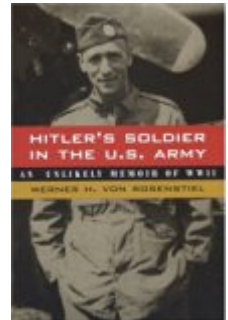


**Werner H. von Rosenstiel.** *Hitler's Soldier in the U.S. Army: An Unlikely Memoir of WWII.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. xxi + 294 pp. \$22.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-8173-5288-2.



**Reviewed by** Bianka Adams

**Published on** H-German (November, 2006)

Werner von Rosenstiel's memoir is not an unlikely one at all.[1] On the contrary, his experiences as a German "enemy alien" living in the United States during World War II were quite typical. He left his homeland under a pretense and arrived in the United States with no intention to return. To avoid deportation and gain permanent resident status and a work permit, he married his college girlfriend, an American citizen. As expected, the authorities noticed and tried to prove that he was a spy. They put him on trial and failed. Aliens from other European countries, most notably Italians, shared similar fates. Of course, Japanese and Japanese-Americans fared the worst, not even being afforded the luxury of a trial. Furious after the attack on Pearl Harbor and deeply xenophobic, the U.S. government lashed out against persons of Japanese ancestry. Declaring them dangerous to the nation's security, it ordered over 100,000 removed from their homes along the West Coast and relocated to specially constructed internment camps farther inland. Today, the United States is at war again. The catalyst for this war was once again a devastating attack on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001, perpetrated by nineteen Mid-

dle Easterners, all Muslims, all Arabs. While the U.S. government refrained from drastic actions similar to those taken in World War II and has even appealed to its citizens not to see a terrorist in every Arab or Muslim, the feeling of unease remains. In this sense, von Rosenstiel's memoirs speak to and express the feelings, anxieties, frustrations and hopes of persons throughout history caught on the "wrong" side of a war.

The title of the book is not, however, entirely an editor's gimmick. In September and October 1938, von Rosenstiel indeed served in the German Army and received military training, which made him Hitler's soldier. During a year as an exchange student at the University of Cincinnati, he reached proficiency in the English language and gained extensive knowledge of the United States. Both made him a valuable asset to the regime. It was also this language facility that provided him with a plausible reason for taking a refresher trip to America before assuming his position in the bureaucracy. The regime allowed him to go because, as a graduate of the legal faculty of one of Germany's most prestigious universities he could look

ahead to a bright and secure future in Hitler's Germany; thus, he was seen as an unlikely emigrant.[2]

Von Rosenstiel arrived in the United States for the second time on April 1, 1939. About four months later, he married his American college sweetheart, which gave him the right to stay. Before he was inducted into the U.S. Army in March 1943, he took English classes, worked for a German-owned company and attended law school in New York City. Soon after Japan attacked the United States in December 1941, the FBI stepped up its investigation of von Rosenstiel, finally calling him before the Enemy Alien Hearing board in December 1942. At his trial, he convinced the judge to release him based on a letter he wrote to his future wife from Berlin after the 1938 *Kristallnacht* pogrom condemning the Nazis' actions.

Von Rosenstiel's memoir covers his two-and-a-half years of service in the U.S. Army. In eleven chapters, he takes his readers from basic training through his active involvement in the preparations for the prosecution of leading Nazis by the International War Crimes Tribunal in Nuremberg at the end of 1945. His two longest, most important chapters deal with the army's method of vetting foreigners and other suspicious individuals at Fort Indiantown Gap Military Reservation near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and his work for the U.S. prosecutor's office.

After finishing basic training, von Rosenstiel received orders to report to the 1576th Service Unit at Fort Indiantown Gap. What he and his fellow recruits did not initially realize was that they had been assigned to the "Foreign Legion," the Army's special unit for observing suspected soldiers' allegiances. Here von Rosenstiel spent one long summer doing Kitchen Police tasks, pulling senseless guard duty and perfecting the art of working at the slowest pace possible on a work detail building a road that led nowhere. The intense boredom and the constant fear of denunciation by a "stool pigeon" placed in the unit to spot

enemies of the state stood out in his memory. Nevertheless, he succeeded in fighting the growing demoralization that had taken hold of many of the men and was finally released to be sent overseas and fight against Germany in the real U.S. Army.

By war's end, the Army recognized and needed von Rosenstiel's unique qualifications as a lawyer with degrees from both American and German universities. Field promoted to Lieutenant Second Grade, he was first put to work to sort out the files of the Reichsjustizministerium and later translated crucial eyewitness testimony that helped convict Nazi leaders. His ability to converse with the natives not only made him a sought-after translator in interrogations of the likes of Hermann Göring, but also allowed him to gain the trust of the vanquished, who did not know what to expect in the way of justice from the victors. In one incident, von Rosenstiel drove out to a farm to take the testimony of a woman whose sixty-seven-year-old husband had been killed by a drunken American soldier. He treated the woman and her daughter with dignity and kindness, making sure that they received a fair hearing and that the soldier was punished. In a society reduced to rubble, rumors replaced the missing daily newspapers, feeding people's anxieties about an uncertain future. Von Rosenstiel's acts of decency were a ray of hope in the darkness after the collapse. Even though he might not have realized it at the time, he was changing German society, one case at a time.

While it is true that von Rosenstiel's autobiography is exceptional in many respects, it also has a lot in common with life stories of other immigrants who came to the United States from the wrong country (Nazi Germany) at the wrong time (the eve of World War II). Today, the "wrong country" is wherever the latest batch of terrorists was born, raised and educated, and the "wrong religion" has been added to the list. As was the case with von Rosenstiel and his contemporaries, im-

migrants who fit certain profiles might have a hard time convincing the authorities that they are not guilty by association but rather can be valuable assets, if given a chance to prove it.

Von Rosenstiel's memoirs remind us not to judge a book by its cover, or a person by her hijab. His is a very American tale about how it is important who you are and what you make of yourself in this land—not where you were born and what some of your countrymen perpetrated. Best of all, it is a good read.

#### Notes

[1]. The views expressed in this review are solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect official positions or the views of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency or the Department of Defense. The book was first published under the title *Tales of an American Soldier* by Xlibris Corporation in 2001 as the fifth book of an eight-volume memoir.

[2]. For more details about his childhood and early adult years in Germany, see Von Rosenstiel, Werner. Interview by Dr. Georg Kleine. 6 August 1996, at [http://www.lib.usf.edu/ldsui/index2.html?f=search-full-record&idx=0&collectionidid=U11.spcnew299&resultsdisplay\\_mode=textual](http://www.lib.usf.edu/ldsui/index2.html?f=search-full-record&idx=0&collectionidid=U11.spcnew299&resultsdisplay_mode=textual).

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**Citation:** Bianka Adams. Review of von Rosenstiel, Werner H. *Hitler's Soldier in the U.S. Army: An Unlikely Memoir of WWII*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 2006.

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