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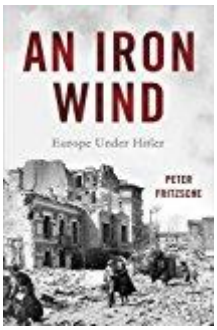
Peter Fritzsche. *An Iron Wind: Europe under Hitler.* New York: Basic Books, 2016. 356 pp. $29.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-05774-0.



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An Iron Wind: Europe under Hitler focuses on contemporary perceptions of events during the Second World War in Europe. Aside from a focus on German perpetrators, it builds a comparative arch grounded in Paris and Warsaw with a window on Swiss opinions, exemplified by the accounts of a Swiss medical mission to the eastern front in the last months of 1941. Peter Fritzsche's book aims to show how civilians, and sometimes soldiers, interpreted the chaotic events of 1939-45.

Fritzsche plausibly justifies the foregrounding of civilians by pointing out that the German war represented an unprecedented assault on civilians. He argues that Europeans focused above all on their own problems, with little empathy for the fate of others. Often, civilians in occupied countries even felt as if their survival depended on the death of others. This created a wall between the national group and outsiders, especially the Jews, whose exclusion from the national community by the Germans encountered little opposition.

Fritzsche first explores the conditions of wartime talk in trains, families, and neighborhoods, evaluating creative efforts to make sense of rumors, images, and propaganda. In the next chapter, Fritzsche examines the perceptions of a gathering storm before 1939. He points out that most western Europeans feared an aero-chemical war most, with cities obliterated by bombs and civilians poisoned by gas. Nobody seemed to appreciate the actual imperialist and genocidal war Germany was preparing. Having read Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), many westerners believed that Germans shared this novel's compelling antiwar sentiment. Fritzsche remains a bit vague about the mood in Germany, however. Undoubtedly, Germans read other authors than Remarque, too, including works that advocated a new war. But Fritzsche, while acknowledging German antiwar sentiments at the time of the Munich conference (September 30, 1938), leaves it open whether they had changed significantly eleven months later.

The following chapter depicts European reactions to the German Blitzkrieg victories in 1939 and 1940, detailing the violence and destruction they brought and reflecting on the implications of the stunning German victory in the West in 1940. The chapter's strength rests on its appreciation of the openness of the future at a time when it did really appear as if Nazi Germany had won. The chapter provides background on discussions in Switzerland about the future of a small state and a democracy in a sea of authoritarian states. Fritzsche, following Swiss historians, shows that the line between adaptation and resistance was porous.

In a chapter entitled "Living with the Germans," Fritzsche turns to the mood in occupied Paris and Warsaw. The chapter draws from many already canonical texts from occupied France that contemplate the difference between good and bad Germans and search for a proper attitude toward the occupier. Fritzsche underlines the difference between the German occupation in France and in Poland, where the brutality of Germany's ethnic warfare left little room for distinctions between good and bad Germans. In a rare discussion of the Swiss medical mission to the eastern front, moreover, Fritzsche zooms in on dialogues between German soldiers and medical personnel and Swiss volunteers who became witnesses of the extreme German brutality against civilians and POWs in the Soviet Union and Poland in the fall of 1941. Fritzsche describes an increasing gap between the hardening Germans and their more empathic Swiss "cousins."

The central chapter of the book, "The Fate of the Jews," goes to the heart of the matter, the German racial war on the Jews. Fritzsche follows the line of argument of Jeffrey Herf's book ***The Jewish Enemy*** (2006), namely that "the Jew" constituted the core image of Germany's enemies and that the Nazi regime conceived of the war ultimately as a struggle in which the life of Germany depended on the death of "the Jew." Fritzsche notes a consistent empathy blockage in the relation of non-Jews to Jews, with few exceptions. The chapter criticizes the attitude of many Polish nationalists who resented the Jews for their alleged passivity and sometimes even expressed satisfaction at the disappearance of the Jews, while taking over (like Germans) the possessions and apartments of murdered Jews. In France, too, the Jews were excluded from the national narrative of suffering and resistance despite some expressions of empathy.

The reflections on the fate of the Jews directly lead to the next chapter, which contemplates the impact of the horrific events on religion. The efforts of Jews to integrate their experiences into existing theological formulas failed. The present horror just did not fit any precedent. As a consequence, some Jews turned away from God, but others arrived at a new understanding of God as a fellow sufferer in need of help. A short look into the "God of the Germans" focuses on two circles of German Protestants in the army (officers and theology students), highlighting the ambivalences of their attempts to reconcile their religious commitment with the war. Fritzsche is critical of their tendency to interpret the war simply as a great unleashing of violence in which everybody ultimately is a victim because it denies empathy to the real victims of Nazism. The book culminates in a chapter entitled "The Destruction of Humanity," which contemplates the selfishness and depravation of many wartime societies. Again, the focus is on France and Poland, and the chapter includes a critical assessment of tensions and animosities within the Jewish ghettos.

