

# H-Net Reviews

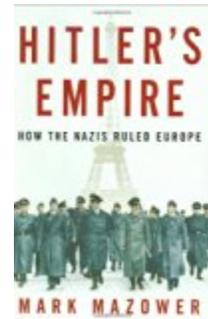
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Richard J. Evans. *The Third Reich at War*. New York: Penguin Press, 2008. 994 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59420-206-3.

Mark Mazower. *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe*. New York: Penguin Press, 2008. 768 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59420-188-2.

Reviewed by Christof N. Morrissey (Independent Scholar)  
Published on H-German (October, 2010)  
Commissioned by Benita Blessing



## Two Major New Studies of Nazi Europe

Adolf Hitler, Nazism, and the Second World War continue to exert an unbroken fascination, not only for the mainstream public but for academic historians as well. Should anyone require proof of the latter, these massive new volumes will dispel any doubts with the force of a coordinated “lightning” attack of tanks and dive-bombers against lance-bearing cavalry. In the two volumes reviewed here, the social historian Richard Evans and the international historian Mark Mazower bring their distinctly different brands of history writing to what is essentially the same topic: the Third Reich and occupied Europe at war.

No one can accuse Mazower of building his authorial career on micro-histories or monographs about narrowly defined topics. His books include sweeping histories of Europe in the twentieth century, the Balkans, and the city of Thessaloniki over half a millennium.[1] *Hitler's Empire* is no less ambitious; it is an elegantly crafted narrative carried forward with broad brushstrokes and punctuated by intriguing case studies as well as insightful anecdotes. The book's eighteen chapters are organized into three sections: the first, chronologically ordered, covers historical background up to the first part of World War II, when the Nazis acquired their empire; part 2 provides a thematic examination of the “New Order”; and the last section puts it all into European and world perspective. Mazower keeps his narrative lean and moving briskly.

He avoids getting bogged down in organizational details of the Nazi occupation and extermination apparatus, and generally eschews German bureaucratic monikers in favor of common-sense English translations. Another of his positive trademarks is a wry sense of irony. That is probably not the worst prism through which to view the more bizarre outgrowths of the Nazi imagination, such as Heinrich Himmler's delusions of a Germanized East, or the brutality and tawdriness of leading Nazis such as Hans Frank.

At the same time, it must be said that Mazower's streamlined approach does not always yield the detailed insights into operational maneuverings and intra-organizational dynamics that—while never providing the sole explanation for the Holocaust or other radical Nazi projects—can nonetheless be critical to understanding how and why Nazism functioned as it did. As it stands, his wide-lens focus reinforces his basic skepticism toward what we can (still) broadly label “functionalist” explanations of Nazism and the Holocaust, whether characterized as “polycratic structures,” “administrative social Darwinism,” or “cumulative radicalization.” Mazower does emphasize the critical role played by the war in making mass murder on an epic scale both conceivable and possible. At the same time, however, he also stresses the centrality of Hitler's wishes, both explicitly stated and implicitly anticipated, to the execution—if not always

the planning—of major policy operations.

Mazower's leading argument about what makes the Nazi empire distinct concerns its unique application of colonialism's racism and brutality to Europe itself. The traditional imperial powers, he argues, had limited their colonial ventures to overseas places and peoples. Additional factors that set the Nazis apart included the unprecedented speed with which they sought to build their empire and, perhaps most significantly, their inability to envision or articulate a political future that could appeal to anyone who was not German. Victorian colonialism, Mazower contends, at least held out the "promise of political redemption" for its subject peoples (Mazower, p. 586). While this thesis is compelling in many ways, Mazower does not really explain how Nazi rule in places such as Bohemia and Moravia, which he specifically cites as an example of "impor[ting] the colonial model to the continent" (Mazower, p. 587), represented a decisively different approach from that which past empires had used to rule over subject European nationalities. In fact, he likens the status of Czechs in the protectorate to Puerto Ricans in the United States.

These questions aside, Mazower's comparisons with other European empires are insightful, and it would have been interesting to see him explore further what role the westward expansion of the United States played in the Nazi imagination. Much of what Hitler and Himmler had in store for Russia and the Ukraine, for example, eerily resembles the fate that befell Native American peoples, even if technological and ideological means differed greatly. The author documents Hitler's interest in tales of the American frontier and his admiration for U.S. racial and eugenics laws; the Nazis often spoke of "Jewish reservations." Mazower might also have compared the Soviet approach to empire, but of course this book is already over six hundred pages long.

*Hitler's Empire* makes many worthwhile contributions. For example, it buries the outdated notion that there was such a thing as a homogeneous Nazi racial conception of "Slavs," a view that remains surprisingly resilient.[2] Perhaps most intriguingly, Mazower places the experience of Nazism on a continuum of long-term historical trends, thereby connecting the Third Reich to Otto von Bismarck's *Kaiserreich* and to the post-World War II Federal Republic. In macro-economic terms, Nazism and World War II did not constitute a historical break so much as an accelerator of developments that would eventually shape the postwar European order: cooperation in the coal and steel industries across international

borders; the German economy's dependence on foreign labor; and the westward orientation of ordinary Germans versus their disinterest in "the East." Some of the players who operated behind the scenes to help realize the European Economic Community in the 1950s had previously served the Nazis in various administrative posts or wartime planning circles.

