

scholarship as a unifying moment for the nation, the home front population, according to Lohse, did not rush to join the “warrior community.” This was not just due to war fatigue and a growing distrust of state-provided information, but also a general dislike of Goebbels himself and the moral and material corruption of the Nazi leadership that he represented. This is an unexpected revelation in the book, that Germans, during the final months of the war, became increasingly concerned with government corruption and the inequalities within society more generally. Lohse suggests that many citizens were reacting to the failure of the Nazis’ promised social revolution.

The topic of the Holocaust, specifically the dissemination and reception of information related to mass atrocities in the East is tackled in chapter 3. Journals, letters, SD reports, and POW recordings reveal that antisemitism was prevalent among civilians and soldiers and that many Germans “knew something” (74) about the killings. Rumors of mass executions were common, but stories of death camps and gas chambers were exceedingly rare. Nearly all rumored atrocities were attributed to the SS and its much-disliked leader, Heinrich Himmler.

Chapter 4 investigates the popular response to the July 20, 1944 plot against Hitler and the early stages of the Allied invasion of Germany. Again, reactions were mixed. Some citizens expressed their sustained loyalty to the regime, while others grew more resentful of the leadership. No meaningful insight is gained here, simply that German morale continued to decrease alongside internal regime radicalization and home-front mobilization.

The final chapter continues to resist a singular view of the German experience of defeat. The tragic battles of 1945 were met largely with desperation, but an enduring faith in Hitler and his messianic qualities inspired many citizens to continue fighting. Total defeat did not slow down the rumor mill, as gossip spread about the Führer’s declining health and refugees from the East delivered stories of violent acts carried out by the advancing Red Army.

In the book’s conclusion, Lohse reminds us that there is no single story of Germans at war, and that it was not her intention to “forge one out of the chorus of voices” (150). While she does not attempt to assess the human condition or make any broad sociological claims, Lohse’s study is ultimately about how individuals, and their communities, make sense of wartime tragedy and hopelessness. German citizens were heavily influenced by the Hitler regime and its propaganda, but ultimately they constructed their own reality, in large part by collecting informal information from family members, friends, colleagues, and comrades. They talked a lot about the war and actively built and negotiated narratives of their own experiences of it. *Prevail until the Bitter End* offers a myriad of rich firsthand accounts, many of them never “heard” before, and is accompanied by meaningful analysis. Furthermore, Lohse’s work contributes to the still emerging and highly promising field of rumor culture.

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Aftermath: Life in the Fallout of the Third Reich, 1945-1955

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Journalist Harald Jähner’s sweeping study—a bestseller in Germany—seeks “to explain how the majority of Germans, for all their stubborn rejection of individual guilt [for the

Holocaust], at the same time managed to rid themselves of the mentality that had made the Nazi regime possible” (324). He shows that there is no simple answer, arguing that numerous factors led “a nation that perpetrated the Holocaust [to] become a dependable democratic country” (323) in the form of the young Federal Republic. Jähner emphasizes throughout his book the simultaneous refusal of most Germans to admit individual guilt, at least until the Auschwitz trials beginning in 1963, usually thinking of themselves instead as victims.

The opening two chapters, on the chaos and destruction of the so-called Zero Hour and life in the rubble reveal part of Jähner’s answer: the physical hardships of the immediate postwar period, themselves brought on by Nazism, helped Germans distance themselves from fascism, though, of course, as Jähner writes, “in the corporate head offices, courts, and offices of the Federal Republic most of the Nazi elite cheerfully carried on” (3). The third chapter centers on the fact that 40 million people out of the 75 million in the four occupation zones were somehow displaced. In particular, the author shows how “racism lived on and was now turned cheerfully inwards” (69) as Germans targeted German expellees from the lost eastern territories. Hatred toward these refugees and resistance to their integration was so great that Allied authorities worried about civil war. The expellees, though, did profoundly change Germany—flattening regional differences, for example—and quickly, “a racially unified *Volksgemeinschaft* was transformed in the post-war years into an enforced association of unloved ethnic groups . . . a new nationalism could hardly be built on this hotly disputed foundation—not a bad starting point for the young democracy” (79).

The fourth chapter looks at the surprising proliferation of postwar dances and parties as, according to Jähner, “partygoers were amazed that they were still alive, and consequently prone to giddiness” (110). Chapter 5 investigates the typical “bad-tempered and ungrateful” (117) returning German soldier (*Heimkehrer*), the extensive violence—especially mass rape—carried out by Soviet soldiers (while acknowledging that the Western Allies also committed rape and other crimes, but not on the scale of the Red Army), and the determination of women, regardless of the violence all around, to cling to the newfound agency they had achieved during the war. Here, drawing in particular on the film scholar Annette Brauerhoch’s *“Fräuleins” und GIs. Geschichte und Filmgeschichte* (2006), Jähner zeroes in on the pursuit of American GIs by German women. Jähner argues that, among other reasons, German women were drawn to these occupiers by their informality, their different and freer way of life, and, as he cites Brauerhoch, as “a protest against the German past” (153). In the following chapter, Jähner turns his attention to the dynamics of the postwar rationing system and the massive black market that developed alongside, showcasing “the black market as a school of citizenship” (187). The author argues the black market was “a vital learning experience for the Germans” (192) as it served as a kind of forerunner to the subsequent social market economy of the Federal Republic: “the caring state ensuring that everybody got something [previously embodied by the ration system] and a free market system that was demand-led and placed the consumer at its center [the preceding black market]” (193).

