



The Nazis: A Warning from History

Laurence Rees , Ian Kershaw (Foreword by)

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Published in conjunction with the History Channel and the BBC, this prizewinning volume, now back in print, contains previously unpublished material and photographs documenting the reality of life under Nazi rule and the evolution of the ruthless slaughter of millions of people in Germany.

In this handsome edition, BBC producer and renowned historian Laurence Rees has collected the testimonies of more than fifty eyewitnesses, many of whom were committed Nazis, free to tell their stories only after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Rees offers us the compelling voices of soldiers and civilians rarely heard from—including a remorseless Lithuanian soldier who shot five hundred people and then went out to lunch, and the anguished older sister of a ten-year-old developmentally disabled boy selected for “immunization injection” (a fatal dose of morphine) at a children’s hospital. These materials cast a harsh new light on the rise and fall of the Third Reich.

The Nazis: A Warning from History Details

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Jonathon Vincent says

4-5 stars.. great book

Steven Bergson says

As we approach the end of the 21st century, it is important that we learn all that we can from those who have lived through the horrors of this current century while they are still alive. In the case of the Holocaust, those who lived through it - victims, victimizers and bystanders - are dying out and taking their memories and ideas with them. It is timely then, that Laurence Rees of the world-renowned BBC has both produced the television series The Nazis and has authored this companion book The Nazis: A Warning from History. Unlike facile histories of the era that dismiss the Holocaust as an anomalous tragedy that was solely the fault of one man (Adolph Hitler) and which will probably never recur, this book warns readers that the policies and attitudes that led to the concentration camps and the commission of wartime atrocities were the result of complicity on the part of Germany's advisors, politicians, workers and civilians. This thesis is adeptly proven through Rees' use of dozens of photographs (including color ones), analyses from respected historians and academics and testimony from surviving Jews, Nazi soldiers, Hitler Youth, Poles, activists and civilians. The endnotes and annotated bibliography lead the readers to other sources where they can learn even more.

One of the frightening themes that runs through Rees' work is the idea that the Germans chose to reject democracy. This idea may seem absurd to today's youth because we are brought up to believe that the democratic system is the only rational ideology and that those who enjoy freedom could never give it up for a repressive dictatorship. However, in the case of Depression-era Germany, the loss of faith in the status quo, the distrust of Jews (which had already been passed down through the generations) and the growing sense of shame felt by citizens combined to make the Germans anxious about the new democratic system that had just been put into place: "...by 1932, the majority of the German people, in supporting either the Communists or the Nazis, were voting for political parties openly committed to the overthrow of German democracy." (pg. 42). Rees shows how, bit by bit, the German people let Hitler tear away at anything that would cause them to reject his ways: "There were no cabinet meetings, no national assemblies, no party senate, no forums in which Germans could legitimately come together to question...A system had evolved which protected Hitler not just from being constitutionally removed from office, but from coherent criticism of any sort." (pg. 210) Just as abhorrent is the suggestion by surviving Nazis that it was their specific horrible circumstances, which could befall any of us or any country, and not personal defects or national character that led Germany to become such a fascist nation. One German angrily said to the interviewer, "It's easy for you, isn't it? You've never been tested." (pg. 235).

Overall, I would highly recommend this book for academic library history collections, Holocaust collections in Jewish and special libraries and the history collections of public libraries.

Sajith Kumar says

There are some aspects of human nature which we find it difficult to concede exist in us. At the slightest opportunity they well up from the depths and overflow, making us hugely embarrassed. In the next instant, we are ashamed of it all, and wonder at the very fact that such a thing had happened at all. This analogy on the personal level can be extended to international politics in the case of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party that ruled Germany for twelve dreadful years in which the most heinous atrocities were committed by the German regime against fellow human beings. Hitler was instrumental in goading Europe into a global war which ended up killing about fifty million people. In areas controlled by the Nazis, six million Jews were exterminated in gas chambers and torture rooms – for absolutely no fault of theirs! Even with hindsight, it is extremely troublesome to imagine that such a grave crime could've been committed in such a civilized country as Germany. Of course, there are apologists who suggest that the Nazis constituted less than five per cent of the population and that it was unfair to put the blame for the deeds of such a small minority on the entire populace. At first glance, this argument is plausible, since the coercive measures of the Nazi autocratic administration brooked no discontent or disobedience from its subjects and forced them to toe the party line. This was the general consensus which possessed a corollary – it saved the analysts from explaining why such a devilish project went uncontested for so long. Laurence Rees approaches the issue from a different perspective. This book examines the culpability of the German public from first-hand accounts obtained from memoirs, notes and diaries surviving from that era. The analysis is not at all rosy for Germany as it clearly established that all the horrendous acts the Nazis had committed were performed with active connivance of the public, if not outright encouragement. The author is a writer, as well as a film producer who had made many films on World War 2 for the BBC. This book is a byproduct of his television series on the War. A large number of survivors of the Nazi rule in Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine and Russia have been interviewed for the research related to this book.

