

It Can Happen Here

[Cass R. Sunstein](#) [June 28, 2018 Issue](#)

They Thought They Were Free: The Germans, 1933–45

by Milton Mayer, with a new afterword by Richard J. Evans

University of Chicago Press, 378 pp., \$20.00 (paper)

Broken Lives: How Ordinary Germans Experienced the Twentieth Century

by Konrad H. Jarausch

Princeton University Press, 446 pp., \$35.00

Liberal democracy has enjoyed much better days. Vladimir Putin has entrenched authoritarian rule and is firmly in charge of a resurgent Russia. In global influence, China may have surpassed the United States, and Chinese president Xi Jinping is now empowered to remain in office indefinitely. In light of recent turns toward authoritarianism in Turkey, Poland, Hungary, and the Philippines, there is widespread talk of a “democratic recession.” In the United States, President Donald Trump may not be sufficiently committed to constitutional principles of democratic government.

In such a time, we might be tempted to try to learn something from earlier turns toward



'National Socialist,' circa 1935; photograph by August Sander from his People of the Twentieth Century. A new collection of his portraits, August Sander: Persecuted/Persecutors, will be published by Steidl this fall.

authoritarianism, particularly the triumphant rise of the Nazis in Germany in the 1930s. The problem is that Nazism was so horrifying and so barbaric that for many people in nations where authoritarianism is now achieving a foothold, it is hard to see parallels between Hitler's regime and their own governments. Many accounts of the Nazi period depict a barely imaginable series of events, a nation gone mad. That makes it easy to take comfort in the thought that it can't happen again.

But some depictions of Hitler's rise are more intimate and personal. They focus less on well-known leaders, significant events, state propaganda, murders, and war, and more on the details of individual lives. They help explain how people can not only participate in dreadful things but also stand by quietly and live fairly ordinary days in the midst of them. They offer lessons for people who now live with genuine horrors, and also for those to whom horrors may never come but who live in nations where democratic practices and norms are under severe pressure.

Milton Mayer's 1955 classic *They Thought They Were Free*, recently republished with an afterword by the Cambridge historian Richard J. Evans, was one of the first accounts of ordinary life under Nazism. Dotted with humor and written with an improbably light touch, it provides a jarring contrast with Sebastian Haffner's devastating, unfinished 1939 memoir, *Defying Hitler*, which gives a moment-by-moment, you-are-there feeling to Hitler's rise. (The manuscript was discovered by Haffner's son after the author's death and published in 2000 in Germany, where it became an immediate sensation.)* A much broader perspective comes from Konrad Jarausch's *Broken Lives*, an effort to reconstruct the experience of Germans across the entire twentieth century. What distinguishes the three books is their sense of intimacy. They do not focus on historic figures making transformative decisions. They explore how ordinary people attempted to navigate their lives under terrible conditions.

Haffner's real name was Raimund Pretzel. (He used a pseudonym so as not to

endanger his family while in exile in England.) He was a journalist, not a historian or political theorist, but he interrupts his riveting narrative to tackle a broad question: “What is history, and where does it take place?” He objects that most works of history give “the impression that no more than a few dozen people are involved, who happen to be ‘at the helm of the ship of state’ and whose deeds and decisions form what is called history.” In his view, that’s wrong. What matters are “we anonymous others” who are not just “pawns in the chess game,” because the “most powerful dictators, ministers, and generals are powerless against the simultaneous mass decisions taken individually and almost unconsciously by the population at large.” Haffner insists on the importance of investigating “some very peculiar, very revealing, mental processes and experiences,” involving “the private lives, emotions and thoughts of individual Germans.”

Mayer had the same aim. An American journalist of German descent, he tried to meet with Hitler in 1935. He failed, but he did travel widely in Nazi Germany. Stunned to discover a mass movement rather than a tyranny of a diabolical few, he concluded that his real interest was not in Hitler but in people like himself, to whom “something had happened that had not (or at least not yet) happened to me and my fellow-countrymen.” In 1951, he returned to Germany to find out what had made Nazism possible.

In *They Thought They Were Free*, Mayer decided to focus on ten people, different in many respects but with one characteristic in common: they had all been members of the Nazi Party. Eventually they agreed to talk, accepting his explanation that he hoped to enable the people of his nation to have a better understanding of Germany. Mayer was truthful about that and about nearly everything else. But he did not tell them that he was a Jew.

