

Book Reviews: Nazi Issues
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Erik Larson, *In The Garden of Beasts: Love, Terror, and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin*, Crown Publishers, 2011

Barry Rubin & Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, *Nazis, Islamists, and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Yale University Press, 2014.

Mary Elise Sarotte, *The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall*, Basic Books, 2014.

Reviewer: Laina Farhat-Holzman

By Laina Farhat-Holzman

These three books treat one important subject that dominated 20th century history: the rise, fall, and influence of Germany's Nazism.

Erik Larson has the remarkable ability to write solid history as though it were fiction. He selects issues so significant that they are page-turners, but there is nothing in his books that cannot be substantiated by the letters, memoirs, or other documents of the participants of the events at the time.

The Garden of Beasts is essential for our understanding of one of the most important mysteries of the 20th century. How could a country as cultured, educated, and sophisticated as Germany permit itself to be taken over by a group of thugs with scarcely a murmur?

It did not happen with scarcely a murmur. The takeover was far more complex than that, and this book provides us with an inside view of a seminal year, 1933-34, in which this takeover could have gone either way. The main inside view is that of a particularly able observer: William E. Dodd, Chairman of the History Department of the University of Chicago, appointed by President Roosevelt as Ambassador to Germany after Roosevelt was turned down by several other more likely (wealthy) candidates.

Dodd was certainly not one of the usual old boys' club appointees. He was, however, a distinguished historian, had gone to the university in Germany and was fluent in German, had fond memories of the country, and promised to be eyes and ears for the president of the weird events of the new Nazi regime roiling Germany. He set out for Berlin with his family, including another important eye-witness, his grown daughter, Martha, a well-educated and sexually-liberated airhead who "fell in love" with a succession of beaux including the newly appointed head of the Gestapo, the French Ambassador, and a Russian who turned out to be the head of the NKVD. Although her romantic judgment was poor, her diary entries and those of her lovers are extremely interesting!

The title of the book is also significant. *The Garden of Beasts* is a translation of Tiergarten, the main park in Berlin, around which most of the embassies were located and where Ambassador Dodd walked each day. It was also a place where someone observed: Germans love animals! Their dogs and horses are so loved, fed, talked to! Much better than they treat their children and each other.

The Dodds arrived in Germany with mixed views of the Nazi government. Dodd was skeptical from the start, quite certain that this was a temporary anomaly. However, Martha was, as were many Americans of her class at the time (such as Charles Lindbergh), an enthusiast. She loved what she considered the vitality of the "new Germany." The blond, healthy, young Germans striding around; the cleanliness; the seeming return to work from the desperation of the prior depression; all this seemed good to her.

And like her class of Americans, she was theoretically anti-Semitic. She didn't hate Jews; just thought that "they had too much power" in the United States. But this dislike didn't stop the Dodds from renting an amazing mansion in the Tiergarten region for next to nothing! Lovely mansions were available in that neighborhood that belonged to Jews suddenly deciding to leave Germany. How fortunate.

Dodd left his post in 1937, just before "Kristalnacht," in which Germany's intentions for the Jews left no doubt. In this book, the Dodds, particularly Ambassador Dodd, goes through a transformation from mildly anti-Semitic to a Paul Revere, by the end of his tour of duty in 1937, warning that the Nazis were going to take on all of Europe and planned to murder all the Jews. He was greeted with disbelief by the

American isolationists---only to be proven right by 1941.

One last thought about a civilized country going bad: I have a hard time reconciling Germany's actions in both World War I and II in being the first to break the rules of civilized behavior. Germany was the first to use poison gas. They were the first to use submarines to attack civilian ocean liners. The first to use dirigibles to drop bombs on cities. All this in World War I. In World War II---the first to bomb urban targets and, of course, genocide (Turkey did it first, but they were not European).

Larson is a master writer. This is an important book.

Mary Elise Sarotte, *The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall*, Basic Books, 2014.

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In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell, a dramatic end to the cold war between the west and the Soviet Union. Shortly thereafter, the Soviet Union collapsed too, greatly reducing the size and power of what had been a de facto Russian Empire.

This monumental event, when analyzed later from the accumulated archives, shares with many such events a confluence of accidents, mistakes, and unintended consequences. Historians who present events as predictable and inevitable are missing the mark.

The November 9th fall of the wall surprised everybody. Officials who could have prevented this were either ill, traveling, or otherwise indecisive. In the book, we meet the players: the young radicals, the Stasi officer on duty at the wall that night, and the Politburo member who decided to open the wall to a press conference that included (by chance) Tom Brokaw from NBC News. As crowds massed, nobody seemed to know what to do. This had not been the case for decades, when an East German citizen daring to cross into the West usually ended with death or imprisonment.