As noted by the author, the book aims to penetrate as deeply as possible on the essential nature of Nazism. The Nazis had no ideology other than misconceived notions of racial superiority and the belief that the Jews were to blame for all troubles Germany was facing as a result of losing World War 1. Lack of a coherent plan of action was compensated by chaos in Nazi administration. Officials played within the broad policy guidelines dictated by Hitler, coming up with ingenious ways of achieving the targets. This initiative was called 'Working towards the Fuehrer' and demonstrates the complicity of ordinary people. Much freedom of action and overlap of jurisdiction was guaranteed in this way, often ending up with turf war between officials when the fuehrer himself intervened as the arbiter. It was simply not sufficient to follow orders, they had to be anticipated. When it came to repressive measures, subordinate officials competed among themselves to invent inhuman measures to be forced on the hapless Jews and other conquered people.

Rees is immensely successful in bringing out the shocking details of how the Nazis mowed down their enemies. We know that they treated Jews as sub-human, but it is revealing to learn that they extended this policy to all Slav people in the countries they conquered in the east. Even though they were not exterminated in large numbers in concentration camps, Hitler wanted them to remain as slaves to the German people. The intelligentsia among them were isolated and killed off in a bid to control the rudderless society. University professors were brutally murdered. The war against Soviet Union was especially bloody since Hitler wanted it to be a 'racial war of annihilation' against a 'sub-human people'. Out of 5.7 million Soviet soldiers taken prisoners, 3.3 million died of disease and starvation. Rees mentions that the treatment meted out to British and American POWs captured on the western front was radically different, as they belonged to the 'superior' race to which the Germans themselves belonged. The British POWs were housed in relative comfort while the Soviets were corralled in open fields and enclosed with barbed wire. Recently, we saw Iranian hardliners appreciating Hitler for killing Jews apparently to express their anger against Israel's supposedly ruthless

putting down of Palestinian uprisings. These ignorant zealots are woefully unaware of the Nazi racial policy that placed the Asians even lower than the Jews or Slavs! The book also notes the meeting between the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and Hitler in which the former expressed his approval for the racial program of the Reich.

Being closely associated with visual media, Rees' verbatim accounts of the killing fields send a chill down the readers' spines. The description of the Treblinka camp in occupied Poland is very instructive. People were directly herded to gas chambers. Women's heads were shaved before they were killed and the hair was used to stuff mattresses! Nazis designed mechanized extermination plants to wipe out racially inferior people. German engineers carried out the leadership's plans with characteristic efficiency. Carbon monoxide was used as the killer vapour in gas chambers, which was derived from the exhaust smoke of the combustion engine of a battle tank. But if the engine was just allowed to run idle, the quantity of smoke produced would be very low and unable to kill many people. So, to fully load the engine to produce more smoke, they coupled a power generator whose output was used to provide electricity to the camp. While the innocent were suffocating in closed chambers with no ventilation, the German soldiers enjoyed the comforts provided by the same machine! This plainly illustrates the sad fact that sophistication and culture is no bar to atrocity. Rees ruefully remarks that 'indeed they can be an aid, for once the intelligent mind devises a justification, and there is no limit to the consequent brutality' (p.161). The conquered people sometimes sided with the Nazis to persecute Jews as seen in the streets of Kaunas in Lithuania. The local public was persuaded to lynch their Jewish neighbours with wooden clubs. Before killing them, the tormentors extracted a written letter from their victims asking their surviving family members to send them money and clothes as if they were still alive. These letters were then used by the killers to steal from their victims' families.