In the late 1930s—the period that most interested Mayer—his subjects were working as a janitor, a soldier, a cabinetmaker, an office manager, a baker, a bill collector, an inspector, a high school teacher, and a police officer. One had been a high school student. All were male. None of them occupied

positions of leadership or influence. All of them referred to themselves as “*wir kleine Leute*, we little people.” They lived in Marburg, a university town on the river Lahn, not far from Frankfurt.

Mayer talked with them over the course of a year, under informal conditions—coffee, meals, and long, relaxed evenings. He became friends with each (and throughout he refers to them as such). As he put it, with evident surprise, “I *liked* them. I couldn’t help it.” They could be ironic, funny, and self-deprecating. Most of them enjoyed a joke that originated in Nazi Germany: “What is an Aryan? An Aryan is a man who is tall like Hitler, blond like Goebbels, and lithe like Göring.” They also could be wise. Speaking of the views of ordinary people under Hitler, one of them asked:

Opposition? How would anybody know? How would anybody know what somebody else opposes or doesn’t oppose? That a man *says* he opposes or doesn’t oppose depends upon the circumstances, where, and when, and to whom, and just how he says it. And then you must still guess *why* he says what he says.

When Mayer returned home, he was afraid for his own country. He felt “that it was not German Man that I had met, but Man,” and that under the right conditions, he could well have turned out as his German friends did. He learned that Nazism took over Germany not “by subversion from within, but with a whoop and a holler.” Many Germans “wanted it; they got it; and they liked it.”

Mayer’s most stunning conclusion is that with one partial exception (the teacher), none of his subjects “saw Nazism as we—you and I—saw it in any respect.” Where most of us understand Nazism as a form of tyranny, Mayer’s subjects “did not know before 1933 that Nazism was evil. They did not know between 1933 and 1945 that it was evil. And they do not know it now.” Seven years after the war, they looked back on the period from 1933 to 1939 as the best time of their lives.

Mayer suggests that even when tyrannical governments do horrific things, outsiders tend to exaggerate their effects on the actual experiences of most citizens, who focus on their own lives and “the sights which meet them in their daily rounds.” Nazism made things better for the people Mayer interviewed, not (as many think) because it restored some lost national pride but because it improved daily life. Germans had jobs and better housing. They were able to vacation in Norway or Spain through the “Strength Through Joy” program. Fewer people were hungry or cold, and the sick were more likely to receive treatment. The blessings of the New Order, as it was called, seemed to be enjoyed by “everybody.”

Even in retrospect Mayer’s subjects liked and admired Hitler. They saw him as someone who had “a *feeling* for masses of people” and spoke directly in opposition to the Versailles Treaty, to unemployment—to all aspects of the existing order. They applauded Hitler for his rejection of “the whole pack”—“*all* the parliamentary politicians and *all* the parliamentary parties”—and for his “cleanup of moral degenerates.” The bank clerk described Hitler as “a spellbinder, a natural orator. I think he was carried away from truth, even from truth, by his passion. Even so, he always believed what he said.”

Mayer did not bring up the topic of anti-Semitism with any of his subjects, but after a few meetings, each of them did so on his own, and they returned to it constantly. When the local synagogue was burned in 1938, most of the community was under only one obligation: “*not to interfere.*” Eventually Mayer showed his subjects the local newspaper from November 11, 1938, which contained a report: “In the interest of their own security, a number of male Jews were taken into custody yesterday. This morning they were sent away from the city.” None of them remembered seeing it, or indeed anything like it.

The killing of six million Jews? Fake news. Four of Mayer’s subjects insisted that the only Jews taken to concentration camps were traitors to Germany, and that the rest were permitted to leave with their property or its fair market

value. The bill collector agreed that the killing of the Jews “was wrong, unless they committed treason in wartime. And of course they did.” He added that “some say it happened and some say it didn’t,” and that you “can show me pictures of skulls...but that doesn’t prove it.” In any case, “Hitler had nothing to do with it.” The tailor spoke similarly: “If it happened, it was wrong. But I don’t believe it happened.”

