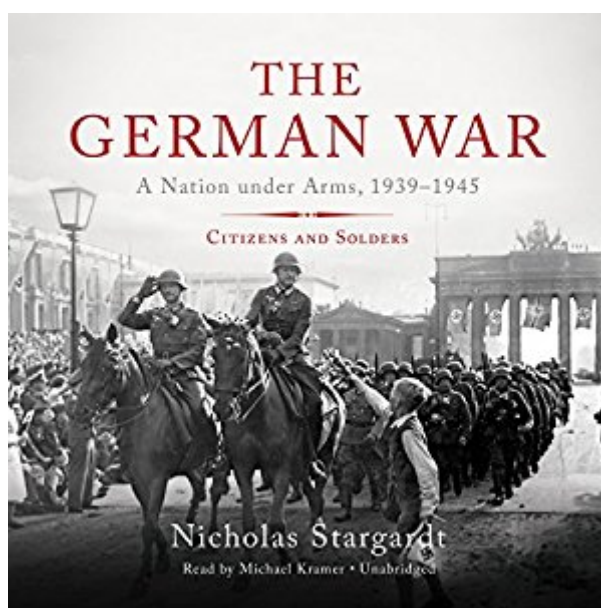


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The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939-1945; Citizens And Soldiers



Synopsis

A major new history of the Third Reich that explores the German psyche. As early as 1941, Allied victory in World War II seemed all but assured. How and why, then, did the Germans prolong the barbaric conflict for three and a half more years? In *The German War*, acclaimed historian Nicholas Stargardt draws on an extraordinary range of primary source materials - personal diaries, court records, and military correspondence - to answer this question. He offers an unprecedented portrait of wartime Germany, bringing the hopes and expectations of the German people - from infantrymen and tank commanders on the Eastern Front to civilians on the home front - to vivid life. While most historians identify the German defeat at Stalingrad as the moment when the average German citizen turned against the war effort, Stargardt demonstrates that the Wehrmacht in fact retained the staunch support of the patriotic German populace until the bitter end. Astonishing in its breadth and humanity, *The German War* is a groundbreaking new interpretation of what drove the Germans to fight - and keep fighting - for a lost cause.

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Customer Reviews

This is a superb book. The writing is outstanding, the book is thoroughly researched, the photos are unusually good, and overall it offers a new perspective on Germany and Germans during the war. It's over 500 pages, and Stargardt's ideas take some time to develop, so this is not an easy read. It's another book that the "I love it" phrasing with 5 stars is not very helpful; this is not a topic one loves, as a great nation engages in a destructive and evil war, on a course to catastrophe. I find it not so easy to tell why I think this is a superb book, and why it stands out in a category of books that

must total in the thousands (I've read scores of related books). Some of it is the wonderful way the story is told. Stargardt uses period letters and journals to follow a number of actors through this story--their story and Germany's story. The author manages to integrate large-scale events with the personal, and the result is a deeper understanding of what it was like for Germans engaged in the war than any other book I have read. It's also the range of stories. There's a good deal of discussion of how German religious figures related to the war (mostly fatalistic patriotism, for lack of a better phrase). There are some touching stories: a soldier writing home to a deeply loved spouse is touching, even if the soldier is fighting in an evil cause. This last is an important point. Stargardt pulls no punches, and this book in no sense attempts to mitigate German atrocities--he even makes a solid case that knowledge of the atrocities (including mass murder of Jews) was rather widely known. What the book does is humanizes people caught up in a pending catastrophe not really, for the most part, of their own making. Stargardt says that when the war broke out it was deeply unpopular in Germany. There was little of the wild enthusiasm that characterized 1914. Instead it seems most often to have been a grim recognition of the necessity of responding to aggressive enemies, particularly Britain--propaganda helped create this view, but so did memory of the "stab in the back" and the second war was apparently widely seen as a necessary correction to reclaim German greatness. The book's analysis of all this, and of propaganda, is superb. The Nazi state was of course coercive, but Stargardt makes an excellent case that coercion was not the main element. The idea of most Germans as victims of a murderous regime, forced into a war, is an old argument that has lost its force. Germans fought willingly, for the most part, not because they were forced to. The regime was admired by some, loathed by others, but until well into 1944 there was little sense that it was an illegitimate government. Hitler was widely admired and the ideology of world Jewish conspiracy was widely shared. Here's one of the many stories contained in the greater story, one I find fascinating. Anton Brandhuber, an Austrian, got tired of fighting and decided to stop. He managed to travel west from the front, 3,000 kilometers to Switzerland and spent the rest of the war there, surviving into very old age. That is not the kind of story one expects from a terroristic police state. Some of the chapters are fascinating. Chapter 5 looks at how German soldiers sent home luxuries from France and Belgium--some plunder, some purchases, aided by clever manipulation of currency. The same chapter discusses more blatant plunder, of apartments and goods taken from Jews sent to the camps. A detail I can't quite comprehend is that it was common for soldiers to have cameras, and the rolls of film were sent home for developing. Many soldiers took photos of executions and murders, and knowledge of these would have been spread to the photo processors and people at home. There was also surprising frankness in soldiers' letters home, so again