The book is an eye opener to the modern world who settles for accommodation with extremist elements in the political and religious domains. When a person claims that only his political ideology is viable, or that his religious belief is the only true faith, we must stop and take note of a potentially disastrous train of events germinating. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria came close to replicating the Nazi pogrom in terms of intolerance and cruelty. We saw them killing followers of other religions indiscriminately, often by devising clever technical innovations. We also spotted them selling chained women as sex slaves in the open market, bargaining with potential buyers. It is by sheer luck that their rule could be brought down with military power before its tentacles could spread far and wide. Even then, they appear in the news again and again by shooting down unarmed shoppers or by ploughing a heavily laden fast moving truck into the midst of a crowd of people enjoying their vacation. So, what does the example of Nazis really teach us? Precious little, if what is on display is fully accounted for. The author does not offer his insights in this regard and stops content with explaining what had happened. It is left to the reader to learn the lesson and not repeat the mistakes.

The book is amenable to easy reading, though macabre portraits of torture, death and suffering are painted with words. Many monochrome plates are included that reflect the horror of Nazi domination. This book is a very fine example of good journalism, with the facts reproduced in as faithful a fashion to the original, but the author's analysis is sorely missing.

The book is highly recommended.

Astrid says

En skremmende bok, kanskje mer en mange av de andre bøkene om emnet fordi i motsetning til mange andre bøker legges ikke skylden på frykten for de overordnede, men viser til en langt mer skremmende virkelighet: At folk enten ikke brydde seg, eller mente at det de gjorde var riktig.

Anonymous says

Anyway, after that first impact, 'o no another book on the holocaust', I actually enjoyed this book. This is because I was never able to watch a documentary on the WWII even though there were so many of them. They look all the same, those black and white images of living dead people at Auschwitz, etc. But reading about war is completely different experience, for those who haven't tried, you should. The other thing I liked is that it focuses on the Eastern front rather than the D-day and the author did extensive research, talking to every possible person alive who witnessed the war, germans, nazis, russians, etc. It is a very good research document that predominantly makes you think about the effectiveness of making war. I guess the only positive point I see is population control really, the most bestial possible way. And technological advance.

The last thing I wanted to post on this is a directive issued by the Nazis at the time of the Polish invasion: 'Any individuals belonging to the German community who maintain relations with Poles which go beyond those deriving from the performance of services or economic considerations will be placed in protective custody... In all cases the maintenance of repeated friendly contacts with Poles must be regarded as failure to observe the prescribed distance'

I wonder if there anyone else out there who is a foreigner in the UK. Just a thought...

Glorious says

"Reading another Nazi book are you?! I'm starting to think that you've got some kind of secret fetish!" is what someone once said when they discovered I was reading this book. I'd been trying to read this book for over two years now and hadn't got round to it. They were right and wrong about some things, however. While I do not have a fetish for Nazis or Nazism in general, I certainly do have a zest for learning about one of the most awful periods in the history of the human race. And an even that it still raw for so many.

Laurence Rees wrote this book over a number of years and gained valuable insight from eyewitnesses that have been available to him following the fall of the Soviet Union, reunification of Germany. The split being a result of the Western powers dividing up Germany after the war. This book goes back to the first world war and the chaos that engulfed Germany in those proceeding years. The simmering resentment that the Treaty of Versailles was seen as a way of enslaving the Germanic population for their sins over the first world war. In just over ten years following the end of this, the Nazi Party would be in power.

However, their rise was not in that most Germanic of traits; efficient. Instead it was chaotic and shambolic as they ran out of funds initially. And they would be seen to scapegoat a certain ethnic background that became known for having money; the Jewish people.

In the thirties and as the country was balancing between one way of authoritarian influence between the National Socialists and Communists, the rise of Adolf Hitler and his cult-like status as he became chancellor of Germany, became telling as he set about ruling with an iron fist and crushing dissent.

One of the most telling pieces from this book is the way that the Nazi influence was brought about in Eastern Europe, in particular Lithuania. They were being persuaded by propaganda, and believing that the Soviet Union's annexation of their country would become permanent. As the Germans invaded in 1941, they exerted more control over the Lithuanian population. But they were complicit in a near-destruction of an entire race of people.

As the tides changed, the Nazis retreated. And not so much going through a scorched-earth policy, but more a scorching of those deemed as an enemy to the Germanic way of life, as the destruction of Jews et al increased intensely.

A haunting and shameful part of human history. And one that must never be forgotten so that we can't pander to right-wing extremism.

