

**Janosch Steuwer.** *“Ein Drittes Reich, wie ich es auffasse”:: Politik, Gesellschaft und privates Leben in Tagebüchern 1933–1939.* Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2017. 611 S. EUR 49.90, cloth, ISBN 978-3-8353-3003-0.

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Diaries from the Nazi era and the Second World War, such as those of Victor Klemperer, Anne Frank, or “A Woman in Berlin,” have found great resonance with readers for their personal perspectives into life under National Socialism and in the war’s aftermath. Historians have drawn upon diary sources for their seeming immediacy and “authentic” observations, usually using diaries to illustrate larger arguments without analysis of diaries as a form.[1] Janosch Steuwer’s *“Ein Drittes Reich, wie ich es auffasse”:: Politik, Gesellschaft und privates Leben in Tagebüchern 1933-1939* foregrounds the diary as a medium by asking what diaries reveal about the early years of National Socialism, and how Germans began to position themselves within the new political reality of National Socialism through diary writing. Steuwer’s main claim is that diary sources require us to recognize Germans in the 1930s as complicated individuals who were increasingly asked to take a stance and position themselves according to new concepts and ideas (*Leitbilder*) propagated by the Nazis. Diaries of the 1930s not only offer insights into how National Socialism changed German society, Steuwer argues, but these sources also remind us that diarists were not passive objects of Nazi propaganda, but reflective, thinking

individuals whose reactions influenced the regime and its politics in turn.

Steuwer’s main primary sources include roughly 140 unpublished diaries written between 1930 and 1939 in Germany by men, women, and adolescents, representing a broad and heterogeneous sample of perspectives and a range of different reactions to National Socialism. Steuwer tasks himself with careful and responsible readings of each diary, rather than selectively excerpting from diaries without providing contextual clues such as the author’s age, political background, profession, and location. This allows him to note when an author is writing ironically, or when a certain remark stands out as remarkable in a person’s writings as a whole. Accordingly, Steuwer traces how the Nazis’ acquisition of power (“Machtergreifung”) enters even unpolitical diaries, and comments on material details like entries decorated with hand-drawn swastikas or newspaper clippings. Steuwer does not hesitate to admit points at which the diaries do not provide answers—for example, in terms of quantitative data or estimates of how many contemporaries were attracted to or repulsed by Nazi propaganda. He is also reluctant to overgeneralize, emphasizing, for example, in discussing models of health and the body, that contemporaries could have a

wide range of experiences and ideas in response to similar physical activities. Among the many sources cited, many diaries stand out as providing extraordinary perspectives—Steuwer has truly found many gems among his impressive research in over thirty-five different archives and his analyses make one want to read more about the individual fates of the writers.

The book is divided into three main sections, each weaving together a social history of the 1930s with an analysis of diaries as a privileged source for understanding the history of experience of the period. The first part considers how contemporaries determined their own relationship to the Nazi regime and how they appropriated new ideologically based categories of inclusion and exclusion. Steuwer's analysis describes how the diary itself became an important tool of social self-positioning and how writers explored their relation to National Socialism through writing. Diarists not only analyze themselves in their writing, but Steuwer shows how they also observe friends, acquaintances, neighbors, colleagues, and relatives and their reactions to the regime in its early years. With careful readings Steuwer demonstrates how diarists often express a simultaneous desire to belong and express dissent or criticism, and how the diary functioned as a means of self-positioning in the social sphere: responses to National Socialism in 1933/34 were anything but private experiences of individuals in isolation.

The main focus of part 2 is education and propaganda (*Erziehung*), showing how individuals began to question their lifestyles and their own self-perceptions as the National Socialists strove to shape and educate citizens under new models of community and racialized concepts of the body and heredity. Steuwer argues for a view of individuals that gives them more agency within Nazi practices of propaganda and education, showing how they selectively integrated new ideas and concepts in their lives—yet often only when these

concepts aligned with their previous beliefs and experiences. Highlighting the strengths of diaries as a source, Steuwer points to ways Germans began to reorient themselves according to new *Leitbilder* propagated by the Nazis, through simultaneous privatization of the political and politicization of their private lives. In three strong chapters, Steuwer traces how individuals worked to change their ways of life and their views of themselves in terms of community (*Gemeinschaft*), the body, and racialized concepts of ancestry (*Herkunft*). The discussion of genealogy is particularly fascinating, as diaries reveal how individuals went far beyond the required research to investigate their family trees, thereby furthering racist policies of the National Socialists.