In contrast to Mazower's wide historical lens, Richard Evans's *The Third Reich at War*, the last in a three-volume comprehensive history of Hitler's Germany under the Nazis, aims for greater depth within a chronologically and conceptually more limited scope.[3] Focused on giving a thorough, almost encyclopedic representation of Germany's—and Germans'—experiences during the years 1939–45, Evans does not consider the continuities of German and European history before or after the Nazi era to the same extent as Mazower. A social historian by training, he uses statistics and figures extensively, even too extensively at times (such as when he catalogues the number of paintings per artist in Hitler's personal collection). For the most part, the author integrates these figures into the narrative rather than using tables or graphs, and there are a number of informative maps. Evans also makes excellent use of published memoirs and diaries from a wide range of witnesses at many levels of the war experience, including the Polish doctor Zygmunt Klukowski; BDM (Bund Deutscher Mädel) functionary Melita Maschmann; a German student, Lore Walb; the German-Jewish academic and well-known diarist Viktor Klemperer; Wilm Hosenfeld, a Wehrmacht officer who rescued Jews; and Eastern Front general Gotthard Heinrici.

Evans is not arguing any particular thesis, nor overtly situating his work within the historiographical landscape; instead, he documents in narrative form Nazi Germany at war. For these reasons, many readers will find the book most suitable as a reference work. Teachers and undergraduates may appreciate Evans's concise and highly readable synopses of specific topics, such as the T-4 "Euthanasia" campaign (which includes a useful map) or Albert Speer's rationalization of the Reich's war economy. Although the book's sheer length and "Germanic" comprehensiveness make it anything but a quick read, and the reader's attention at times inevitably wavers, Evans provides plenty of "wake-up" moments. Some renditions of the violence and moral depravity making up the Holocaust, a subject so seemingly familiar, carry an almost unexpected gut-wrenching force. The sophisticated way he outlines the interplay between the prosecution of the war and the evolution of anti-Jewish policies,

particularly in chapter 3, is another real strength.

Critical notes include the author's many unusual translation choices, which draw undue attention to themselves. There may be a defensible intellectual decision behind eschewing "der Führer" and instead using "the leader." But why, for example, refer throughout to the well-known Nazi press organs as the *Stormer* and the *Racial Observer*, without ever giving their original titles? In the same vein, Evans writes of the *Roman Observer* and the ill-fated pocket battleship "Count Spee." Other curious translations include "racial comrade," "regional leader," and the innocuous-sounding "task force" or "task unit." Readers are left to guess that these stand for "Gauleiter," "Volksgenosse," and "Einsatzgruppe," respectively. True, even professional translators struggle with such terms and universally accepted English versions are not always available; the main problem here is Evans's consistent refusal even to mention the German originals.

Similarly questionable word choices, or simply errors, crop up throughout the text. He incorrectly gives both the chief of the Army General Staff, Franz Halder, and the head of military intelligence, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, a "von" (Evans, pp. 113, 631, 881); renames the Essen arms manufacturing dynasty "Krupps" (Evans, pp. 114, 156); and refers to Alexei Kosygin as "Andrei" (Evans, p. 196). Finally, it is simply untrue that "the Western Allies thought it unnecessary to fly in support" to the Slovak Uprising in 1944 (Evans, p. 654). In fact, the Americans flew in twenty-four tons of material from bases in Italy during September-October; after the revolt was suppressed, as many as fifteen captured members of the U.S. military mission were executed.[4] Even considering the great length and depth of this book, such errors occur too frequently.

Evans and, especially, Mazower have written valuable accounts of the Third Reich at war, and readers will find much that is rewarding in these volumes. Even the formidable skills of two internationally renowned historians writing at the peak of their powers, however, cannot bestow the status "must read" onto either of these books. There is simply too much that has been written, and continues to be written, on this most studied of subjects for Mazower's and Evans's works to be anything more than leading current efforts in an ever more crowded field. No doubt in ten—perhaps even five—years' time, the continuing evolution of scholarship on Nazism and the Holocaust will have inspired further revision and still newer syntheses.

#### Notes

[1]. Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), *The Balkans: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), and *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews 1430-1950* (London: Harper Collins, 2004).

[2]. Research articulating the differentiated Nazi views on, and practices toward, the Slavic-speaking nationalities has long been available. See for example John Connelly, "Nazis and Slavs: From Racial Theory to Racist Practice," *Central European History* 32 (1999): 1-33.

[3]. Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (London: The Penguin Press, 2003), and *The Third Reich in Power* (London: The Penguin Press, 2005).

[4]. The Slovak National Uprising Museum, *Exposition Guide* (Banska Bystrica: Adade, 2000), 54-55, 58-59; and Roland Schoenfeld, *Slowakei: Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2000), 149.

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**Citation:** Christof N. Morrissey. Review of Evans, Richard J., *The Third Reich at War* and Mazower, Mark, *Hitler's Empire: How the Nazis Ruled Europe*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2010.

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