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Nicholas Stargardt’s *The German War: A Nation under Arms, 1939-1945* is military history at its best—original, well written, and well researched, and a virtual page-turner. It challenges the reader's preconceived notions while providing fresh and insightful perspectives. In *The German War*, the author describes the impacts of the pivotal events of the Second World War on the German home front, adding much insight to one's understanding of this unique perspective. While others have covered some of the same ground as Stargardt—Ian Kershaw’s incisive *The End: The Defiance and Destruction of Hitler’s Germany, 1944-1945* (2011) comes to mind—his scope is unique in that he spans the war’s entirety, providing a six-year perspective incorporating first-person narratives from a cross-section of German society.

Stargardt masterfully chronicles Germany’s “descent into anarchy,” to borrow a term applied by Keith Lowe in his excellent *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (2012), which includes Germany in its European-wide scope.[1] Arranging his work chronologically into six parts, the author begins with “Defending the Attack” and ends with “Total Defeat,” encompassing the ebb and flow of German war fortunes and their corresponding impact on the German home front. While Stargardt provides ample historical context, his main purpose in *The German War* is to chart the perceptions and reactions of “ordinary” Germans during the course of the war, ranging from the initial euphoria of Germany's lightning-quick early victories to the uncertainty and shock of the Russian Campaign, and finally to the fear and despair of the Allied approach to Germany proper.

An obvious strength of *The German War* is the perspective provided by Stargardt’s letter writers and diary keepers, which amply illustrate the author’s concepts and observations. These include a cross-section of participants, including frontline soldiers and officers, ordinary citizens, and even a Jewish scholar and World War I veteran who survived the entire war while living in Germany proper. He also includes viewpoints...
from SS officers, such as Wilm Hosenfeld, who at great risk hid renowned Polish pianist Władysław Szpilman during the battle for Warsaw (a story made known to the public by the movie *The Pianist* [2002]). Stargardt tracks these letter writers and diary keepers over time, so that patterns of attitude changes and social adjustment emerge. Thus, *The German War* is as much social history as it is military history.

The book can be intensely personal at times. While the events of the war provide backdrop, Stargardt’s focus is on how the war affected Germans in their daily lives. To this end, he effectively portrays how they thought and felt about a range of issues—important as well as mundane—as detailed in their correspondence and memoirs. Thus, the reader is drawn into critical insights into their feelings regarding interpersonal relationships, love of country, faith in the Adolf Hitler regime, intergenerational issues, and life after the war. As the conflict ran its course, Germans reacted to a plethora of events—increasingly negative—including food rationing, bombings and evacuations, surveillance, and interrogations, as well as the eventual mass mobilization of men, women, and children to the war effort. Remarkably, the home front never collapsed—a point driven home by Stargardt’s excellent analysis. This resilience is also evident in the letters and memoirs of the author’s subjects.

Another noteworthy aspect of *The German War* is how Stargardt deftly compares these first-person accounts with another set of disparate “barometers” of German will and morale, including Hitler himself; Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels; American war correspondent and author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1960) William L. Shirer; and the ubiquitous and notorious Nazi intelligence apparatus, the SD—or Sicherheitsdienst. The latter unfailingly reported on the morale of the German people until March 1945, when the Third Reich was approaching its demise. The “battle for the narrative” is also evident in each chapter as Goebbels spun his official view of events, however distant from reality, while ordinary citizens, starved for news, thrived on gossip and rumor. As German war fortunes declined, Goebbels’s version of the truth contrasted sharply with the news from the front that German citizens received from their relatives and loved ones. Consequently, they looked to other sources for news, particularly the BBC, even at the risk of punishment by the Gestapo. Indeed, the battle for the narrative between official sources and the German public is a constant theme in *The German War*, and underpins the entire work.

Another strong point is Stargardt’s case that knowledge of what would be later known as the Holocaust was widespread within the home front by the summer and autumn of 1941. By that time, he argues, German atrocities on the eastern front involved hundreds of thousands of participants, eyewitnesses, and passersby. While some addressed these mass executions openly in letters, others either referred to them euphemistically or kept their thoughts private in diaries. As German war fortunes declined, Goebbels’s version of the truth contrasted sharply with the news from the front that German citizens received from their relatives and loved ones. Consequently, they looked to other sources for news, particularly the BBC, even at the risk of punishment by the Gestapo. Indeed, the battle for the narrative between official sources and the German public is a constant theme in *The German War*, and underpins the entire work.

Finally, Stargardt shows that neither the Nazi Party nor its organizations were necessarily monolithic in their dealing with the German populace, and that even Hitler and Goebbels backed off if they anticipated a strong negative reaction
on a particularly policy from the German public. Additionally, the German people were neither uniformly for nor against Hitler, the Nazi Party, or its associated organizations. Indeed, there was a complex interplay among these institutions, the German people, and such nonparty institutions as the German Protestant and Catholic Churches and governmental bureaucracies. Thus, it is impossible to categorize uniformly attitudes and perceptions among such a wide and disparate number of actors. Stargardt reminds us of the folly of overgeneralization, even when considering a regime as heinous as the Third Reich.

Any criticisms of the book are minor at most. The author includes a number of useful maps at the front of the text but never refers to them in the body of the text. Doing so would have helped the reader with chronological and geographical context. Additionally, the author refers to Hitler’s prophecy of 1939 regarding the demise of Jewry multiple times throughout the text, perhaps repetitiously so. Finally, at times it is difficult to track the many voices Stargardt employs in relating his narrative, even with the effective dramatis personae at the front of the book. These nitpicks, however, are scarcely worth mentioning and in no way detract from the book’s overwhelmingly positive impact.

_The German War_ is an impressive work that offers as much to the specialist as it does to the general reader. It is a tour de force and provides a tremendous basis upon which to discern how the German public reacted to the war and how it underwent a social transformation during the six years of conflict. The book provides great insight to those who may have a more monolithic view of Nazi institutions and the German public and their roles during the Second World War. It is very well researched, articulately written, and highly recommended.

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