

Walter Kempowski. *Swansong 1945: A Collective Diary of the Last Days of the Third Reich*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015. 512 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-393-24815-9.

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Many works of military history rely on first-person accounts to add depth, realism, and emphasis to contextual prose. Certainly this is the case with recent works such as Keith Lowe's excellent *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (2013), or Nicholas Stargardt's insightful and comprehensive *The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939-1945* (2015), both of which encompass the same time period as the subject of this review. What distinguishes Walter Kempowski's *Swan Song 1945: A Collective Diary of the Last Days of the Third Reich*, however, is that it consists entirely of such accounts without an accompanying prose narrative. Unique in its composition, *Swan Song 1945* provides a devastating eyewitness account of four crucial days in 1945, as seen through the eyes of those who experienced them.

Swansong 1945 is not a typical historical work but a compilation of hundreds of first-person accounts taken from diaries, letters, log entries, and other primary sources that represent the insights and observations of participants. The collection, recently translated into English, is actually part of a much more massive effort that was the crowning achievement of German writer Walter Kempowski. The author, who died in 2007, was renowned for his efforts to chronicle wartime experiences across Europe in the participants'

own words. *Swansong 1945* thus contributes to a broader collection known as *Das Echolot* (Echo soundings), which culminates Walter Kempowski's remarkable lifetime work.

The author's design is simple yet elegant. He organizes hundreds of entries into four sections by date—April 20, 25 and 30, and May 8-9. Each of these corresponds to a major event in the European war—Adolf Hitler's fifty-sixth birthday, the linkup of US and Russian allies on Germany's Elbe River, Hitler's suicide, and the declaration of VE Day. Each of the entries was written on or near the exact date of each event, so that the reader can discern trends and patterns within each section as well as between them. Collectively, the personal accounts demonstrate remarkable depth and breadth while capturing the collective experiences of participants from a variety of unique perspectives.

Even without an overarching narrative, Kempowski's artistry shines through in the way he composes each section of the book. For the most part, the author starts with pieces that help set the strategic context. He skillfully arranges diary, journal, or log entries from easily recognizable political or military figures on both sides of the conflict. For the Allies, these include national leaders such as Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, and Charles De Gaulle and military

luminaries such as Dwight Eisenhower, Bernard Montgomery, and Georgy Zhukov. For the Axis, the German and Italian leadership figures prominently, especially Adolph Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and most of the top Nazis. (The Japanese perspective is largely absent due to the book's European focus). The author then follows with perspectives from a rich variety of sources—combat troops, civic leaders, journalists, writers, artists, ordinary citizens including women and young people, and prisoners of all types. Thus, Kempowski compiles insights spanning all levels of war, multiple countries, and national as well as individual perspectives. Collectively, the four sections represent a rich tapestry of experiences and observations that helps explain the culminating events of World War II in the European theater.

The author concludes each section with excerpts from a poem by the German lyric poet Friedrich Holderlin, all of which deal with the eternal hope of spring. Despite the horrors of war, each of these selections has an optimistic tone, which at times contrasts sharply with views expressed in many of the first-person accounts that precede it. Kempowski's use of Holderlin is unique; his verses are not part of the eyewitness observations that comprise each section but provide a brief respite between them. A sample of Holderlin's poetry concludes the fourth section of the book on a positive note: "Man's activity begins with a new goal, Such are the signs of the world, of its many wonders" (p. 427).

It is difficult to encapsulate a book that consists of hundreds of short, separate entries linked only by date. To begin with, *Swan Song 1945*, as the title indicates, documents the death throes of the Third Reich. Thus, Europe is devastated by war, Berlin is under siege, and by the time of the first entry—April 20, 1945—the Reich has only eighteen days left in its presumed "thousand year" existence. For the eventual victors, there is a sense of excitement and anticipation as the Allies close the noose around a desperate yet deter-

mined enemy. The world anticipates the prospects of peace while at the same time is numbed by the horrors the Allies uncover as they liberate hundreds of concentration camps in Poland and Germany. For the Reich civilians, there is an abject sense of dread, especially among those in the direct path of the Russian juggernaut. All of Europe seems to be on the move, and as the war winds down hundreds of thousands are clogging the roads—refugees, displaced persons of all kinds, prisoners of wars, freed slave laborers. Those liberated by the Allies are trying desperately to return home, while others are simply fleeing from the horrors of war to anywhere resembling tranquility. Desperation, hope, relief—these are all themes that pervade Kempowski's haunting collection of memoirs, in the exact words of those who lived through the European war.

Within the broad context outlined above, each section has its own unique voice. For example, those voices recorded in the first section—April 20, 1945—reflect a decidedly mixed reaction to the Fuhrer's fifty-sixth birthday. Even Hitler's right-hand man, Field Marshal Keitel, observes, "When I found myself facing the Fuhrer, I wasn't capable of giving him birthday wishes" (p. 33). Kempowski captures the renowned link-up of American and Russian allies on April 25 in the words of an American lieutenant approaching the German village of Leckwitz: "There—amid a ragged crowd of displaced persons—sat a Russian soldier on a horse.... The soldier was a cavalryman. He was quiet, reserved, unenthusiastic" (p. 103). That inauspicious start marked the beginning of one of the war's most iconic and celebrated events.

Observations from Hitler's personal staff dominate the third section marking his death by suicide on April 30, 1945. While many know this story, Kempowski contributes to our understanding by the grim and detailed passages from a wide swath of witnesses and observers. To illustrate, a telephonist in the Hitler's bunker observes: "He

looked broken, burnt-out, lost. We had realized long ago that he had no choice but to kill himself” (p. 214). Hitler himself writes, in the hours just preceding his death: “I myself and my wife—in order to escape the disgrace of deposition or capitulation—choose death” (p. 294). The final section underscores the separate VE Days marked by the Western allies and the Russians, on May 8-9, 1945, respectively. While jubilation and relief across Europe is a dominant theme, Kempowski includes a remarkable passage (and the single longest in the book) from a British sergeant, detailed as an interpreter, who delivers the Allied surrender document to the German high command. His account is but one of hundreds of unique passages compiled by Kempowski in *Swansong 1945*.

The book is not without potential shortcomings. For one, it is not an easy read and one should not tackle it all at once. Since it requires the reader to change perspective constantly and is without connective prose, the book takes concentration and focus. Perhaps the best way to approach it is one day at a time—that is, to read it in its constituent sections. While Kempowski provides a useful *dramatis personae* to assist the reader in assessing the first-person narratives, it is still a daunting task and requires a labor of love, much like Kempowski’s. Readers may not be familiar with the many references made in the book to people, places, things, or events due to a lack of context. These are minor annoyances at worst, however, and in no way detract from the overall impact of the author’s impressive work.

In essence, *Swansong 1945* is a treasure trove of unique observations and insights that adds tremendous depth and nuance to an understanding of the horrors of the Second World War, as seen through the eyes of its European participants. It constitutes a remarkable yet devastating record that cannot be ignored, and serves as a constant reminder of the powerful forces that helped shape modern-day Europe. Walter Kempowski’s remarkable achievement is well worth

consideration, and is highly recommended to students and professionals alike.

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