harsh on Germany? Was it an inherently flawed compromise

* Count Brockdorff-Rantzau, 7 May 1919. Cited in R.F. Holt & A. Pickard (eds), *Democracy, Dictatorship, Destruction: Documents of Modern German History 1918-45* (Melbourne: Longman, 1991) p. 47.
** Philipp Scheidemann, 12 May 1919. Cited in Ibid, p. 49.
*** Adolf Hitler, 1927. Cited in Ibid, p. 52.

Adolf Hitler, Hermann Göring and Joseph Goebbels saluting during the singing of the Nazi anthem

between disparate Allied aims? Certainly, the Allies had gone into the peace talks with very different objectives. France, which had borne the brunt of the conflict, wanted to make Germany pay, literally in the form of reparations, and symbolically in the loss of territory and status. There was also a steely determination to ensure that Germany was so weakened that it could never again threaten France's borders. By contrast, the United States adopted a more moderate tone. President Woodrow Wilson had ambitions for an international disarmament agreement, freedom of the seas, the right for self-determination among national minorities and the creation of a League of Nations to safeguard world peace. Caught in between these two powers, Britain

hoped to destroy German naval strength, while Italy simply wanted to gain more territory.

Against such a background, it was always going to be difficult to reach an agreement that satisfied everyone. Anthony Lentin suggests that the terms did not go far enough: Germany was weakened, but not so much that it could not wage war again; moreover, the sense of humiliation that the Treaty evoked would make Germany determined to undermine it wherever possible.* More recently, scholars such as Sally Marks, Ruth Henig and William Carr have argued that the fundamental problem lay not so much with the terms of the Treaty itself, but with the Allies' unwillingness to actually enforce it throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

* Anthony Lentin, *Guilt at Versailles* (Leicester: Methuen, 1984).

PRE-WAR GERMANY

At the start of the 20th century, Germany was ruled by Kaiser Wilhelm II, the grandson of Wilhelm I who had overseen the nation's belated unification back in 1871. The Kaiserreich, or Imperial Germany, as this period is generally known, had universal male suffrage and a parliament (the Reichstag) that housed various political parties. Yet this was also very much an authoritarian regime. Real power remained invested in the Emperor himself, and it was he who had the ability to appoint – or dismiss – his chancellor.

Within the political sphere, it was the rural, landowning elite that continued to wield the greatest influence, despite the fact that the majority of people now lived in cities.

Consequently, a socialist movement led by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) had been developing during the late 19th century which called for political and social reforms. While these efforts were temporarily interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War, the ideas would not simply fade away. Instead, demands for revolutionary change would re-emerge from 1918 and characterise much of the interwar period.

Since 1888, Imperial Germany had been keen to flex its international muscles and find its own "place in the sun", pursuing overseas colonies in the Pacific and in Africa. Germany consequently came into direct competition with the older colonial powers, especially Britain and France. This, together with a developing arms race, heightened nationalism and a wave of popular militarism, all contributed to rising tensions that, ultimately, would spill over into the First World War as Germany and Austria-Hungary took on the combined weight of Britain, France and Russia. ■

Yet however one interprets the peace settlement, it is too simplistic to draw a straight line from Versailles to Hitler's appointment as German chancellor in 1933. Many other factors came into play and the history of the post-war Weimar Republic itself needs to be considered if we are to understand how the Third Reich ever came about.

Why did the Weimar democracy fail?

On 9 November 1918, the Social Democratic politician Philipp Scheidemann stood at the window of the Reich Chancellery in Berlin and proclaimed a new political era for Germany. Kaiser Wilhelm II, who had ruled the country for 30 years, had abdicated, the monarchy was abolished

and a new republic was to be formed in its stead. The authoritarian style of rule that had characterised Germany since the nation's unification in 1871 was to be replaced by parliamentary democracy. This Weimar Republic subsequently drafted what was, at the time, one of the most advanced, liberal constitutions in Europe, with clauses guaranteeing freedom of speech, assembly and worship, universal suffrage and unfettered elections. Just 15 years later, though, all of this lay in tatters as Adolf Hitler stripped away people's civil rights and imposed his brutal dictatorship.

What went wrong? Historians have wrestled with this problem for many years, contemplating a wide array of both internal and external, short and long term factors that may have contributed to the Republic's demise. Most early studies focused predominantly on its final years, stressing the devastating impact of the 1929 Wall Street Crash and subsequent Great Depression that, at its peak, left six million Germans unemployed. Such accounts highlight the government's slow response to the crisis, its inability to cope with the sudden surge in welfare demands and, of course, the aptitude of extremist groups like Hitler's Nazi Party to exploit popular grievances in their propaganda. Even more significantly, it seems that by the start of the 1930s many Weimar politicians were simply unwilling to take measures to safeguard the fragile democracy. When push came to shove, most people harked back to the idea that having a single, strong leader was the best means of solving the nation's ills.

But is this enough to account for the abandonment of the Republic? Dissatisfied with the emphasis on short-term issues, a second wave of historians, writing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, switched their attention to the very origins of the Republic, asking whether, in fact, it had always been doomed to fail. As Richard Bessel sums up, "virtually the entire literature about the Weimar Republic has as its central theme the problem of its fundamental instability".*

Certainly, the fledgling Weimar Republic faced tremendous social, economic and political challenges from the off. First, there was a failure to enact a thorough revolution in 1918/19. Throughout the autumn of 1918, there had been growing public unrest about the state of the German war effort. This erupted into sailors' mutinies in the ports of Kiel and Wilhelmshaven, followed by the formation of workers' and soldiers' councils across Germany which, inspired by the success of the Russian Revolution the previous year, demanded a complete political change.

The new Republic was headed by the left-wing SPD but for some Germans things had not gone far enough. Bloody street fighting ensued and in January 1919 the Spartacist Uprising, headed by Rosa Luxembourg and Karl Liebknecht, called for

* Richard Bessel, *Social Change and Political Development in Weimar Germany* (London, 1981) p. 11.