With evident fatigue, the baker reported, “One had no time to think. There was so much going on.” His account was similar to that of one of Mayer’s colleagues, a German philologist in the country at the time, who emphasized the devastatingly incremental nature of the descent into tyranny and said that “we had no time to think about these dreadful things that were growing, little by little, all around us.” The philologist pointed to a regime bent on diverting its people through endless dramas (often involving real or imagined enemies), and “the gradual habituation of the people, little by little, to being governed by surprise.” In his account, “each step was so small, so inconsequential, so well explained or, on occasion, ‘regretted,’” that people could no more see it “developing from day to day than a farmer in his field sees the corn growing. One day it is over his head.”

Focusing largely on 1933, in *Defying Hitler* Haffner offers a radically different picture, in which the true nature of Nazism was evident to many Germans from the start. Just twenty-five years old that year and studying law with the goal of becoming a judge or administrator, he describes the mounting effects of Nazism on the lives of his high-spirited friends and fellow students, who were preoccupied with fun, job prospects, and love affairs. Haffner says that as soon as the Nazis took power, he was saved by his capacity to smell the rot:

As for the Nazis, my nose left me with no doubts. It was just tiresome to talk about which of their alleged goals and intentions were still acceptable or even “historically justified” when all of it stank. How it stank! That the Nazis were enemies, my enemies and the enemies of all I held dear, was

crystal clear to me from the outset.

As Haffner describes it, a form of terror began quickly, as members of the SS made their presence felt, intimidating people in public places. At the same time, citizens were distracted by an endless stream of festivities and celebrations. The intimidation, accompanied by the fervent, orchestrated pro-Nazi activity, produced an increase in fear, which led many skeptics to become Nazis. Nonetheless, people flirted, enjoyed romances, “went to the cinema, had a meal in a small wine bar, drank Chianti, and went dancing together.” Sounding here like Mayer’s subjects, Haffner writes that it was the “automatic continuation of ordinary life” that “hindered any lively, forceful reaction against the horror.”



Ben Stansall/AFP/Getty Images A protest against the election of Trump outside the US embassy, London, November 2016

In Haffner’s telling, the collapse of freedom and the rule of law occurred in increments, some of which seemed to be relatively small and insignificant. In

1933, when Nazi officers stood menacingly outside Jewish shops, Jews were merely “offended. Not worried or anxious. Just offended.” But Haffner insists that Hitler’s brutality and the ongoing politicization of everyday life were clear from the outset. In the early days of the regime, a self-styled republican advised him to avoid skeptical comments, which would be of no use: “I think I know the fascists better than you. We republicans must howl with the wolves.”

Haffner catalogs the howling. Books started to disappear from bookshops and libraries. Journals and newspapers disappeared as well, and those that remained kept to the party line. Even in 1933, Germans who refused to become Nazis found themselves “in a fiendish situation: it was one of complete and unalleviated hopelessness; you were daily subjected to insults and humiliations.” Haffner sought refuge in the private domain, including with a small group of young people studying law, who had formed something like an intimate debating club. They were very good friends. One of the members, named Holz, held nationalistic views. Others disagreed, but it was all civil, the kind of energetic discussion young people often have about politics.

The group fell apart when Holz accused Haffner of “ignoring the monumental developments in the resurgence of the German people” and of being “a latent danger to the state”—and ominously threatened to denounce him to the Gestapo. Not far from its end, Haffner’s narrative provides a delicate and almost unbearably moving account of several idyllic weeks with the love of his life, who was engaged to an Englishman and who was about to leave Germany for good. (Seeing his distress after informing him of her engagement, she responded with infinite gentleness: “For now I’m still here.”) Summarizing those weeks, and something about human resilience, Haffner’s unfinished manuscript offers some words from the poet Friedrich Hölderlin: “Let us not look forward/Nor back. Be cradled, as in/A swaying boat on the sea.”

While Haffner concentrates largely on a single year, Jarausch’s topic is a

century. In *Broken Lives* he draws on more than seventy personal memoirs produced by Germans who were mostly born in the 1920s. His aim is to produce a “vivid and personal picture of what it meant to live through the twentieth century,” rooted in the perspectives of people who were born after the carnage of World War I, and who generally enjoyed happy and even carefree childhoods in the Weimar Republic. It’s a wide-ranging, panoramic, revealing treatment, and for the most part, it’s very dark.

Jarausch offers a fact-filled account of the lives of “Nazi adolescents” a few years younger than Haffner, and of the immense social pressures that led to the rapid growth of the Nazi movement among young people. One of the Nazis’ clever strategies, which they adopted immediately after assuming power, was to increase those pressures by enforcing “an appearance of unanimous support for the Third Reich.” Many Germans were not so much pro-Hitler as anti-anti-Hitler—and their opposition to Hitler’s adversaries aided his rise. Decades afterward, memoirists referred to their “happy times” in the Hitler Youth, focusing not on ideology but on hiking trips, camaraderie, and summer camps.

