
Reviewed by Larry V. Thompson

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During Weimar's violent initial phase, the Nazis helped educate the German public that conducting politics was tantamount to waging war. And, later, Hitler bedazzled the Republic with his staged political extravaganzas designed to suggest that politics was above all good theater filled with high drama. Perhaps inadvertently, David Yelton's study of the *Volkssturm* reveals that what began as heroic drama ended up as tragic farce in the Third Reich's theater of the absurd. His work captures the buffoonery displayed by the Gauleiters and their subordinates as they sought to work their way toward the Fuehrer while using the militia for their own protection and advancement. Moreover, Yelton highlights the plotting and scheming of leading Nazi actors (Martin Bormann, Heinrich Himmler, Joseph Goebbels, and Albert Speer) bent on upstaging one another to gain control of the militia, and the manpower embodied in it, to promote their organizations and obtain top billing for themselves with Hitler. Just as with stage villains, however, their various duplicities combined to curtail the militia's potential.

The brief history of the *Volkssturm* (the 1944 mobilization of German civilian males between the ages of sixteen and sixty to form a national militia to resist the allies) is well known. Early on, war crimes prosecutors as well as scholars maintained that the *Volkssturm* failed to help stem the Allied advance because it was poorly led and trained, badly equipped, and composed of those who were physically and chronologically unable to withstand the rigors of combat. The general conclusion was that the militia was a tragic example of what state tyranny and fanaticism could create when faced with a national emergency. David Yelton, professor of history at Gardner-Webb University, reconfirms this judgment. His study, however, does more than recapitulate the known. He argues that the *Volkssturm* was not simply a vehicle that the party cynically hoped it could ride to regain domestic power and influence lost during the war. He demonstrates how true believers, first and foremost Martin Bormann, viewed the German civilian militia as the instrument through which victory would be salvaged or, at worst, defeat averted. Why would zealots believe that military amateurs could de-
feat Germany’s more numerous and better armed adversaries? Because they insisted that a racially superior people, convinced of its superiority, could not and would not admit defeat. To the contrary, they argued that Germans, motivated by effective propaganda and inspired by the party leadership, could be mobilized to fight so fanatically that their enemies, lacking in racial superiority and without similar fanaticism, would choose to make peace. Bormann and others, Yelton argues, sincerely saw the militia as Germany’s last best weapon.

In short, Yelton insists that ideology played a vital role in the creation of the Volkssturm and that it continued to be a factor in how the organization evolved and performed. However, Bormann learned at the outset that ideology had to be employed selectively. For example, the notion that aroused racial nationalism would bring victory implied using the Volkssturm to spearhead a German resistance movement. But resistance in the guise of partisan warfare stripped those prosecuting it of combatant status. Fearing that partisan war would expose all German citizens to unrestricted Allied military reprisals, and mindful that this threat had a negative effect on the public’s acceptance of the Volkssturm, Bormann fought for the militia’s designation as a military formation. Ideology thus receded into the background in this instance; however, it reappeared center stage when Bormann demanded that the militia be organized along egalitarian lines to conform with the propaganda trumpeting the creation of a Nazi social revolution. Consequently, Bormann wanted no cliques, no occupational groupings, and no class distinctions to determine militia unit composition.

In reality, manpower demands from the military and the armaments sector forced him to compromise on unit cohesiveness as well as in deferring large numbers of civilians from militia service. While the egalitarian image of the Volkssturm was a facade, millions of men technically were forced into it. And, as Yelton demonstrates, this experience not only affected them but had a huge impact on the work place, families, leisure time, even religious activities, since limited time for training involved drill on Sunday mornings. Not surprisingly, compulsory militia service influenced, for better or worse, civilian morale. The party soon came to realize that the impact on morale was more negative than positive, which meant redoubling propaganda efforts to counteract grumbling over inequities and the loss of free time. Despite all propaganda and coercive efforts, the anticipated national defiance expected from the vaunted Volksgemeinschaft failed to develop.

Yelton is able to assess civilian morale during the last two years of the war and the party’s efforts to strengthen it because of his exhaustive research in archives at every level of state and party governance during the Third Reich. As a national entity, the militia’s records were dispersed over a wide spectrum of governmental, business, industrial, professional, and party agencies. While many records were destroyed or lost, those that survived remain scattered among archives and repositories all over Germany. German reunification subsequently forced Yelton to expand his research to include records held in the areas where access had previously been denied. Yet, reunification enabled him to broaden and deepen his research base, especially at the local level, thus permitting for the first time an assessment of the militia’s grassroots reception. Consequently, the scope of his research permits insights that make his study the most comprehensive one to date. For example, he demonstrates that the Volkssturm’s combat performance in the East was far more successful than earlier studies indicate. Why? The kind of war being waged there made racial ideology more persuasive to Germans convinced that they were fighting for their national survival and a badly outnumbered German army proved willing to train and use them on that front. The mediocre performance of the militia in the West is ex-
plicable for the opposite reasons. Army indifference and the widespread belief that the western allies were not bent on their annihilation convinced Volkssturm units, left mostly on their own or led by incompetent party hacks, to flee or surrender. Mediocre militia performance overall, notwithstanding, Yelton's statistical tables reveal that the Volkssturm suffered appallingly high casualties during limited combat exposure.

In addition to providing insights into the militia's military performance, this study highlights the centrality of manpower shortages in Germany's conduct of the war. Bodies were necessary to achieve goals. Fighting over human material was more than a game; it was the key to personal and organizational power, the critical factor for military victory, and the best way of impressing Hitler with promises of successful results. Yelton demonstrates that no one played the game better in the latter stages of the war than Martin Bormann. He even argues that Bormann got the best of Himmler in gaining control of the militia for himself. Hence, the struggle for supremacy over the Volkssturm not only underscores the manpower issue, it also reveals once again the administrative chaos that substituted for governance in the Third Reich. Yelton's work thus contributes to the ongoing discussion among students of Nazi Germany as to whether ideology or function was the more crucial for decision-making and governance in peace or war. In sum, this is a slim monograph (164 pages of text) which is heavily documented, statistically driven, and impressively researched. It adds much to our understanding of the Volkssturm, civilian morale near the end of the war, and the importance of ideology in prolonging that conflict. Moreover, despite its narrow topical focus, it contains insights that are of value to broader interpretive questions that currently dominate many research agendas.

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