Chapter 7 stays with the emergent economy to argue that the 1948 currency reform was a second Zero Hour, “the economic Big Bang of the Federal Republic” (xiv), since everyone got the same sixty Deutschmarks and savings were massively devalued, yielding “the magic trick of equality of opportunity that remains a part of the founding myth of the Federal Republic” (204). Within this dynamic atmosphere, Jähner traces the postwar transformation of Volkswagen and the work of the young entrepreneur Beate Uhse, selling her mail-order pamphlet on the rhythm method and opening the world’s first sex shop by 1961. Jähner characterizes the battles waged by Germans in the 1950s against Uhse, against Americanization embodied by the popularity of foreign music and comic books among German youth, and “against their own children” (233) as “an outlet for their own frustrations that were outwardly cultural and apolitical, but meant that one could remain a Nazi without openly presenting oneself as such” (232-233).

The eighth chapter looks at the development of a democratic press under Allied supervision, while the ninth spotlights the emergence of abstract art as the dominant

mode of cultural expression in West Germany. Jähner shows that the modernist, abstract style of artists like Willi Baumeister, Heinz Trökes, and Juro Kubicek was a clear break with art under Nazism, which had aimed to collapse the space between popular and elite. By promoting (with American financial help) art that was unpopular outside the cultured elite, the young Federal Republic drew a line between itself and the Nazi past: “the fact that large sections of the population came to accept a state-sponsored artistic avant-garde, even if they couldn’t make head or tail of it, was a positive sign for the development of democracy, because it meant a recognition of cultural diversity” (281). Jähner shows the quiet, gradual incorporation of such a style into the home via items such as the “kidney table,” “the decorative symbol of denazified living” (290). Moreover, while East Germany focused on figurative painting, Western abstract art could present itself as “the art of freedom” (282). East Germany appears in Jähner’s book infrequently, but that is no issue since his emphasis is on the development of the Federal Republic.

The final chapter concentrates on a theme present from the book’s first pages: the refusal of Germans during the postwar period to admit individual guilt over the Holocaust. Jähner refutes the impression of a silent postwar generation, showing that many people were extremely chatty, except when it came to the murder of the European Jews. The author argues that the Holocaust “represents a crime whose monstrosity affected the subsequent life of every German and plunged them into the undertow of the unsayable as soon as they thought about it” (305). According to Jähner, their connected choice to see themselves as Hitler’s victims was important for the establishment of the Federal Republic’s democracy: “the conviction that one had been Hitler’s victim was the precondition for being able to shed all loyalty to the fallen regime without feeling dishonorable, cowardly, or opportunistic” (316).

In this way, across more than three hundred pages, by vividly weaving together many threads, Jähner gives his answer to how the Federal Republic became a successful democracy out of the ruins of fascism while most individual Germans concurrently refused to take any ownership of the murder of the European Jews: “the radical shock of disillusionment played a central part in this, as great a part as the megalomania that went before it; but so did the attraction of more relaxed ways of living as embodied by the Allies, the bitter education of the black market, the struggles to integrate the expelled from the eastern territories, the spectacular arguments about abstract art, the pleasure in new design” (324). Jähner argues convincingly that, all told, the fact that this transformation happened while most Germans stubbornly refused to engage with the Nazi past “is a much greater wonder than the so-called economic miracle” (323).

Jähner is a master storyteller and has produced an impressive, well-crafted book, handling many difficult topics with the appropriate tone. The author’s sharp prose and powerful, engrossing narrative make the book particularly well-suited for classroom use. However, in the preface, Jähner asserts that the years between the war’s end and the currency reform “are in a sense a time lost for historiography . . . [since] German history-writing is still essentially structured as a national history” (xiv), but power during that period emanated from the Allied capitals. Much scholarship on the immediate postwar period of the past decades, though, is cognizant of such complex power dynamics: Norman M. Naimark (which Jähner himself cites), Atina Grossmann, and Adam R. Seipp jump to mind, to name just three relevant authors. Indeed, the first sentence of Seipp’s brilliant analysis of a Bavarian town is “this book is an international history of a very small place” (*Strangers in the Wild Place* [2013], 1). Further, Jähner’s contention in chapter 10 that the silence of Germans over the Holocaust was because “the right words were a sheer impossibility” (305) seems too tidy and simple, especially within this larger book which is complex and sophisticated.

On the whole, though, Harald Jähner has produced an outstanding, clear-eyed, epic study brimming with nuanced analysis.