Gillian King says

Laurence Rees says in 'The Nazis: A Warning from History' p101:

'I thought more than once from talking to these people that their travels through Nazism had been like a rocket ride. They had started on the journey because they wanted an exciting new experience. Then, when the rocket went up through the clouds, they grew uneasy. 'That was fun, but now it's time to return' they would have said. But the rocket did not return. It went on and on into the dark, a bleak and horrible place. 'But I only asked for a rocket ride,' they said at the end of the whole horrific journey. 'I never wanted to go into the dark.' But the rocket was always going into the dark if they had only looked ahead.'

Nadiya says

The collection of interviews is priceless. The amount of detail and personal viewpoints of very different hues, makes the book a fascinating picture of the WW2.

Unfortunately, the author descends to making harsh personal judgements on the people who he interviews, sometimes making the interview questions tactless and rude. These passages of author's personal emotional reaction to the veterans' or former-Nazis' answers, and a stubborn search for the 'feeling of guilt or remorse', which made many people cut the interviews short or respond in anger - could easily ruin the reading for me. Fortunately, they are not very frequent.

The rest of the material, factual or based on the impressions of witnesses, is outstanding.

Mark Wardlaw says

It is difficult today to understand how a civilised country could plunge to the depth of the Nazi regime. Laurence Rees has produced a brilliant work in bringing into focus what the Nazis were and why they did what they did.

In the aftermath of Germany's humiliating defeat in 1918, a blame culture, Hitler's charisma and embracing

the Darwinian theory of natural selection where the strong triumph and the weak die, the Nazis released the darkest side of human nature plunging the world into a second world war.

The Western Allies would endeavor to uphold values in the struggle against the Nazis to help the weak, bring back compassion, mutual understanding and freedom. In the East crushing the Nazis would not result in freedom under Communist rule.

This book is not for the faint hearted and as Laurence Rees states it is a warning to humanity.

Alastair Rosie says

There was a period of my life when I studiously avoided history books about World War Two, there were so many, enough to fill a library and each year there seem to be even more books. I don't know why I picked this book up, it was probably on sale somewhere and I seem to recall it was part of a special, three books for £5 or something like that and it's stayed on my bookshelf until the other night when I actually sat down and started reading it.

The Nazi horror that affected millions is part of common knowledge and yet we are forever haunted by the facts surrounding it. In particular the fact that it was an intelligent white nation committing the most barbaric acts of the twentieth century against Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, homosexuals. The question that has always nagged at me is why? How could it happen? Why wasn't it stopped? And could it happen again?

Laurence Rees has attempted to answer that question amongst others with this companion book to the BBC series of the same name. He charts the growth of the Nazi party from the chaos of the Armistice right through the twenties and thirties and Hitler's rise to power. He takes a more objective view of the atrocities but doesn't hold back his disgust at the crimes. He does however attempt to explain why Hitler was so loved and adored. He wasn't a particularly intelligent man, nor did the Nazi party have much of a policy platform. Hitler seemed content to seize power and then delegate his subordinates to do the dirty work. He did have the gift of the gab and one is reminded of the power of the press and propaganda. It was the latter which probably contributed more to the Nazis rise to power than anything else.

Rees does show us that the Nazi machine was not the methodical model of efficiency that we've been taught to believe. On the contrary it was remarkably disorganised from the very beginning, it was only later on during the invasion of France that we seem some kind of organisation. According to the book the Final Solution came about gradually and although there is no smoking gun by his admission he is adamant that those at the top knew what was expected of them.

Rees does cover the dreadful atrocities in Eastern Europe, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Belarus and Russia. It wasn't just about the Jews, the Russians and in fact Slavic peoples in general were earmarked for extermination. The enormous German successes were due to Stalin's ruthless purges of the Russian officers in the thirties, leaving few experienced officers behind.

His coverage of the war has to be singled out as being remarkably biased towards the East and for that Rees is to be commended because he's highlighted what the vast majority of historians have glossed over in their attempt to make it a British/American victory when in fact the Russians broke the back of the Nazi war machine. Two weeks after the D Day landings the Red Army pulverised one hundred and sixty five divisions compared to the Allies' thirty in France. Thus he has gone a long way to righting the balance.

