

Catherine Epstein's *Nazi Germany: Confronting the Myths* provides an excellent history of Nazi Germany in a short and easy to read work. Epstein organized the book into a format of dispelling some of the more popular myths about Hitler's Third Reich. She attempted to provide more than just a narrative of events, but present hard questions about Hitler's government and attempt to provide the ambiguous answers.¹ Epstein vowed to expose the disturbing racial atrocities of the Third Reich while engaging the reader in the intriguing intellectual challenges of the Nazi historiography. Does Epstein succeed in this task? Epstein's research and evidence was generally sound, but her conclusions and attempts to assess blame often fall short and seem labored. Her writing style can sometimes seem sophomoric. Had Epstein focused more on the historical narrative and less on trying to provide modern readers lessons, her work would have been stronger.

Epstein organizes her 2015 *Nazi Germany* in a mainly chronological list of the most important themes of Hitler's rise to power and subsequent government rule. One of the more important tasks that Epstein attempted to accomplish was to provide agency for Germans and remove them from the status of mere victims, but to willing participants in the entire debacle. She contended "there was nothing inevitable in Hitler's coming to power."² Epstein showed that Hitler's path to power was fraught with struggle and mistakes. Epstein believed that Hitler properly utilized his opportunities, but there was also a certain amount of luck and chance involved in his ascent to power.³ She challenged that Germany was solely controlled by the terror and coercion of an efficient government, but that the Nazis in power were often chaotic in

¹ Catherine Epstein, *Nazi Germany: Confronting the Myths* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), xi.

² Ibid., 1.

³ Ibid., 41.

governance and that they had to carefully manage German popular approval.⁴ Epstein believed that the strongest motivation for the average German's appeal to the Nazi policies was their support of the "racial state". She contends that the widespread support of the "racial state" tied the German people to the Third Reich and its fate.⁵

Epstein tackled many of the military myths surrounding Hitler's army in World War II. Epstein's organization of the War and Occupation chapter strengthens her work. She starts the chapter by introducing the myths she will tackle. Epstein did not just blame the German defeat in the Soviet Union on the Russian winter, but the weakness of German supply lines and breakdown of German machinery. She argued that the Wehrmacht was not innocent and that the atrocities were not limited to the Schutzstaffel. She also contends that the United States and Britain were not the primary downfall of the Nazis, but the Soviet Union played an invaluable role in their defeat.⁶ Epstein's chapter introduction is then followed by a brief, but thorough narrative of the Nazi war machine's marches through Poland, Western Europe, the Soviet Union, and North Africa. She addressed the myths as she weaved through the chapter in order to keep the reader engaged. At the end of the chapter, she quickly addressed the United States' entry into the war and uses this as a segway into the next chapter about genocide.

Epstein's work is commendable for her mission. As a teacher, she wanted to provide a reader friendly history on the Third Reich that was not geared towards academics. She also wanted to update the scholarship on the Nazis as she claimed it has changed over the years and will continue to change. Her points are valid as the passage of time can certainly change the way

⁴ Ibid., 45.

⁵ Ibid., 93.

⁶ Ibid., 123.

historians perceive the Third Reich. In the immediate years after the war it would be difficult to objectively look at the Nazis without the bias of revulsion for what they did to their victims. As soon as World War II was over, the Cold War started and the ideological battle between the Soviets and the West would not allow this objective view. Only with time and detachment can historians study and research the Nazis without utilizing that bias. And it was that bias that was taught throughout academia in the period after World War II that developed these popular myths that Epstein attempted to dispel.

Nazi Germany provided the easy to read history that Epstein wanted for her students. The book is of sufficient length to provide a thorough understanding of the Third Reich without putting the reader to sleep. She uses a variety of primary sources, but most of her sources are books written since the end of the Cold War. These sources provide the information needed to correct those myths that have permeated the historiography of the last seven to eight decades. Epstein also directly references the authors of contradicting theories regarding the myths she addresses. For example in her Genocide chapter she cites the various theories on the origins of the Holocaust and their authors.⁷ Then in the Bibliography at the end of the chapter, the sources for those theories are easy to find and expand upon if desired.

Yet it is Epstein's own conclusions that may leave the reader scratching their head. Immediately after covering the varying theories for the origins of the Holocaust, she issued a damning evaluation of modern times. She contended that the genocides of Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur proved the lessons of Auschwitz had been ignored.⁸ She wrote, "Only when we all are prepared to be responsible for the humanity of every other person will the danger of

⁷ Ibid., 173.

⁸ Ibid.

genocide subside.”⁹ Epstein’s lofty words are hard to swallow without an establishment of what she has done to take responsibility for the genocides that occurred in her lifetime. Epstein issued blame or alleviated blame for Nazi atrocities several times throughout the book. She addressed the resistance of some Germans to save Jews as a condemnation of the entire country because something could have been done.¹⁰ This was a comfortable claim to make from Amherst College in 2015, but would she have been so bold in Bavaria in 1938?

Epstein’s language and comments occasionally lacked refinement. When discussing the persecution of homosexuals by the Third Reich, she claimed that some observers believed the Nazis started a “homocaust”. Although she immediately stated “This is inappropriate language”, a reader must wonder why the language was used at all. She also followed with her greater point that the Nazis did not attempt to hunt down and murder every homosexual like they did the Jews. This point could have been made without mentioning “homocaust” at all and letting the word die out without perpetrating it. Perhaps her point was to make the reader aware of the past historiography that would be flawed enough to use such terminology. Maybe in a book full of Nazi atrocities the use of the word is the least troubling aspect of words associated with the Third Reich. However, in modern academia there really is no need to include the word in the book and its use only detracted from her other valid points.

Despite Epstein’s attempts to be the arbiter of blame or innocence and her interesting word choices, *Nazi Germany: Confronting the Myths* is a worthy read for any student of the era. Her historiography is sound and the book provides a well balanced and brief look inside the Third Reich. Her format of bringing up the myths that she had found in the earlier historiography

⁹ Ibid., 174.

¹⁰ Ibid., 172.

of the genre and then addressing them directly was a novel concept and was effectively used. A book like this will go very far in introducing new perspectives that directly contradict the suspect views of generations of historians that might have been too connected to the history of their time. With time, new perspectives will be available, but one must be careful not to be too judgemental of the past in evaluating their own thoughts of what they might have done in the same situation. Such views certainly deserve to be taken with a grain of salt.

Bibliography

Epstein, Catherine. *Nazi Germany: Confronting the Myths*. John Wiley & Sons, 2015.