In Jarausch’s account, things got much worse for Germans starting on September 1, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland. A few days later, England and France declared war on Germany. One memoirist noted that with the Great War looming in the background, “no flags were flying, there was no approval, no enthusiasm.” Jarausch painstakingly describes the ensuing developments, starting with the initial triumphs of the Wehrmacht and the rapid conquest of Poland, and ending with the Normandy invasion, the relentless advance of the Red Army, and Hitler’s suicide.

After the war, defeat meant a new beginning for many, a kind of opportunity, and Jarausch shows how Germans—grim, shell-shocked, determined—returned to ordinary life and bet on a better future. Avoiding nationalism or even national pride, they succeeded in rebuilding their economy and their morale. Jarausch’s main focus is on West Germany, but he devotes

considerable attention to the collapse of communism in the German Democratic Republic, suggesting that it foundered because it disappointed and disillusioned its citizens. Though his unifying theme is that the lives of countless Germans were broken in multiple ways, his conclusion is upbeat: many Germans have been transformed “into sincere democrats and pacifists who want to prevent a recurrence of earlier horrors.”

For those who seek to understand the German experience in the twentieth century, Jarausch has done a tremendous service. He paints on a much broader canvas than Mayer and Haffner, even when he explores Hitler’s rise. But precisely because of the fine-grained, intimate nature of their accounts, Mayer and Haffner speak more directly to those concerned about what makes authoritarianism possible. Of course we can’t be sure whether to believe Mayer’s subjects when they claim ignorance of what Hitler actually did. (Mayer isn’t sure either.) But they are convincing when they say that at the time they were mostly focused on their families, their friends, and their everyday lives. Haffner’s depiction of the “automatic continuation of ordinary life,” possible for so many amid their government’s step-by-step assault on freedom and dignity, is in the same vein.

All three authors are keenly aware that their narratives offer important lessons, and these should not be lost on contemporary readers. Turkey, for example, has been sliding toward authoritarianism through tactics not unlike those of the Nazis: jailing political dissidents, attacking freedom of speech, treating critics as enemies of the state, and obliterating checks and balances. Thus far, President Trump has been more bark than bite. But some of the barks have a history that is at once ugly and revealing. The Nazis applied the term *Lügenpresse* (lying press) to the mainstream press; President Trump refers to the “FAKE NEWS media,” which, he says, “is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!” In significant domains (including climate change), his administration denigrates science; he has even failed to fill the position of White House science adviser. The Nazis also dismissed or politicized science (especially Einstein’s “Jewish Science”) in favor of what

they claimed to be the spirit of the *Volk*.

If the president of the United States is constantly lying, complaining that the independent press is responsible for fake news, calling for the withdrawal of licenses from television networks, publicly demanding jail sentences for political opponents, undermining the authority of the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, magnifying social divisions, delegitimizing critics as “crooked” or “failing,” and even refusing, in violation of the law, to protect young children against the risks associated with lead paint—well, it’s not fascism, but the United States has not seen anything like it before.

With our system of checks and balances, full-blown authoritarianism is unlikely to happen here, but it would be foolish to ignore the risks that Trump and his administration pose to established norms and institutions, which help preserve both order and liberty. Those risks will grow if opposition to violations of long-standing norms is limited to Democrats, and if Republicans laugh, applaud, agree with, or make excuses for Trump—if they howl with the wolf.

In their different ways, Mayer, Haffner, and Jarausch show how habituation, confusion, distraction, self-interest, fear, rationalization, and a sense of personal powerlessness make terrible things possible. They call attention to the importance of individual actions of conscience both small and large, by people who never make it into the history books. Nearly two centuries ago, James Madison warned: “Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a wretched situation. No theoretical checks—no form of government can render us secure.” Haffner offered something like a corollary, which is that the ultimate safeguard against aspiring authoritarians, and wolves of all kinds, lies in individual conscience: in “decisions taken individually and almost unconsciously by the population at large.”

Letters

[Sure It Can](#) August 16, 2018

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Sebastian Haffner, *Defying Hitler: A Memoir*, translated by Oliver Pretzel (Picador, 2003). ↩