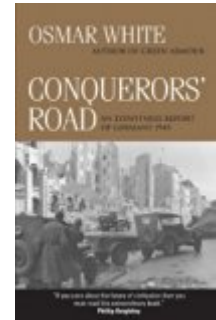


**Osmar White.** *Conquerors' Road: An Eyewitness Report of Germany 1945.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 240 pp. \$23.99, paper, ISBN 978-0-521-53751-3.



**Reviewed by** Joseph Robert White

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In *Conquerors' Road*, Australian war correspondent Osmar White supplies a "spectator's" perspective of World War II and Germany's first months of occupation (p. xvi). In the Southwestern Pacific and European Theaters, the author reported for the newspapers of Keith Murdoch, the father of controversial media mogul, Rupert Murdoch. White's Pacific reports form the basis of his first war memoir, *Green Armour* (1945). Critical of Allied jungle tactics, White urged the immediate adoption of camouflage in lieu of khaki uniforms, hence the title. His strongly worded statements delayed publication by nearly a year. Like his first offering, *Conquerors' Road* offers a blunt critique of Allied commanders and policies, which led Unwin Hyman and W. W. Norton ultimately to reject its publication in 1946. The author pigeonholed the manuscript until 1983, when he began to revise it. Following his death, HarperCollins, a division of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, published *Conquerors' Road* in 1996. The inclusion of lengthy excerpts from the 1945 manuscript and a selection of wartime dispatches indicate that the 1983 revisions were more cosmetic than substantive. White's scrupulous refusal to comment upon

events taking place after he left Germany makes this memoir especially valuable.[1]

Writing for the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* and the Melbourne *Herald*, White covered the advance of General George Patton's Third Army into Germany. Eschewing Patton's boorishness, White nevertheless conceded that "it was distasteful to admit that the man's genius as a commander in the field overshadowed that of his fellow generals" (p. 35). For the press corps, Third Army's speedy advance necessitated a two hundred-mile drive for filing dispatches. The absence of guerrilla activity along Third Army's line of communications led him to the problematic conclusion that the "Germans' unquestioning obedience to authority" made them ineffective partisans (p. 49). But as historian Perry Biddiscombe has recently demonstrated, small-scale *Werwolf* attacks occurred not only during the invasion of Germany but for two more years in the Soviet Zone.[2]

The author visited Buchenwald shortly after its liberation. Initially skeptical about reports of Nazi torture chambers, his view quickly changed after visiting the camp hospital and the abattoirs

where many thousands were murdered. His account dovetails closely with well-known camp survivors' reports. His Brisbane *Courier-Mail* article, filed five days after liberation, closely followed the journalistic conventions outlined by historian Barbie Zelizer, with a meticulous description of suffering and lengthy interviews of prominent detainees. But White's account ended with the following departure from the conventional: "only God is powerful enough to exact spiritual reparation for what has happened in such camps as Buchenwald" (p. 191).[3]

In the week before Buchenwald's liberation, U.S. Army Colonel Hayden Sears ordered Ohrdruf's population to review the decaying corpses in the neighboring camp. Similar spectacles took place once U.S. troops reached Buchenwald. In reaction, German civilians took refuge in the relativization of others' suffering and self-pity, by dwelling on the victims of Allied bombing and European colonialism. White neglected to mention, however, that he was reporting these events out of order. The Allies entered Ohrdruf on April 6 and only liberated Buchenwald six days later. A lay reader could be forgiven for reversing the sequence of liberation. As Zelizer has noted, the practice of using representative incidents or images led journalists to take atrocities out of context, which rendered interchangeable scenes of Ohrdruf and Buchenwald. White's admission, "I already knew, of course. Anybody who could read knew what a concentration camp was like," reminds us that prewar accounts often colored press reports of liberation (p. 77).[4]

After witnessing the surrender at Rheims on May 7, 1945, the author remained in Germany during the first six months of occupation. He had occasion to gather the details about brutal Allied behavior towards German women. U.S. troops' attitudes towards German goods and German women disturbed him, as both were seen early on as spoils of war. In the segregationist U.S. Army, white soldiers raped German women with im-

punity, while African Americans faced court-martial for the same allegations. Initially dismissing as propaganda German accusations of rape against Soviet troops, he revised this view after interviewing credible witnesses. His testimony supplements recent works on the behavior of Soviet troops in Germany.[5]

