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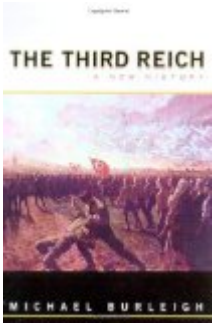

Michael Burleigh. *The Third Reich: A New History.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2000. xxv + 965 pp. $40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8090-9325-0.

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The Third Reich: A New "New History"

There is something about a book that announces itself as "a new history," which makes me slightly uncomfortable. For one, no "new history" is likely to remain as such for very long, least of all within the field the novelist Don DeLillo has mockingly dubbed "Hitler studies," due to our endless fascination with violence, devastation, and evil. Even as Michael Burleigh's new history of the Third Reich was rolling off the presses in 2000, to succeed Klaus Fischer's 1996 *Nazi Germany: A New History*, its days were numbered by the relentless cascade of National Socialist literature. This included, for instance, the second volume of Ian Kershaw's biography on Hitler a month later, in November 2000.

The other aspect of the title "a new history" I find discomfiting is its built-in hubris: to instantly designate all that came before as old, while not explaining what, exactly, makes it new. On this matter, and to Burleigh's great credit (if not his publisher's), there is an answer to be found on the book's jacket. In a painting by Richard Spitz (housed in a U.S. Army art collection), waves of Nazi brownshirts, their backs to the viewer, move toward a radiant, sun-like swastika rising out of a Teutonic castle on the far horizon. Everyone is gazing intently ahead, while in a clearing, in the center of the painting, a brownshirt breaks the fall of his fatally wounded comrade, whose right hand gestures reverently toward the golden swastika-sun. Nazi flags dot the landscape and the more visible faces in the foreground depict a Hitler Youth, a distinguished-looking older German, and a farmer (they are all males, incidentally). But the most symbolic element in the work appears in the sky, where resurrected spirits of wounded Nazi faithful stream towards the shimmering swastika-sun, amidst raging luminescent clouds and with right arms stretched forward less in a Hitler salute than superman-like flight. The scene (blandly entitled "Nazi Vision of Greatness") is religious to its very core. It is also the essence of Michael Burleigh's superlative new history of the Third Reich.

This history can be summarized as the story of what happens when politics and religion become one, and the principles of civilized society

such as the rules of law, individual rights, and humane values thereby fall to the wayside. This makes for, as Burleigh states in the Introduction, "a very twentieth-century story" (p. 1). Much like Mark Mazower's history of the twentieth century, ***Dark Continent***, Burleigh views Nazism and Soviet communism as a twin-pronged and near lethal assault on liberal democracy. Yet the darkness Burleigh uncovers in this exceedingly dark and depressing book goes beyond the threat these ideologies posed to government. The author revives 1950s and 1960s ideas about totalitarianism, which are "more indebted to a number of philosophers, political scientists and historians of culture and ideas than the general run of historians of this subject." By doing so, Burleigh seeks to move Nazi historiography away from its traditional methodological emphasis on political decision-making or the post-modern concept of politics as theater, and into the realm of faith (p. 3):

For no matter how much one rehashes this history with rationalistic categories and concepts, there is a missing element which only reference to unfulfilled religious needs can reconstitute. For what else was the Führer than a messiah? What else were chosen races, leading classes and vanguard parties than privileged vehicles of destiny? What else underlay the spuriously scientific belief that, once demonic class or race enemies had been overcome, mankind would enter into a state of perfection? What else was the "national community" than a reversion to times which knew no categorical separation of Church and state, and in which the one flowed effortlessly into the other?" (p. 210).

While there are many important (and to Burleigh's credit, well-acknowledged) precedents to this interpretation of Nazism as political religion, it is the "Movement's" blatant disregard for civilized values and humanitarian feeling that arouses the author's greatest indignation. In a chapter that takes its name from the threat made by a virulently anti-leftist judge against a communist defendant ("'Miss Becker, Your Head is at Stake, Your Head is Wobbling': The Demise of the Rule of Law"), Burleigh catalogues how law and order were debased into instruments of racial ideology and rubber stamps for whatever the regime determined to be in the interest of the "national community." Thus the July 3, 1934, Law Concerning Measures for the Defence of the State retroactively legalized the murders Hitler had personally ordered during the "Night of the Long Knives" (which inexplicably included General Kurt von Schleicher's wife). The legal system ceased protecting individuals once it began implementing the state's exclusionist racial policies, first by determining who could marry whom and defining crime as an illness, later by stripping Jews and "asocials" of their civil rights. In a book brimming with revulsion and disgust, as well as the inspired turns of phrase to capture it, Burleigh describes Himmler's infamous 1943 speech justifying genocide to senior SS officers in Posen as "a witches' whirly-gig of grotesque moral involution" (p. 661). (Himmler himself is derided as "a moralizing little creep" [p. 191].) Burleigh's ***Third Reich***, in short, has been stripped down to its bare truth, namely a criminal, amoral, and barbaric police state that left no legacy of any cultural or political value "except perhaps its contemporary function as a secular synonym for human evil" (p. 481).