The Fall of the Berlin Wall should remind us of the confluence of events that triggered the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and (not yet acknowledged) the Iranian Revolution.

This should also be a reminder to all tyrants that they cannot count on their oppression to keep people permanently in line. Oppressors do fall.

Not only did this imprisonment of the East German population collapse during one night, but the reunion of East and West Germany has been so successful that Germany is now being led by two East Germans, the most famous of whom is Angela Merkel. Under Gorbachev, the Soviet Union was already going through a reformation, but the collapse of the wall overwhelmed this careful process and brought the roof down on the USSR.

This is a book worth reading and mulling over how accidents can change the world.

Barry Rubin & Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, *Nazis, Islamists, and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Yale University Press, 2014.

Not long ago, Israel's president Netanyahu commented in a speech that Hitler was influenced by his ally, the Palestinian Grand Mufti, Amin al-Husaini, to murder rather than expel Europe's Jews. There was an immediate uproar that this statement was historically incorrect, and that by saying this, he was diminishing Hitler's role in the Holocaust. It seems that it was not incorrect, and this book, written by two very solid scholars, have not only validated this assessment, but have provided documents, letters, and photographs hitherto not widely available.

Why should this matter? The Holocaust was a Nazi program, no matter what the inspiration for it. But it does matter in another way: it reveals something that has not been widely understood: the long-standing parallel developments during the 1920s and 30s of a murderous brand of fascism that allied the Nazis with the Muslim world. We see the continuum of this ideology today in the similarity of ISIS genocidal practices in their conquered territories with those of the Nazis as they rampaged through Poland and Russia. The values are the same.

The authors spell out their rationale:

"The story of Nazi Germany's involvement in the Middle East has hitherto largely been viewed as a dramatic tale of might-have-been that was nevertheless marginal to Middle East history and the course of World War II. In fact, however, this episode

was central to the modern history of the Middle East and continues to reverberate many decades later given its profound effects on Arab nationalism, Islamism, and the course taken by the Palestinian Arab movement." [ix]

The rise of the Nazis after World War I paralleled fascist movements all over the world at that time. Dictatorships blossomed, all sharing the same disdain for democracy, votes for women, and tolerance for some ethnic diversity. The Muslim world, such as it was (ethnically divided) followed the same track. All they had in common were authoritarian rule in their newly minted countries, a religion frozen in the Middle Ages, and injured pride over their obvious backwardness.

The new Nazi party played on this commonality, and one charismatic figure who emerged in the Palestinian territory (still under British control) was a man of Circassian ancestry (blond and blue-eyed), claiming descent from the Prophet Mohammad, and through family pull, appointed as the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. Al-Husaini was not a cleric, nor was he pious; he was, however, ferociously ambitious and aspired to become the next Caliph, a dictator over all Muslims. (The last "Caliph" had been the Ottoman Sultan, both roles abolished when the Ottomans were defeated during World War I.)

Hitler and the Grand Mufti became allies, an alliance ignored in history until now. They met several times and the Nazis protected him throughout the war, even though the jihad he promised never materialized. Husaini had little luck in organizing an Arab army, but he did better with the Muslims of the USSR, India, Afghanistan, and the Balkans, creating Muslim corps who assisted the Nazis in their holocaust.

Husaini was definitely a war criminal and was on Britain's list for trial and (hopefully) execution. The Swiss would not give him refuge as Germany fell, but the French did, out of spite against the British, and they released him to create decades of Islamist mayhem in the Middle East. The French did it again when they gave refuge to the Ayatollah Khomeini. Without these two men, world history would have been very different.

The great irony here is that the Muslim world always managed to choose losers: first the Nazis, and then the Communists. Now they are following the latest Islamo-fascist cult, ISIS. Saudi money is still supporting that movement, along with stolen oil, extortion taxes and "Islamic" fines on their conquered subjects, and criminal enterprises such as human trafficking and drugs. National borders are in meltdown, hordes of citizens fleeing, and the region's anarchy moving global.

The connection between the Nazis and the Muslim World is alive and well, but is doomed to the same end that the Nazis earned. This is a definitive book on this very current subject.

These reviews demonstrate how important Germany's involvement was in the worst 20th century events. Nothing that they did in World War II was a one-time only. The seeds were already planted in World War I, and before that, in the encouragement of the Muslim Arab world to revolt against their colonizers (Ottoman, and later British and French) and side with Germany in the world wars and after.

This is a sad observation when one thinks of the wonderful contributions of Germany before that to science, music, literature, and philosophy.