Crediting the Soviets with restoring some measure of normality to Berlin, White favorably contrasted their pragmatism with flawed U.S. policies. Unlike the Americans, the Red Army arrested major Nazi offenders and left the smaller fish to the difficult task of reviving local administration. To the author, U.S. policies of nonfraternization and indiscriminate denazification compounded the burdens of defeat for the vanquished and bred resentment against the victors. The nonfraternization order, he noted, proved to be unenforceable and "was eased quietly into limbo" (p. 146). In the unrevised 1945 manuscript, White accused the U.S. occupation authorities of incompetence: "Of all the occupying Powers, the Americans showed themselves the most inept at the business of governing a conquered country. They maintained little or no continuity of policy....They did not, indeed, make up their minds about anything except the 'superiority' of their own intentions" (p. 209). This quotation gives an idea of why two publishing houses concluded that his manuscript was a hot potato. Disgusted with what he had seen of the Nuremberg Trial preparations, he did not stay in Europe long enough to witness the modification or official abandonment of the nonfraternization and denazification policies.

The book's last section consists of White's musings on Germany. As an example of the alleged German national characteristic of obedience to authority, he described armed German POWs marching under German guard to a U.S. POW camp at Tegernsee (p. 151). While not immune to stereotyping, as when he described the Germans' having "an instinct to obey orders by those in power," he rejected the view that Nation-

al Socialism was Prussian militarism's latest guise (p. 150). Under the right set of circumstances, he concluded, fascism could have triumphed elsewhere.

White's most questionable judgments concern the Nuremberg Trials. His prediction that "the 'trials' could have no more moral or judicial status than any trial by kangaroo court in the backwoods of Tennessee" has not stood the test of time. Acknowledging that the trials would "expose the depravity of Nazi motives," he firmly rejected the possibility that they had deterrence value (p. 176). Rather than lessen the value of jurisprudence through proceedings based upon *ex post facto* law, he would have preferred to shoot the leading Nazis on site.[6]

This memoir has valuable insights for German historians, military historians, and policy-makers. In a time when the United States occupation of Iraq dominates the headlines, this thoughtful volume reminds us that even under circumstances overwhelmingly favorable to the Allies, the democratization of Germany was no easy matter. Thus the memoir suggests troubling implications for the current U.S. occupation of Iraq.

#### Notes

[1]. *Green Armour* (Sydney and London: Angus and Robertson, 1945), pp. 1-2, 134-135, 167, 180-181, 189, 233. The appendices to *Conquerors' Road* include the 1945 introduction; an April 18, 1945 Buchenwald dispatch, a perceptive fragment from 1945 concerning slave labor; a Melbourne *Herald* article on the Czech expulsion of Sudeten Germans; a stern critique from 1945 of Allied (especially U.S.) occupation removed in 1983; and the 1945 conclusions, formulated as a dialogue on the causes of the war, the tribulations of occupation, the occupiers' interests in Germany, and the need to make international law applicable for all nations.

[2]. *Werwolf! The History of the National Socialist Guerrilla Movement, 1944-1946* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

[3]. David A. Hackett, *The Buchenwald Report* (Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1995); Eugen Kogon, *The Theory and Practice of Hell*, trans. Heinz Norden (New York: Berkley Books, 1980, first published 1950); Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 64-85.

[4]. Zelizer, pp. 80, 92, 98, 100, 117-118, 120.

[5]. On U.S. troops, see the recent contribution by Petra Goedde, *GIs and Germans: Culture, Gender, and Foreign Relations, 1945-1949* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 84-86; see H-German review by Maria Hoehn at <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=103561067481200>; Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (New York and London: Viking Penguin, 2002); see H-German review by Bianka J. Adams at <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=253651068096698>. The most scholarly account of Soviet rape and its effects upon the occupation is Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), Chap. 2; see H-German review by Steven Remy at <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=12108851401777>.

[6]. Wilbourn E. Benton and Georg Grimm, eds., *Nuremberg: German Views of the Trials* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1955). A helpful survey of the Allied proceedings is Gerd R. Ueberschaer and Rainer A. Blasius, eds., *Der Nationalsozialismus vor Gericht: Die alliierten Prozesse gegen Kriegsverbrechen und Soldaten 1943-1952* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999).

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