awareness of the conduct of the war (and the problems that soldiers experienced in Russia, such as cold, lack of equipment, savage fighting) was common--this in a state I had always thought had a rigid censorship. One chapter is especially touching. Chapter 10, "Writing the Dead," includes stories of wives and family members of dead or missing soldiers continuing to "write" them in the form of journals and other writings. Another chapter details in an intriguing way the Katyn Forest massacre of Polish officers by the Soviets, discovered and used adroitly for propaganda purposes by the Germans (in this book, Goebbels is portrayed as a master manipulator). I could add more and more detail, but you'll have gotten the point by now. The master story is partly comprised of a number of overlapping stories of real people caught up in the larger story of Germans at war. Particularly engrossing is the last hundred pages or so, dealing with impending collapse and then catastrophe, how people managed to live with their world collapsing around them.

As another reviewer has stated, this is not a book about which you should say "I love it" -- except to say that one loves getting closer to the truth about one of the most difficult realities in world history, a reality that is still, to this day in October 2015 a few weeks after the book's publication, "current events." At over 500 pages, Stargardt's history have been very well developed, and his sourcing is almost frightening in its intensity (at one point I thought that every paragraph had a footnote, and many many do). But the basic work that "The German War" does best is to continue the debunking of the Cold War mythologies that many of us were plagued with when we were growing up in the USA during the 1950s and 1960s. As Stargardt's research makes very very clear, the German war was a war supported, even after the Wehrmacht began retreating following Stalingrad and Kursk, by the majority of the German people (the "Volk") and by a probably greater majority of their various leaders -- religious, social, political, and especially in the entertainment industry. The German people who formed the base for the worst the Nazis did in the 1930s and 1940s were not "occupied" by Hitler and the Nazi Party. They were willing participants in the project, at almost every level of German society. Years ago, as we were discussing how difficult it was to get a clear understanding of World War II in Europe, a friend of mine quipped, "Ah, the Germans and the Nazis. You can't blame everyone for what the majority did." But we had to wait for a new generation of historians, willing to plow through an enormous amount of material following the end of the Cold War, to get something that provides even the casual reader with the depth and breadth of what Stargardt's work gives us in *The German War*. Told from the points of view of a number of "rank and file" average Germans, "The German War" shows confusion and complicity on the part of the men, women, and children who provided the base for Hitler's attempts to conquer a large part of the world and rid the