It is in its fusion of pseudo-biological notions of race and purity with religious concepts of the perfectibility of man that Nazism reached its most depraved core. As the author of several well received works on Nazi race science, Burleigh is on solid ground in the sixty pages he devotes eugenics and "euthanasia," and in the nearly one hundred pages on the Holocaust, chapters which could stand alone as introductions to these vast topics. What makes these chapters, and the book in general, particularly rich and accessible are the numerous microhistories Burleigh recounts to illustrate his larger themes. In one memorable account, a girl named Elvira Hempel is classified as "anti-social" merely because she came from a bro-

ken family and, while committed to a children's home, "failed" the part of an intelligence test that involved arranging cards to depict a vase and flowers. Brought to a T-4 extermination center at Brandenburg prison, Elvira barely escaped murder when a man studying her file plucked her from the group of condemned children while she was in the process of undressing for the gas chamber. Elvira's younger sister Lisa, however, was not so fortunate. Nor was Albert Herzfeld, a haut-bourgeois painter, collector (of books, art, stamps, Rosenthal china, and pipes), friend of the disadvantaged, baptized Protestant, and decorated World War I veteran from a wealthy family of Jewish philanthropists in Düsseldorf. Living a life, as Burleigh states, "considerably more substantial than that of an Eichmann or a Heydrich," "Albert Israel" was gradually forced to surrender, in addition to his name, his officer's saber, club memberships, worldly possessions and, in Theresiendstadt, his life (p. 306).

The interpretative framework of Nazism as political religion inevitably informed the many choices Burleigh made concerning what to include or not include in his book. ***The Third Reich***, thus, has far more to say about the "nazified Passion Play" (p. 264) performed every November 9 to commemorate the "martyrs" of the 1923 Putsch than it does about the events of the Putsch itself, which are handled in a single short paragraph. (By contrast, Klaus Fischer devotes several pages to a meticulous account of the attempted coup.) Likewise, the reader learns a good deal about Göbbels' efforts to find the perfect martyr for the Nazi cause (he eventually settled on Horst Wessel), but little about the social, cultural and economic impacts of Nazism. For example, the Nazi campaign against degenerate art is barely examined, nor are the lives of ordinary Germans under the Third Reich given much attention.

While every scholar has to pick and choose, Burleigh periodically evinces a certain frustration with how historians fetishize over issues he sees as quite common within the broad spectrum of Western politics and history. Regarding Nazi propaganda during Weimar, for example, Burleigh writes: "Broadly speaking, [it] was a matter of saying 'Anything you can do, we can hijack and do better,' pretty much par for the course nowadays" (p. 120). Burleigh reminds readers that the Nazis' pro-natalist policies and moralizing attitudes on the family, prostitution, and homosexuality were common in interwar Europe. The "science" of eugenics was widespread in the United States, where no less than thirty- five states permitted sterilization of the mentally handicapped. Even in assessing that "explanatory master-key of Nazi rule, namely the mutually radicalizing effects of competing agencies," Burleigh sees the same kind of "multi-centred incoherence" in modern democratic governments (p. 156). What ultimately makes these issues interesting to Burleigh is not how scholars have analyzed (and re-analyzed) them, but the lawless, scientifically-corrupt, and religiously zealous ways in which they were pursued to their debased and deadly ends.

None of this is meant to imply that Burleigh brushes over important historical controversies. On the contrary, while critical of historians whose sole methodology is "the mere accumulation of archival 'facts,'" when the "fact of the Holocaust [...] breaks the bonds of whatever intellectual framework we variously impose upon it," the author uses his comprehensive understanding of Nazism to stake out a position on any number of signal issues (p. 811). In treating the intentionalist-functionalist debate over the origins of the Holocaust, for example, Burleigh plants himself firmly in the functionalist camp, detailing the "blockages and stoppages" that evolved into the murder of the Jews (though stressing that these "structural circumstances [...] were the deliberate product of individual human agency, not a species of ***deus ex machina***"). Other issues Burleigh weighs in on include the Goldhagen thesis (which he easily dismisses for its unrealistically narrow focus on anti-Semitism as the sole motivating

force for Nazi perpetrators) and the efficacy of the Allied bombing campaign (which he defends), just to name a few (p. 572, 581). Of particular note in this alternatingly vast and focused work is Burleigh's extensive coverage of the Holocaust in Romania (including a map in the book's frontmatter). Romania provides an important case study since the country ruthlessly massacred Jews in Moldavia, Bessarabia, North Bukovina, and Transnistria, but staunchly protected 300,000 Jews living in Romania proper.

Burleigh's new history of the Third Reich will most certainly not be the last history, for the questions it raises about indiscriminate violence, human depravity, and what Burleigh incisively calls "the universalization of ugliness," remain, unfortunately, far too pertinent in our world today (p. 481). Yet after reading this brilliant and sordid work one almost wishes that it were the last. For even the most hardened student of twentieth-century brutality and totalitarian mass murder cannot help but feel thoroughly sickened by the lawlessness that suffused Nazism's millenarian quest for human perfection. If there is any lesson here, it is that the "politics of faith" is invariably a politics of failure, and fatality. Or, as Burleigh so eloquently and decisively puts it: "There are no 'quick-fix' leaps to happiness, even assuming that that is a desirable objective, judging by the devastating human consequences of such enterprises in the twentieth century [...]. It is not an edifying story" (p. 812).

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