Ultimately he gives us no detailed answer to why? But the answer is already suggested in the subtitle, A Warning From History. Taken in that context the book makes for sobering reading because the Nazi Party never came to power with the slogan 'let's kill all the Jews.' No one would have voted for such a party. No, it came to power with the promise to make Germany great again and to rebuild the economy. Even the most

hideous regimes start with a good idea and in that I think we have the answer to why? It happens when a population is lulled into apathy or blind obedience and the checks and balances against tyranny are removed. What happened in Germany between 1933 and 1945 could happen anywhere to any nation no matter how civilised or uncivilised and that's why we should read this book. With the rhetoric on the War on Terror and some of the more idiotic comments coming out of Whitehall and the White House, the banking crisis that saw rich crooks get away with theft, a rise of extremist attacks against Muslims and non-Muslims, calls to limit immigration, suspension of habeas corpus, detention without trial I can't help but wonder and make comparisons. The example of Nazi Germany serves as a barometer, it's not to be used lightly as it was in 1991 in the lead up to the first Gulf War to justify yet another war. The picture that Rees unveils for us is ultimately terrifying because it could very well happen again, if we let some unprincipled leader get away with it.

Geraint Roberts says

Very informative and interesting, but feels rushed following the Battle of Stalingrad.

Krista Ashe says

I read this book as a bit of research for one of the books I'm writing. The Holocaust has always interested me, and I'm also teaching Night right now. It was a pretty thorough look at the Nazi party from its inception in the 1920's to its end at the end of WWII. It also took a look at how policy came about and how it was implemented all through Europe, not only Germany. It was based on a BBC documentary, and the author took time to hunt down survivors as well as the actual former Nazi's who inflicted some of the torture and atrocities. It was also supplemented with authentic photographs, which enhanced the experience of the book. Overall, it was a good read to help expand my knowledge on the subject.

Kevin Cole says

Because there was an abundance of good and evil in World War II, history since then looks on those days like Lord of the Rings. But real life, real people are more interesting than that. It is Mr Rees' gift to present to us the history of that war that's ignored. He doesn't do it by drowning us in detail. He doesn't do it by a tidal wave of after-the-fact analysis. He does it by simply paying attention to what happened day-to-day. We all know Poland was invaded in September 1939. What do we know what was going on in November 1939? You might be fascinated. Rees is also the kind of historian who balances--beautifully, I'd say--book history with eyewitness accounts. I really can't say enough good things about the guy.

Sharon says

This book is frightening...but I pushed through it. It is well worth the read. To read the responses of former Nazi soldiers ...the lack of empathy...it really was frightening. This book is very informative. I recommend this book to anyone wants to better understand how something so heinous could not only come to

fruition...but how it could go on for so long.

Adam Balshan says

2.5 stars, low [History].

A passable work of history with a sociological implication.

There were 3 good elements to the book: 1) His use of interviews, 2) The description of Treblinka, and 3) His last chapter, "Reaping the Whirlwind," about the anti-Bolshevist ideology and other elements which led the Germans to fight to the last. I would have added as fourth his special bent for the book, a look at sociology to form a "warning from history." Unfortunately, I think he failed in this.

Bad points were several (in no particular order): 1) He favors polemic statements (fine in a political book) but rarely presents either an ordered explanation as to why, or footnotes. 2) His sources did not seem very diverse. 3) When not recounting material from his interviews, he speculates a lot and gives tepid, sophomoric presentations of other historians' positions. 4) There is no discernible order to the book, other than a slightly chronological one--which doesn't jibe with his seeming goal of not being just another history sequence. 5) [My main objection]: Rees spends a lot of pages (and several pictures) on the cruelties of the Nazis, but he doesn't follow it to its logical conclusions. He says on p186, "It is impossible to understand how human beings could do this." He then proceeds to ignore that very question for the rest of that chapter. Instead of talking about sociology, he spends pages conjecturing on why the escalated killing orders came about in 1941 Lithuania, or tries to analyze communiqus between Himmler and others to discover a flash point in their parlance. The question of whether Hitler was anti-Semitic during or after Vienna, or whether or not a specific even triggered the Holocaust, does not answer the fundamental question that both Rees and so many people in the 1940s tried to answer: "why?"

Don't look to this book for the answer. The only answer I could discern came in the last several pages, and is preposterous if Rees meant it as such: that it was "exciting." Since there are probably 100 books on the Nazis, this mediocre work need not be one that you read on the topic. I don't have another of the same bent to recommend to you, but I imagine there's a better one out there.