world of "Jewry." The two projects, both of which were outlined in *Mein Kampf*, grew from an intelligent understanding of imperial history -- especially the histories of the British and American empires. This is just one of the things that "The German War" brings home to the attentive reader. Hitler was very bright, and a master actor. With the almost as brilliant aid of Josef Goebbels, he was constantly adapting the bases of the Nazi project to the shifting possibilities provided to him both within Germany and by those who might have slowed him down much earlier. As the book shows, "Munich" was part of a process that had begun long before Chamberlain went to Bavaria in 1938, weighed down with the weights of British mega-deaths from the first World War. Did all the German people support the Nazis? Of course not. But the claims that the Nazis were "losing ground" in 1933 and 1934 are largely irrelevant, as Stargardt's meticulous unfolding shows. Hitler and his organization were consummate opportunists, adapting as necessary to the shifts of their opportunities. As the future "allies" allowed the Germans to encroach across central Europe, each new almost bloodless "victory" silenced another possible internal opposition to Nazism. And the fact -- a huge fact -- that the majority of Germans who were not Jews were either active or complicit in their silence as the "final solution" evolved has to be studied in even greater depth than in Stargardt's work here. Although the horrors of the Final Solution did not completely come about until 1942 and 1943, the seeds were there from the very beginning, from the opening of Dachau and the use of the concentration camps to murder the best organized opponents of the Nazis -- not the "Jews" but the Social Democrats and Communists. Stargardt's research also reminds us that the development of the methodologies of mega murder perfected by "Auschwitz" began much earlier, as the German leadership experimented on how much it could get away with by murdering the unfit (i.e., those with disabilities) and the unwanted (up to a certain point, mostly the Roma, or gypsies). It's chilling to read the words of the majority of the Catholic and Protestant clergy in support of the Nazi project throughout the period. Again -- not everyone, just the "majority." By focusing on the lives of individual German men and women, many of them memorialized in their diaries and letters, Stargardt's history gives us a very good look at life at the "grass roots" during the entire Nazi era. Among those who should get the historical credit they deserve is Goebbels, who was able to shift the propaganda project of the Hitler regime to fit into the evolving new conditions faced by the German people as the alliance against them and their armies solidified. The bombing campaign against German cities (and hence, German "civilians") proves to be both a curse to the people and a blessing to the regime. Over and over, as Stargardt's work shows, Nazi propaganda was able to hold together the German people based on the new narrative -- that of the Germans as the "victims." And this is probably the most amazing "take away" I get from this significant and

impressive work of history. One other thing worth noting: the photographs. Seldom does a work of history make such a good use of available photographs. By mining the personal archives of individual Germans (those he cites in the narrative) Stargardt is able to utilize the visuals to add greatly to the story. We are looking at the people he is quoting. One of the most disturbing photographs shows one of his subjects skipping through the ruins of a city in Russia that had been destroyed by the Wehrmacht. These young people were enjoying it -- until they stopped "winning" and began losing big time. As our fathers noted about the final days of World War II, as the U.S. and other armies moved into Germany and Austria in 1945, the Nazis virtually disappeared. Suddenly, it seemed to many, "everybody" among the German people (those who were left, the Jews had mostly by then been wiped out and the casualties in the military were monstrous) was a non-Nazi or even an anti-Nazi. Even the SS disappeared, although their tattoos were a useful identifier. (My father served with an infantry division, the 44th, that worked its way through France, across Southern Germany, and into Austria, where their war ended; he taught his children early that the paradox of the Germans was obvious to every GI... Why had the fighting been so fierce if as the Germans seemed to claim at the end, they had always been against Hitler and his clique?...). This is one of the few books of history that deserves a second reading. The first is to go get through the basic reality it reports. My second reading will be to remind myself of all the propaganda we had to suffer through during the 1950s and 1960s during the Cold War version of the "German Miracle." I'm thankful Stargardt's work is now in print and available. My sons will be able to learn from it if they ever ask the questions I had to ask my own family as I was growing up. Being a "Schmidt" and an American, we had a special way of being reminded of the paradoxes of our lives. Our fathers, uncles and (in my case) mothers had fought The Germans, not just "Nazis" during the Second World War. The complexity of that reality has been hard to understand during the past 60 years, but historical work like Stargardt's helps a lot. Thanks. This is not a work to "love," but to appreciate greatly -- as the truth always is when we get closer to it.

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