An Iron Wind concludes with new reflections on words and on documenting the atrocious present of 1939-45. Fritzsche argues that perpetrators were quite vocal about the atrocities they committed, describing, photographing, and filming them in anticipation of a heroic history to be written after the war, although they were never sure whether the German public, even after a final

victory, would be ready to listen and accept the documentation. By contrast, Jews desperately wrote in an effort to document their unprecedented suffering, not knowing whether anybody would ever care to read their texts. Meanwhile, the non-Jewish patriotic narratives of the occupied countries excluded the fate of the Jews and narrowed down the experience of the occupied peoples as one of heroic resistance. The erasure or marginalization of the fate of the Jews made such a narrative easier by relegating collaboration to the margins. In the case of Poland and Czechoslovakia, the patriotic narrative also excluded the prewar ethnic German and other minorities from their future.

An Iron Wind is a touching and passionate book. One of its strengths is that it evokes the confusion and desperation of many Europeans in the face of the unprecedentedly destructive Nazi war on people. It sheds a fascinating light on Europeans reading classics at the time, contemplating, for example, the German campaign against the Soviet Union in the light of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869), which, like all other templates, ultimately obscured as much as it revealed about the atrocious present. Fritzsche's book is a powerful reflection and analysis of this effort to make sense of an unprecedented evil that ultimately questioned the survival of mankind.

One issue remains unresolved. For example, while Fritzsche correctly emphasizes the obsessive German determination that the "stab in the back" of 1918 (the November revolution that many Germans mistakenly blamed for the defeat) must never be repeated, he does not elaborate on the notion of Germans that 1918 very nearly destroyed the existence of Germany. True, some Germans argued that the Treaty of Versailles nearly strangled the German nation; but, clearly, it was possible to overcome and destroy the limits of Versailles. My sense is that the German notion of "never again" with respect to 1918 refers to the experience that the enormous losses of World War I had been in vain. As the German casualties increased in 1941 with the invasion of the Soviet Union, it seemed unthinkable to again end up losing a world war. The big unfinished question from the First World War in Germany was how to make sense of, and give meaning to, the millions of German dead in 1914-18.

Within the book, there are some moral judgments, and I sometimes felt that the criticism was a bit harsh. For example, Polish relations with Jews are described with a focus on Poles as anti-Semites, marginalizing the heroism of many individuals who helped Jews. Similarly, I felt that the depiction of Germans sometimes generalizes them too much into cynical perpetrators deserving of the fate that ultimately befell them. After all, the bombings of German towns killed rather few perpetrators but countless civilians, including children, prisoners of war, and foreign laborers. A consideration of religion in wartime Germany would need to address a wider variety of sources, and it would have to include the Christians of both confessions who protested the murder of the Jews. The reflections on the religious German soldiers criticize them for seeing themselves as victims and not as perpetrators, but is this not a tendency of all soldier narratives? We know that the soldier memory of World War I similarly focused on victimization and largely erased the fact that soldiers kill people (and sometimes enjoy it).[1] On a larger scale, is it surprising that empathy in such difficult times focused on the most immediate circles of family and kinship?

Among the few smaller problems I see is the imprecise use of the term "Allies" and "Allied." For example the *New York Times* is presented as "Allied" opinion at a time when the United States had not entered the war, and it appears occasionally as if "Allies" means only Britain and the United States, not the Soviet Union. Moreover, some of the reflections on the position of Swiss nationals could have included more information on the people involved in the contacts with the Germans.

For example, Ulrich Wille, the rival of Swiss commander in chief General Henri Guisan, not only expressed sympathies for German nationalism but also was a friend of Rudolf Hess and had arranged a fundraiser for Hitler in Zürich in August 1923.[2] The chief of the Swiss medical mission, Eugen Bircher, also had a quite radical right-wing past as an organizer of anti-leftist home guards and a fellow traveller of the Swiss fascist movement. I also wondered about the significance of the alienation of the Swiss provoked by their observations of extreme German brutality. Germans witnessing Ustasha atrocities against Serbs in Croatian-annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, often expressed similar shock and outrage. It is always hard to justify one's own massacres to outsiders.

The book is by necessity selective. The subtitle "Europe under Hitler" applies mostly to France and Poland. The book's emphasis on wartime writing privileges the perspective of the educated. But these limitations are understandable in the interest of space, and the comparative axis France-Poland is important and perhaps even paradigmatic because it exemplifies the fundamental differences of German policies in the West and East. The consideration of Swiss perspectives is an enlightening addition. The book's appreciation for the openness of the future and its focus on reading and writing in wartime is a welcome perspective. The book is touching and haunting, particularly in its powerful empathy for the fate of the Jews. The experience of World War II in Europe comes across as an unmitigated nightmare of guilt, suffering, and confusion. Fritzsche raises ultimate questions on life and death and the future of humanity in an age of unprecedented means of destruction. The book is based almost entirely on published sources such as diaries, letters, contemporary fiction, and memoirs, and this makes sense given the focus on reading and writing in wartime. This focus opens up a profound philosophical and humanistic perspective not found in other books on Nazi-occupied Europe.

Notes

[1]. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War,* trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).

[2]. Raffael Scheck, "Swiss Funding for the Early Nazi Movement: Motivation, Context, Continuities," *The Journal of Modern History* 71, no. 4 (1999): 793-813; Alexis Schwarzenbach, *Die Geborene. Renée Schwarzenbach-Wille und ihre Familie* (Zürich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2004).

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