The third section examines the relationship between the Nazi government and the German people by analyzing what it meant to participate in a new political culture. Looking at the reception of mass media and political events, Steuwer seeks to respond to the question of popular support for the regime, and whether it was possible to have a private life under National Socialism. The first chapters of this section center on Nazi elections and changes in the form of political values and behaviors, showing how Germans became active media consumers, especially as radio listeners. Steuwer's findings echo those of Alexandra Garbarini in *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust* (2006), who shows how European Jews became careful "news readers," critical and observant consumers of media and gossip to determine their truth value. Steuwer argues that propaganda was never total, and both supporters and opponents of the regime developed their own political judgments, or worked to align their behaviors with the expectations of the regime. Underlining the complicated interweaving of Nazi power structures and private lives, Steuwer concludes: "Although contemporaries looked for ways to live their own lives in the politicized private sphere, although they sought 'a Third Reich, as I see it,' they nevertheless contributed to the real-

ization of the National Socialist social project” (p. 548).

Steuwer demonstrates deep knowledge of secondary literature on National Socialism, and the book makes several notable contributions to larger debates in the historiography, often through slight shifts in the questions we are able to pose of our sources. For example, the book contributes to debates about the effectiveness of Nazi propaganda, the assessment of public opinion, the emotionalization of politics, the lack of critique in response to the 1934 July murders, the concept of a “total” and repressive regime, and many others. In each case, Steuwer consults diaries as a privileged source to offer a more nuanced examination of German society and its relationship to National Socialism—always treating “the Germans” as individuals rather than as a collective. For example, he notes that in 1933/34, as individuals began to align themselves with the regime in public and in private, it was less about the concept of “dissonant lives” [2] or a split between “private” and public” selves than about the changed conditions of communication in public spaces and the need to position oneself and take a stance. In private, as well, individuals could feel conflicted and have contradictory views about their beliefs and the regime. Repeatedly, Steuwer underscores how Nazi propaganda and education efforts were most effective when policies dovetailed with preexisting lifestyles and beliefs.

One highlight of the book is the chapter on “Experience and Reflection: Diaries in National Socialist Education and Propaganda,” providing an overview of the role of diaries in National Socialism, from Joseph Goebbels’s public self-presentation as a diarist to the promotion of diary writing in Kraft durch Freude trips and in volunteer work camps. He discusses the importance of the diary’s bourgeois roots, and how scholarship has persistently treated diaries as a private medium despite changes in diary writing practices. In this way, Steuwer contributes to a history of the

diary, showing how diarists sought new forms of diary writing such as group and communal writing that were aligned with ideals of the new regime. The section on work camp diaries (*Lagertagebücher*) has nuanced, close readings of texts, highlighting how diaries not only shaped individual and collective experiences but also memory culture. Intermittently Steuwer returns explicitly to the notion of the diary as “an instrument of constant political negotiation” (p. 423) in which individuals work on or shape their behaviors according to expectations of the regime—working against the idea of a diary as a space of retreat: “Through writing, diarists frequently tried to adopt certain modes of behavior and perception, for instance to align their own political behavior with the expectations of the Nazi regime” (p. 448).

While Steuwer’s consistent approach makes the book feel like a unified whole, combining historiography with detailed readings of diaries, the three parts of the book (totaling twenty-three chapters) are each so extensive that the book drags a bit at points. The author notes himself in the introduction that the three sections could be read independently from one another. Furthermore, the contextualization of the sources within larger historiographical debates on “Volksgemeinschaft,” propaganda, or “Erziehung” is so thorough that the diaries almost take a supporting role. Indeed, the author repeatedly asks what we can “ask of” these sources (“Befragt man Tagebücher der 1930er Jahre ...”). At times the organization feels driven by outstanding debates in the social history of National Socialism, rather than by the material provided by the diaries themselves. The lengthy introductions to each section sometimes make the diaries feel “illustrative”—a method Steuwer rejects from the outset. Steuwer’s presentation of the diaries is particularly strong, but it is sometimes difficult to tell how extraordinary an individual was.

In conclusion, *“Ein Drittes Reich, wie ich es auffasse”* provides a detailed analysis of individual reactions to the prewar years of National Socialism, with careful analysis of the many and varied voices of Germans who lived through the 1930s in Nazi Germany. Steuerer convincingly argues that diaries provide insights into life in Germany 1933-39, and important correctives to historical work that treats Germans as largely passive objects of National Socialist propaganda. Doing justice to the complexity of individuals and their motivations, he shows how diarists seek coherence in their lives, want to be understood by others, and how they struggle to orient themselves and make political judgements in a period of great change. Along the way, he contributes not only to *Alltagsgeschichte*, *Erfahrungsgeschichte*, and the social history of the period, but also to a history of twentieth-century diary writing. This book will be of interest to specialists working on the social, political, and cultural history of National Socialism, as well as to scholars of autobiography and life writing in Germany.

#### Notes

[1]. A notable exception to this approach is Peter Fritzsche’s work, including *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), *The Turbulent World of Franz Göll* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), and his most recent book, *Iron Wind: Europe under Hitler* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

[2]. Mary Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives: Generations and Violence through the German Dictatorships* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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